

Deathglass

by Lee Killough

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* * *

Since our father's death, my siblings and I have looked out for one another with fierce protectiveness, but the bonds are more than blood and our common love of glass. There is also shared terror. The public remembers Joshua Benet as a name synonymous with fine glass, like Tiffany, Gallé, and Lalique, but it is his death I cannot forget, ten years of descent into raving madness, lurching and twitching and screaming paranoid accusations until nothing remained of the father Claudia, Garrett, and I had worshiped. Nothing but the legacy of his genius in our hands, and cold-sweat dread of the time bomb in our genes.

So it was no surprise to have Claudia calling me during the day at Johns Hopkins, where I blew glass apparatus for research projects. "Dane, someone has to talk to Garrett. He's taken up another of those religious cults, a pagan one this time, I think."

Hardly a reason for so much concern that I could see. Garrett had been religion-hopping since he left home for college. "He's a grown man, Claudia."

I could see her at the other end of the line, calling from her studio filled with stained glass, and leading, and the largest privately-owned inventory of vitamins and health foods in the hemisphere. We each had our defense against Fate. I could not see that Garrett's was any more ridiculous than Claudia's.

"Why not let him live the way he wants?"

Her breath hissed over the wire. "In the first place, this time the high priestess or whatever has actually moved in with him-- Aletheia, she calls herself, no last name, just Aletheia-- and... she's not content with just taking his money. Obviously you haven't been to his new exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art."

"I haven't even talked to him for a month."

"There's an article in Newsweek. You'd better read it."

I remembered a copy of the magazine in the lounge. I ran down the hall after it, then pawed through to the Arts page.

"Benet à la Bosch," the headline read. I have no idea what the writer thought about the exhibit; I never saw the text. Color photographs of three pieces in the exhibit illustrated the article, and for me, nothing else existed on the page. Garrett had made his reputation on glass portraits and sculptures that seemed to defy gravity, crystal thread spun into dreams of moonbeams and starfire. But the pieces in these pictures... A chunk of lead crystal like a fragment of glacier trapped some creature frozen in a moment of desperate struggle. A fairy palace light and frothy as cloud cast a twisted, demonic shadow. The third photo showed two views of the same vase. Seen from the front it seemed no different than his usual work, but the fresh young girl's face within the glass became that of a toothless hag when the light shone through it.

I stared at the photographs. Could a cult really have influenced Garrett to start producing pieces like these? Perhaps he had just gone commercial. The Beautiful People lost in the ennui of sunning and gambling in their villas in Saint-Tropez and Monte Carlo would love these. The novelty, the duality of ugliness in beauty, would bring them flocking from the galleries of now commonplace sonic and tropic sculptures, from the holosymphony performances and the boutiques of chamelemode clothing and silicivitea jewelry.

But I could not help remembering something else, something Claudia had either overlooked or chosen to ignore, that Father, too, had changed his style as deterioration swallowed him.

* * *

Twenty-four hours later I stepped off the plane in Gateside and caught the cabletrain for Aventine.

Artists built the mountain retreat. The rich and famous have discovered its isolated peace and filled the shores of the Lunamere and Heliomere with their villas, but the center still belongs to the artists. Shops and studios with balconied living quarters above them lined Terpsichore Road and the other muse-named streets I walked on the way to Garrett's studio. Sonic sculpture sang at me in passing. A kinetropic piece recognized movement near it and rattled a greeting with wooden rings. Garrett's studio had no sign, no streetside sample, only a window etched into a delicate floral fantasy surrounding large letters, "BENET", and under them, smaller and simply, "Glass". I pushed open the front door.

The smells inside were those of my life... acid and hot glass and the warm-metal scent of an annealing oven. Past three straight wooden chairs and a single glass showcase holding a half dozen or so finished pieces, the studio spread beneath fluorescent lamps: tables scattered with pieces of cut glass and works-in-progress; bins of glass rods and irregular chunks; an asbestos-and-stone-topped workbench with holders, spreaders, gas jets, blowpipes; another workbench under a strong light, backed by a rack of enamel and acid bottles. A gangly form sat at that workbench with his back to the door.

"I'll be with you in a minute," Garrett said.

I trotted across the studio to his shoulder. "Is that any way to greet your kid brother?"

For the first time in my life, he did not grin and hurl himself at me. Instead, Garrett's fingers whitened on his paintbrush. "Did Claudia send you?"

"I saw the Newsweek article on your exhibit and thought as long as I was on vacation, I'd drop in." It was half the truth at least. "An interesting change in style."

"Is that what you think."

His voice shut me out, remote as the peaks above Aventine. Remembering my father's black moods, my gut knotted. "Garrett--" I began hoarsely.

Overhead, the ceiling creaked. Garrett looked up for a moment, then turned toward me. "It's begun, Dane."

The knots tightened. "Have you been to a doctor?"

He frowned irritably. "I don't need a doctor. We all know the signs... depression, inexplicable and uncontrollable anger, incoordination, twitches. There've been times when my hands shook so much I couldn't work, and I'm thirty-six, the same age when Father--"

I cut him off. "An anxiety reaction. You're giving yourself the signs just by worrying--"

"Dane, stop it!" His arm raised, and for a moment I thought he might smash his work, an antique-looking, footed bowl of streaky amber glass, what the Victorians called a coupe, to the floor. But he stopped, and after a moment, resumed work on it... painting the silhouette of an antique car, I saw now. "You think that by refusing to admit something exists, it can't. That's no answer, any more than Claudia's vitamins and brewer's yeast."

The ceiling creaked again. This time I recognized the cause, someone walking. The soft footsteps crossed overhead toward the staircase at the end of the room. A pair of bare feet appeared on the stairs.

"But there is an answer," Garrett said. "Dane, may I present Aletheia."

The woman came down the stairs, all long, smooth limbs, brief neo-grecian playsuit, and ebony hair pulled up into a casual topknot, but the thought that crossed my mind was *Pygmalion*, not *priestess*. For under the studio lights her hair had a shifting purple sheen, as though it were not black at all but deep iridescent violet, and her skin glowed with the pearly inner light of glass reaching the melting point. In a moment of caught breath, reaching out for a slender hand that felt hot, too, I wondered if Garrett's genius could have created her of opalescent glass, giving her the classic face of a Greek statue and setting her eyes with amethysts, then used the knowledge from his arcane religions to breath life into her.

"In a manner of speaking, perhaps he did." Her amethyst eyes smiled into mine, then while I was still realizing that I had not spoken my thought aloud, shifted past me to an askance focus on Otherness that

sent a chill up my spine. *Madness*, the eyes said. "I'll check the oven, Garrett. The bowl for the Kimbrough wedding should be ready."

The voice was like crystal, clear and smooth, but somehow... transparent. When it stopped, I could remember the words but never the *sound* of the voice.

Aletheia padded gracefully across the room to the annealing oven. The light there made a purple nimbus of her hair, but her skin glowed on its own, a white heat shimmering hypnotically against the darkness of the paneling behind her.

It took an effort to look away from her to Garrett. "I didn't know you were living with anyone," I lied. "How long have you been together? Where did you meet her?"

"It isn't what you think. She walked into the Gallery Cafe a couple of weeks ago, looking for a job and a place to stay. I have more room than I need and I had been wanting someone for housekeeping and odd jobs in the studio, so..." He shrugged. But he avoided my eyes. "She has a real gift with glass. I've begun to let her do all the annealing."

I glanced toward her. Aletheia swung back the lid of the annealing oven. Reaching in, she lifted out a thick crystal bowl, which had been put in for reheating and a slow cooling that would relieve the stresses the process of fabrication put in it. So Aletheia could not be responsible for the pieces in the exhibit, I reflected, and maybe there was no new cult after all. Still...

I glanced sideways at my brother. Garrett watched her with an intensity, a fervor, that sent a chill down my spine. I lowered my voice so Aletheia could not hear. "Come on, Garrett, no woman that beautiful has to keep house and pick up around an artist's studio for a living. What's she really doing here?"

He hesitated, then said, "Her name means 'the healer.'"

My gut wrenched. Oh, god. "Don't tell me you were fooling around with something and because she showed up you think you summoned her?"

He looked away. "She says she can cure me."

I sighed. "With what, magical incantations?"

"She can cure me, Dane." Faith burned in his eyes. "When she touches me, the moods end. My hands quit shaking."

I glanced toward Aletheia. She appeared to have heard nothing. Setting the bowl on a worktable and kneeling down to turn it in slow examination totally engrossed her.

Watching her, it occurred to me that if Garrett's symptoms were merely the result of anxiety and she reassured him out of them, what was the harm in her for now? I could stay on a while to make sure she demanded nothing extravagant for her "services."

Staring into the lead crystal, Aletheia sighed.

The sound touched a reflex bred into both us. We ran for the bowl.

"Did it crack?" Apprehension edged Garrett's voice.

"No." The amethyst eyes looked up at him, past us both, focused on Otherness. "There will be no wedding."

My relief over the bowl changed to amusement. "No wedding." I tried to smile, but something in that mad, askance gaze and flat pronouncement paralyzed the muscles. "What makes you think so?"

"The glass." She caressed the rim of the bowl absently. "The images don't join."

I squatted down beside Garrett at the worktable. The bowl was laminate work, layer upon layer etched with delicate floral designs and two portraits, presumably of the bride and groom. As usual with Garrett, the detail was exquisite. The two beautiful young heads in their gossamer bower looked three-dimensional, like holographs. Logically, then, at some point in seeing the portraits through the glass they should have superimposed over each other. They did not. No matter how we turned the bowl, the two images never crossed. They lay on one side of each other until they almost touched, then abruptly jumped to the other side.

I tried again and again to superimpose the images, turning the bowl repeatedly. "It's some trick of diffraction, isn't it, Garrett? How did you do it?"

"I don't know." He caught his lip between his teeth.

"No trick," Aletheia said. "It is what is." She padded away up the stairs.

I followed, leaving Garrett staring into the bowl in fascination.

Aletheia must have headed straight for the balcony. I found her there leaning against the rail, looking up at the snow-capped peaks. Afternoon light played purple and blue over her hair and soaked into her skin, intensifying the glow until she looked almost incandescent. Around us curled a cool breeze filled with the scent of mountain pine, the laughing voices of the tourists window-shopping along the street below, and the mixed chorus of a dozen sonic sculptures in the studio opposite.

"I do nothing to the glass," Aletheia said, without looking at me.

I started. "You only prophesy and read minds."

She stroked the railing. "I don't prophesy. What is, is."

"That's how you plan to heal Garrett?"

Now she looked around, though she barely glanced at me before her focus slipped. "I never said I could heal him. Help him, though, yes."

"He thinks you have a cure. He says your name means 'the healer.'"

It came out more accusingly than I intended. Her gaze focused, and the intensity made her eyes glitter more jewel-like than ever. Light shimmered gold and pink around her skin. "He believes what he wishes to believe. He doesn't think clearly." She sighed. "He doesn't ask the right questions."

The light from her was beginning to give me a headache. I frowned irritably. "What questions? What do questions have to do with helping him?"

"I cannot seek. I must be sought. I am Aletheia."

I am Aletheia. She said it like a title. Names. Something jogged in my head, but of course when I tried to identify it, it slipped out of reach.

I stared into the amethyst eyes for a minute, groping in vain for the elusive thought, then left the balcony and went back downstairs. Garrett had returned to painting the coupe.

"Part of my luggage is still at the cabletrain station," I told him. "I'm going after it."

He nodded without looking up.

But I went to the library, not the station.

* * *

Aletheia had supper ready by the time I returned to the studio. It was a brief, quiet affair. Garrett bolted his food so he could go back to work, and Aletheia stared at and through him into whatever other dimension she saw. I ate in silence, too, wondering what to do with the information I had learned. Saying anything could destroy the relief Garrett thought Aletheia brought. Silence, on the other hand, would only sharpen his despair when the "cure" failed.

And on the other, third hand, I could not stay forever, and what might happen to him when I finally left him with this mad-eyed woman?

Afterward, I followed Garrett downstairs and sat watching while he fused another layer of glass on the coupe.

"A commission?" I asked.

He looked up from the coupe and gas torch, eyes purple behind the didymium lenses of his goggles. "The winner's cup for the Diana Mountain Road Race next week. It's their seventy-fifth year and they wanted something nostalgic and appropriately commemorative."

"A coupe is certainly appropriate for a road race."

Admittedly, the humor was feeble, but I expected him to at least smile. He did not.

I bit my lip, then taking a deep breath, asked, "Who told you Aletheia's name means 'the healer'?"

Garrett did not answer immediately. The flame of his torch flared from blue to blinding orange against the glass. Through the goggles, though, I knew it would look only pink. After a minute, he said, "It's something I remember from when Mother was pregnant with you, a discussion about names and what they mean. Why?"

"Because I looked it up. *Althea* means 'the healer.'"

The orange blaze washed across the bowl of the coupe. "So? Her name is a variation."

I was tempted to leave the matter at that. The truth might well do him more harm than good. Then I thought again of the strange woman upstairs with her opalescent skin and eyes focused on Otherness. "No. *Aletheia* means 'the truth.'" I took a breath. "Garrett, you haven't called up some healing spirit. Whoever Aletheia is and wherever she comes from, she's mad. I think she believes that she is her name, that she is the personification of Truth. However she did that trick with the wedding bowl, she did it to support her fantasy."

"Fantasy." He looked up then. Lifted from the bowl, the torch flame dimmed to blue again. "I forgot to tell you. After you left for the station I called the Kimbroughs to tell them the bowl was ready. The wedding's off. The bride eloped this afternoon with another man."

He had gone back to the coupe and the goosebumps had subsided on my spine before it occurred to me to point that prophecies did not make a healer. By that time it was too late, though; Garrett had soundproofed himself with concentration.

* * *

I might have brought up the subject again later as the three of us sat out on the balcony sometime after midnight, watching the blaze of stars overhead and listening to the chorus of sonic sculptures across the way fade into silence. The opalescent paleness of Aletheia's skin shone misty in the darkness, turning her to a phantom curled cross-legged in a basket chair.

She tilted back her head and breathed deeply. "It's good here. Artists ask deep questions, and honestly desire answers. In too much of the world I have been twisted and raped by people who consider Truth something to be tailored to order."

I wanted to poke Garrett. *See? Listen to the voice of unreason.* But I did not. That wedding had been canceled, and Aletheia understood Garrett. He believed what he wanted to. As long as he thought this strange woman gave him a weapon to fight fate, I could tell him nothing.

Up the street, a whoop of group laughter broke the quiet. A sonic sculpture whined in response, setting off others, a ripple of sleepy sharps and flats spreading down the street ahead of the merrymakers like a bow wave. As they neared us, I recognized several as Garrett's neighbors I had met on previous visits, including Caroline Edmund-Leigh, the holosymphony composer, and poet Tony Jubal.

They halted below us and Tony called up, "Did you know you're a modern oracle?"

Garrett blinked. "What?"

"Darius Miller's new play, *The Man In the Concrete Glider*, opened tonight at the Blue Orion Theatre in Gateside with Kelsi Ferris in the leading role."

"A role the gossip columns say Maya Chaplain moved heaven and earth to land," Caroline added in the tone of one savoring something delicious. "Didn't I see Maya in your studio a couple of weeks ago buying a crystal egg?"

"Yes," Garrett replied slowly.

"Well," Tony drawled, "after the opening we attended the cast party, and Kelsi told us that 'someone' sent her a crystal egg just before the show opened, with an unsigned card in it reading 'A wish for you and all the cast.' Only a strange thing happened. Kelsi picked up the egg and was holding it, and she swears it looked perfect, not a crack anywhere in it, when it suddenly fell into a dozen pieces in her hands."

"And the play didn't lay an egg," another of the women said. "The word from inside sources is that the critics started raving as they left the theater."

My breath stuck in my chest.

Aletheia laughed, a ringing sound as clear as tapped crystal. "Glass is wonderful, so responsive. They should have thought of it at Delphi and Dodona."

"Delphi glass," Tony said. "I like the sound of that. I think I'll use it in my next poem."

The group trooped on. Garrett stared after them until they turned the corner out of sight, then turned to Aletheia. "You knew. When Miss Chaplain picked up the egg, you said 'It won't do her any good.'" He

smiled thinly. "Do you still think she's mad, Dane?"

Not mad, no, but... "I don't know what she is."

Darkness turned Aletheia's eyes to obsidian, but they still glittered, reflecting the light from below. "I am Aletheia."

Garrett's smile vanished, uncertainty suddenly in his eyes as he watched Aletheia. Was he remembering what I told him her name meant? My gut knotted in sympathy and self-recrimination. Why had I said anything? At least he had had hope before.

This is better for him, though.

The words sounded so clearly in my head that I thought Aletheia spoke aloud, but when I glanced toward her, her lips never moved. I stared, then frowned angrily. Better! How could this be better?

Aletheia smiled. In my head her voice said, *Watch.*

* * *

I watched. Over the next few days I watched Garrett throwing himself into his work with grim haste. I watched Aletheia. And I watched the glass, examining each piece before and after annealing. Sometimes they changed. When Aletheia put them in the oven, pieces came out with designs that had not been present before.

Like the vase a woman commissioned as a gift for her very wealthy fiancé. Garrett etched her portrait into the crystal, and from the front her stunning beauty showed to perfection. At any other angle, however, the face twisted, revealing vanity, selfishness, and avarice.

And like the Road Race coupe.

Aletheia's soft intake of breath brought both Garrett and me running to bend anxiously over the coupe.

At first I wondered what she had seen. The original design appeared intact. The shapes of antique race cars drifted all through the streaked glass, some visible on the outside surface, some from inside the bowl, others as phantoms below the surface, like memories half-forgotten, or competitors obscured by dust. Turning the coupe produced neither new shapes in the glass nor altered the ones already there. Then I noticed the light. Coming through the bowl it looked not golden but pulsing, flickering scarlet, and where it danced around the cars, the silhouettes sank into twisted frames stained a bloody red.

My gut knotted. Another addition to the Delphi collection?

"What kind of disaster are you wishing on us this time?" Garrett said softly.

Aletheia regarded him solemnly. "I don't make the future. What is, is."

Garrett traced the rim of the coupe, following the bead with his finger... around and around and around.

* * *

The day of the race, we watched it on television, but not like most viewers, I am sure. We sat in silence, Garrett's and my eyes fixed intently on the screen. Apprehension chased along my spine. Aletheia-- I wish I knew what Aletheia felt or saw. She curled cross-legged in a dark armchair that intensified her glowing pallor, face expressionless, hands relaxed in her lap, jewel eyes focused past the television on... whatever.

For three-quarters of its distance, the race went well. A car spun out here and there. A French car scraped the barrier at the edge of the drop-off on the outside of a sharp switchback. One American's tire blew out. A billowing cloud of white smoke announced the demise of an Italian engine. None of it serious, except perhaps in the viewpoint of the Italian, who stormed around his car with waving arms, shouting a diatribe as histrionic and rhythmic as an operatic aria.

Then the lead cars reached Scorpion Turn.

The front tires on Victor Dietrich's Porsche dissolved simultaneously in flying shreds of rubber. Seconds later the car was spinning across the road and into the inner wall, rebounding from that in a

leaping roll that brought it down on two following cars. An orange fireball enveloped the three. A passing car trying to avoid the pileup skidded sideways, through the guardrail and into emptiness.

Everything behind the fire vanished from the TV camera's sight, but in the end, the statistics came to four drivers dead, three others hospitalized.

Garrett slammed his fist down on the arm of the couch. "I should have said something. I should have warned them!"

"You can't change the future, either," Aletheia said distantly.

He came to his feet, whirling on her. "Then what are you doing here! Who and what are you?"

She sighed. "If you refuse to know, how can I ever help you?"

Garrett exploded, as suddenly and vividly as the racing cars. Grabbing her by the shoulders, he jerked Aletheia out of the chair and to her feet. "What the hell can Truth do for me!" he shouted. "Will you prophesy my end, tell me the measure of my productive days? Is that supposed to *help* me!"

She looked up at him with compassion. "The right questions will help you."

"*Questions.*" Face contorted in rage and despair, Garrett shook her. "Damn your questions!"

Aletheia's head snapped back and forth. Galvanized by the memory of our father's murderous rages, I leaped at Garrett. "Stop it! Let her go before you kill her!"

We went down on the floor in a tangle. Somehow, though, Aletheia peeled clear. From the corner of my eye I saw her retreating across the room to watch us with glittering eyes. Garrett thrashed under me, kicking and swinging, but he managed only one good connection that left my head ringing before I pinned both his arms. He might be the older, the smarter, the more gifted, but I was always faster and stronger.

He struggled a minute more, then went limp. "Dane. Oh, god, Dane."

The cry of anguish stabbed through my gut. I hugged him fiercely, searching for something comforting and reassuring to say... something that would reassure me, too. "It's all right. You've got Claudia and me. No matter what comes, however unthinkable, we'll face it together."

His shudders stopped. "Face?" Suddenly he sat up and pulled away to where he could look at me. "Face. That's it." He twisted to look at Aletheia. "The question?"

She smiled faintly.

He rolled to his feet and headed for the stairs.

I started to follow, but a fever-hot hand caught my arm. "Please don't. Let him work."

I looked around into the amethyst eyes. They focused on me and remained there, intense, earnest... fiercely happy. I stared at her. "What question?"

Regret dimmed her eyes only a little. "A private one."

I fought a desire to shake her, too. "Is it the right one? Do you promise this will really help him?"

The heat of her hand seared my arm. "I promise."

* * *

I gave him his privacy. That did not stop me from speculating on what he could be making, though. My best guess was a self-portrait in glass, to see exactly what he faced and how soon.

Garrett worked the rest of the day and through the night. The several times I woke, I heard voices and movement below. But in the morning I found him in the kitchen clear-eyed and singing while he made toast and coffee.

Astonishment and relief washed through me. I wanted to hug Aletheia. She had been right. "You must have liked the answer. What was the question?"

He only smiled and left the toaster long enough to put a shoe box on the top shelf of a cupboard.

Then it dawned on me that *he* was cooking. "Where's Aletheia?"

"Gone." He turned to smile at me again. "And you should be going, too. You have your work. So do I."

Could he really be the anguished brother of yesterday? "What did you see in the glass?"

He hesitated only a moment. "Freedom. Come on, finish up. I'll help you pack and walk you to the cabletrain station."

We walked, joking and laughing with an ease we had not enjoyed for years. It was a beautiful morning, I remember, cool and golden. I left him on the platform, luminous with contentment.

* * *

A month later Claudia called again to tell me Garrett had died of a self-administered barbiturate overdose.

He willed me the studio "...in the hope you'll stop squandering your talent on the sterility of laboratory glass and produce something more worthy of your blood."

I turned in my resignation and took possession of the studio.

And even before unpacking the suitcases, I headed for the kitchen. The shoe box no longer sat on the shelf where I had seen Garrett put it, however. I swore. Now I would have to search the entire house and studio.

"That isn't necessary," a voice said behind me. "I took it to keep the police from finding it."

I had not heard her come in, but it did not surprise me to find Aletheia there. I turned to look into amethyst eyes. "You must not have gone far."

"I am never very far away." She handed over the shoe box.

My hands shook a bit as I laid it on the counter and opened it. Tissue wrapped the object inside. I stripped it off... and caught my breath.

Garrett had spent that night making a goblet, blown in the same streaky amber glass as the Road Race coupe, and he had put a face on it, but not his. The empty eye sockets and lipless mouth of a sculpted death's-head leered at me from the glass.

I looked up from it to Aletheia. She smiled past me, radiating light, eyes askance as ever... but somehow no longer looking mad.

Slowly, I looked down at the goblet again and turned it to the position the shape of the rim would force a drinker to use. That put the death's-head on the opposite side, where the skull cast a shadow through the glass. Tilting the goblet, though, the skull softened into a face, sexless but... attractive, friendly... compassionate. *What did you see in the glass?* I whispered in memory. *Freedom*, Garrett's voice replied. Perhaps he should have said *victory*. Tipping the goblet farther, the face vanished, replaced by an almost blinding--

A hand took the goblet away. "You don't need that truth yet," Aletheia said.

I drew in a breath. "Will I?"

She looked up at me, into me, smiling faintly. "You don't really want to know." Her hand touched mine as she handed back the goblet. "For the time you may, however."

I rewrapped it and put the box up in the cupboard. When I turned back around to thank her, Aletheia had vanished.

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