

## Sanctification

a short story by John Meaney

An old blind beggar, a man she never saw before or afterwards, set the young girl's feet upon the path to Sainthood.

Her body ached, her eyes were dry and sore, as Ashara walked barefoot through the city of Wusaba. All night, she had been entertaining her

fat

old master and his business acquaintances. Despite his abuse of her,

she

almost liked him, aware of just how badly treated other servants were.

But

her child's soul still ached from misuse.

The mosaic stone paving was warm and dry beneath the tough soles of her bare feet. She had completed her errand, delivery of a data capsule to some merchant's house. It was an inconspicuous way to deliver illicit

data

beyond the reach of the proctors' monitoring services. Now, having time

of

her own, she wandered through the vast boulevards of the city, to

sections

she had never seen before.

Through a mile-square crowded bazaar, among tents and stalls, she made

her

way slowly. A vast ornate flyer floated silently overhead,

jewel-encrusted

and bearing the seal of a scion of the city's noblest class. Ashara stopped and stared up at it, until it had gone. Then she bought a small fruit from a stall, using a quarter of her weekly credit allowance, and walked on, sniffing the fruit, holding back the moment of biting into

it.

She walked until she reached the end of the plaza which held the

bazaar.

Hesitating - she had never been this far from her master's house - she walked through an elliptical marble gateway, to the Boulevard of Hands.

The boulevard was half a kilometre wide, and many more long. Its

central

avenue was a blue sapphire. To walk on it was to walk upon the sky. On either side of the vast highway, stone arms flowed upwards from the

ground

and reached with outstretched hands up towards heaven. Flyers dotted

the

sky around, but none flew directly overhead. The Boulevard of Hands was

a

sacred way, and none would desecrate it by allowing machinery to pass

over

it.

Squatting in the shade of giant stone arms, anticipating the ferocious heat of the sun which was yet to beat down upon them, were hundreds of blind and mutilated beggars, beseeching the genteel passers by with

some

dignity of their own, but begging nevertheless. The musical sound of

their

voices filled the air. Some recited epic poems, sagas which grew in the telling over the years, and never ended. Some recited, from memory,

long

passages from the Scriptures. Blind beggars read holy words from

braille

hardcopies of the Bible or the Koran, preaching to busy crowds who had little time to hear. Many had lived with their painful diseases for

over  
two centuries. To Ashara, this was an unimaginable length of time to  
bear  
such suffering. Even among beggars, caste prevailed. The lowest were  
those  
who recited not from memory, but as spokespersons for cerebral  
implants.  
They hoped for employment, she knew, and some might find it. Their  
employers were likely, though, to be less than upright citizens. Their  
lives might become less painful, but drastically shorter in the world  
of  
shady commerce.  
One old man caught her attention, his light musical voice drifting  
above  
the droning of the other beggars as he talked of the religions of many  
worlds, and the oneness of all their paths to enlightenment. He was  
blind,  
Ashara noticed, with sunken eye sockets hiding a hint of something  
pink.  
His beard was long and grey, matted with black dirt. The lines of his  
face  
were deep, engraved with pure filth. And he stank. But his voice was  
pure  
and clear, like a child's.  
Ashara squatted down to listen to him. After a while, he stopped. He  
cocked his head to one side and smiled at Ashara, though he could not  
see  
her.  
"Did you like my story, little one?"  
"No," Ashara said simply.  
"Why not? Isn't enlightenment worth aiming for?"  
Perhaps it was meant as a joke, but Ashara thought about it, frowning.  
"No," she said finally.  
"Ah, now. An unbeliever."  
"My master does not allow me to worship. Or listen to philosophy."  
"Oh. May I ask how old you are?"  
"Twelve." Defiantly.  
"And do you know of the Saints who live in the monastery?"  
Ashara shook her head. Then realizing that she could not be seen, she  
said  
quietly: "No." She took a bite of her fruit, in near ecstasy at the  
sweet  
taste upon her tongue, and immediately regretted her thoughtlessness.  
She  
twisted the fruit in two, and placed one half firmly in the old  
beggar's  
hand.  
"Thank you, daughter. Tell me, do you see the building at the end of  
the  
Boulevard? It is very far away, a green jewel of a building, and even  
your  
young eyes will need to strain to catch sight of it."  
She strained indeed. Against the clear bright sky, many kilometres down  
the shrinking perspective of the arrow-straight boulevard, she saw what  
might have been a green speck with a dark spire reaching upwards. Not  
to  
disappoint the old man, she told him that she had seen it. Pleased, he  
nodded and settled himself. Fruit juice now mingled with the other  
stains  
on his beard.

"You know of the worlds of Man, that we inhabit vast tracts of the galaxy.  
Yet our vessels by themselves would take millennia to track between those worlds.  
"By ourselves, impossible. But the Saints, they can move their thoughts in a blink, in the time it takes a wave function to collapse. Those of the acolytes who achieve Sainthood have one Wish to make, and the wisdom and the discipline to make their Wish come true."  
"Saints? I've heard of them. I thought they were just a story."  
"They are a terrible story, but a true one. They seek the path to deepest enlightenment, to achieve oneness with the innermost depths of reality."  
"Who are they, master?"  
"I am not your master, little one." The old beggar half-laughed, half-sobbed. "Anyone can try to become a Saint. But for those who draw near to that goal, the consequences of failure can be - not insignificant." For a moment, he drew his hand across his face, where his eyes should have been.  
Ashara did not see the gesture. She was peering into the distance, trying to resolve further detail of the mysterious emerald monastery, almost lost in the distance beyond the boulevard's end.  
"I must go," she said, and left the beggar, now grown silent, to his own ruminations.  
Long hours of walking over the cool blue crystal road while the sky grew hotter. Hours of slipping through throngs of robed gentlefolk, walking past the giant stone pillars of arms reaching upwards, before she reached the ornate monastery. It was emerald and yellow stone, and, though smaller than neighbouring buildings, it seemed imposing and purposeful to Ashara.  
She walked around its edge, until she stood before a gleaming green gateway. They must admit her. By this time, her master's household would have missed her. She did not know what punishment she was due: never had she heard of a servant willfully disappearing from her master's employ. So, when she stood before the gate, she was determined. Despite her poor light garments, despite her bare feet and uncombed hair, she stood straight and gazed with clear calm eyes at her future.  
The gate's automatic system challenged her to state her business.  
"I am going to be a Saint," she said.  
Her name was Ashara and she was only twelve years old, but this was the pivotal moment in her life.  
"Who are you? How old are you?"  
"I am Zenshara, and I am as old as the cosmos."  
So she renamed herself, and gave the answer which had been drawn out of her without volition. It sounded foolish and pompous to her, but it was apposite - or the system found it amusing, or intriguing - for the

gateway

swung open. Ashara left her old life behind as she stepped through the portal and became Zenshara forever.

The procedure was the reverse of what she would have expected, had Zenshara considered the matter at all. She was kept alone in neophytes' quarters, at the other end of the building from the established students.

She would only graduate to the children's dormitories if she proved her aptitude for this way of life.

She spent long hours alone, solving word puzzles and geometric holo-problems in her small room. Sometimes a small, calm old man would enter silently and watch Zenshara as she worked. After the first few times, when he had gestured for her to continue as she turned to him, she

had taken to ignoring him. Or rather, though she made no attempt to communicate directly, she deliberately relaxed and ran through the exercises more quickly than ever in his presence.

After five days they began to teach her the ancient disciplines.

The testing was not over: they needed to see just how quickly she could absorb the thinking and make it part of her own. Quantum theory was taught

in the simplest fashion, for the rigorous mathematics would come later. She had human tutors, who made no personal contact and discussed only

the academic matter at hand. She spent hours interacting with her terminal. Occasionally, the old man silently observed.

He was not present on the twentieth day, when Zenshara worked her way successfully through a series of wave-function problems, drawing holos in

the air with her fingertip-cursor. Afterwards, the terminal demonstrated

the interconnectedness of events: separating two particles in a singlet state, deciding afterwards the axis of the measurement upon the randomly

fluctuating spins. Collapsing one wave function. The other particle always

knew - instantaneously - how to be its partner's opposite. Yet it had not

known this before the separation; it was as though history had been altered to determine the second particle's characteristics.

"How then," asked the terminal, "may this occur?"

Zenshara remained silent.

"Why do you not answer?" The voice was neutral.

Zenshara shrugged. "It must occur, since it has happened. I can't explain

it. It just is."

Though the old man was not in the room, he was watching nonetheless. Observing a small display, he bowed his head as Zenshara answered.

Things

would happen as they must. It was not wisdom to hope too easily, for there

were many disappointments for a Teacher. But the child showed promise.

A

great deal of promise, indeed.

Zenshara was placed in the girls' dormitory. To her surprise, there were

more girls than boys studying in the monastery. Some were student technicians, some were true acolytes who hoped to travel as far as they

could along the path to Sainthood. Her rough accent marked her as different from the rest. The girls' origins ranged from upper middle-class homes to the highest strata of society. They were educated, and demonstrated as much poise as young girls could. Zenshara wished she had their dainty elegance, their gaiety. On the first evening, not one of them talked to her. Zenshara kept her silence. Let them, if they wanted, make the first move towards friendship. She was content to study, to know the joy of it which was deeper than she had imagined possible, and to sleep alone in a comfortable bed and know she would not be bothered during the night.

On the next day she had her lessons with a group of other girls, but they were too busy with individual tasks for socializing. By monastery rules, lunch breaks were a silent affair. That night, though, a girl came over to stand by Zenshara as she was readying herself for bed. At last, thought Zenshara. Some companionship in this place.

"Here, girl." A pair of shoes was thrust beneath Zenshara's nose.

"Clean these immediately." A giggle sounded from the far end of the dormitory. Zenshara reached slowly for the shoes as she had been bidden. As she took hold of the shoes, her hand also closed upon that of the other girl.

"When you've finished with your servant, Lucinda," said a voice nearby, "could I borrow her? My floor-space is unacceptably dirty."

So this was Lucinda. Zenshara's grip tightened and she pulled the girl forwards. Quick as a pouncing cat, she bit into the girl's hand, clenching her jaws until her muscles ached and the metallic taste of warm blood spurted in her mouth, and Lucinda's screams could be heard even above the roaring in Zenshara's ears. Zenshara spat out blood as she pushed the girl away.

She looked around warily, ready for attack. The other girl who had spoken was already calling for the monitors from her bedside terminal. The others held back, faces pale. No-one seemed in any hurry to rush Zenshara. Lucinda was hunched over, trembling with shock. Two of her friends came over to comfort her, but they cast fearful glances at Zenshara all the while.

The monitors were two boys who rushed into the room, but then stopped and held back as they saw that the incident was no longer in progress. The elder and larger of the two took control, lifting up Lucinda and carrying her from the room.

As they left, the younger of the two boys turned to Zenshara and gave her an impudent wink. Zenshara was astounded.

She spent the rest of the nights, after lights out, sitting in the lotus

position on her bed, relaxed yet alert for any attack. There were none. Nobody in the monastery ever saw Lucinda again.

Several nights later, Zenshara crept through the corridors of the monastery after dark. She knew the security systems were observing her, but she had a feel now for the way the Teachers and Administrators handled acolyte relationships. The policy was one of minimal interference. This seemed strange to her, since so much of the training was geared towards self-control and discipline of the mind... but it was, nonetheless, their approach.

She went past the boys' dormitory to the smaller individual rooms where the monitors slept. She knocked at the farthest door. When it slid open, the large boy who had helped Lucinda was standing there, blinking in the half-brightness of his night-light and running a hand through his tousled hair. He opened his mouth to speak, then stopped.

"Can I come in?" asked Zenshara.

"I don't think so." His voice was not unkind. He understood immediately: she had no friends among the girls, and never would. She was destined to be a loner, a pariah in their midst. So she had come to him for some companionship.

"I'm sorry," he added. "I need my sleep. But if you knock on Zhiang's door - that's his, next door along - you'll probably find the little bugger awake, playing games on his terminal." He smiled: a kind, gentle smile. "OK. You're Mark, aren't you?"

"You've accessed personnel files? Well done, Zenshara. You're a girl after Zhiang's heart. Don't keep him awake all night, now." He waited until he saw her knock on Zhiang's door, before he retired. Zhiang, as expected, was the short impudent boy with spiky cropped hair who had winked at her, at the very moment when she was most sure that she would be banished from the monastery forever.

"You shouldn't be bothering Mark." Zhiang led her into his room. How had he known? Zenshara didn't think the walls were that thin. "I didn't mean to-" "Oh, he'll be a good friend. But he's on the verge of Sainthood: a real golden boy. It's best he keep a little distance."

Zenshara had not realized, had not even thought that there might be people close to actually achieving Sainthood in the monastery right now. It transpired that Zhiang was thirteen, though he was smaller and looked younger than Zenshara. They talked and played competitive games on a terminal until the early morning. When they grew too tired, they eventually fell asleep side by side on the thin matting.

It was a year before Mark was ready to become a Saint. Neither Zenshara nor Zhiang saw anything of him during the final weeks before the ceremony.

On that morning, they and all the other alpha-group acolytes dressed in formal robes, and filed silently into the Great Hall. They knelt down

at

the rear of the vast stone chamber, beneath its domed ceiling and sweeping buttresses. They sat back on their heels and waited. Even for those used to it, it was a posture which would become painful during the long hours of the ceremony.

Teachers and Administrators sat on small stools to one side of the hall.

The focus was a wooden dais on which an emerald rug lay, the place where

Mark would kneel to make his Wish. There was no sign of him yet.

Zenshara

tried to imagine what he was feeling right now.

There were archways along both sides of the hall, connecting it to the side corridors. In each archway was a Bowman, kneeling on one knee with his tall asymmetric bow in front of him, already strung. The archers were

in light blue robes with ornate designs, and their bows were striped in primary colours. They wore tall formal hats of black and gold, tied under

their chins with black ribbon.

Behind the dais, at the end of the hall, was a giant flat-screen display:

currently blank, a neutral grey.

The early part of the ceremony involved silent meditation, while eerie dissonant music floated through the hall. For the kneeling acolytes,

the

difficulty was ignoring the pain in their knees. Different Teachers

stood

up in turn to recite poems or mathematical treatises. The Teacher who spent most time with Zenshara was the last to stand. He talked simply,

of

the history of the monasteries on all the inhabited worlds, and their

role

in maintaining the social order while continuing the expansion of humankind throughout the universe.

There was little ritual involved in the actual sanctification of Mark.

He

was very calm as he walked in, moving majestically in rich black and

green

robes, almost gliding across the floor to the simple dais. He stepped

onto

it and knelt down upon the mat.

Two solemn boys brought him a golden goblet on a cushion. He smiled at them as he took it and drank the contents. They backed away as he

closed

his eyes and entered the trance, his face calm and peaceful. Behind

Mark

the screen came to life, and showed the large colony ship floating in orbit high above Wusaba, parked in black space. The picture must be transmitted from one of the ship's own remotes, Zenshara thought. It looked like an ornate toy. Hard to imagine that it contained a thousand would-be colonists, eager to face the adventure of their lives,

dreading

the other possibilities. The worst outcome would be failure to move,

and

their ignominious return in drop-shuttles to the homes they had left behind.

Not every Saint had the talent for visualization to transport such a huge ship, though most did indeed use their Wish for some form of matter or data transmission.

The archers fitted arrows to their bows. Gods forbid that they should be necessary. A shudder passed through Mark's body as the drug cocktail took hold. Beneath the monastery, vast machinery swung into action, making huge energies available to Mark's questing mind. Slowly, Mark was drawing his mind forward till it occupied the no-space between a wave-function and its collapse, the Buddha-nature of reality.

"I wish the ship to be at Aleph Mu." Mark's voice was startling, resonating in the silence.

There was a delay - the verbalization was not the thought itself - and then the screen showed empty space above the planet. The colony ship was gone.

The strength of Mark's wish kept a comms link open across the light-years, and stayed long enough for a bearded face to appear on the screen. The ship's captain.

"We have arrived safely. The newest nation of Man will soon be born. Our thanks, and our prayers."

The screen went blank.

It was completely forbidden, but Zenshara reached out to hold Zhiang's hand as he knelt beside her. They held hands, squeezing painfully, as they watched the drugs' final effects upon Mark's body. As all in the monastery watched, Mark began to die. His face seemed to close in upon itself, his whole body to shrink. Slowly, the tension in his muscles faded and his head began to sink forward, his torso bending until he was kneeling with his head on the dais. Then the final change and all of tension and all of life was gone from Mark's slumped body.

The smell of incense drifted through the air as the pallbearers, robed in white, arrived to wrap the corpse and carry it away on a ceremonial floatpad. There was no funeral ceremony for a Saint, for they had achieved their Wish. As the pallbearers took their burden from the hall, Zenshara could not accept that she had seen Mark for the last time. Surely she could run to his room, right now, and see him there, standing with that smile upon his face... But she of all the people in the hall, should know better. For it was no longer a secret that Zenshara, too, seemed destined for Sainthood.

At the end of the ceremony Zenshara and Zhiang went back to Zhiang's room, after their legs had recovered sufficiently to walk. There would be no lessons today. The pain in their legs was almost unbearable in its



pleasure: the pain of being alive.

They held each other tightly, though it was Zhiang who wept more. Later on, they made love for the first time. It was the deepest experience of their young lives. It was an affirmation of life.

She was kneeling on the hard rich wooden floor of her study, facing the wall. The wall was blank, all holo- and flat-displays switched off. At

her

side knelt Teacher; he could watch her expression, though she could not turn to look at him.

"Where does the Wish live?" he asked.

"The space between matter and idea."

"When does the Wish live?"

"The time between possibility and event."

"What is this place and time?"

Zenshara: "It is reality."

There was a pause, then Teacher asked a new question, and it was not a standard one. "What do you call this place and time?"

"I call it Hope," said Zenshara softly.

That night, when she went to Zhiang's room, she found it empty, devoid

of

all his belongings. She asked no-one about his departure, knowing that no-one would tell her anything. She would never see either of her

friends

again.

She worked harder than ever at her lessons on the next day. In the evening, she was told she had to serve at the Masters' Table. During

their

dinner, she waited on table with two of the monastery's servants.

Despite

the name, the Masters' Table was a richly appointed dining-room for the occasional use of Teachers and Administrators, of either gender, and

their

visitors from the outside world. The assignment was both a reminder of

the

humility which Zenshara needed to achieve, and a reward which would let her listen to the conversation of strangers to the monastery.

These visitors were rich patricians and merchants, wealthy men with well-refined manners and a genuine interest in helping the monastery.

That

donations might enhance their social standing was a happy accident.

Zenshara listened as the Administrators shamelessly flattered the

visitors

in the hope of contributions to the monastery's substantial

requirements

for revenue. The Teachers at table mostly kept their silence.

During the weeks which followed, Zenshara's mathematical training was intensified. At the end of one particularly gruelling session, having simultaneously mapped out a huge array of stochastic functions in the simulation room, she was about to leave when Teacher stopped her with

the

smallest of gestures.

"Zenshara." His voice was deceptively gentle. "There is one question

you

have never asked me, in all your time here."

Zenshara wondered what sort of test this was. "Which question,

Teacher?"

"You have never asked, why it is that a Saint must die."

The common people thought that death was a natural side-effect of the

drugs the Saint must take to commune with the machines. Both Zenshara and

Teacher knew better. The toxin was a deliberate addition to the mixture.

"When a link has been established to the machines," she said, "then it can

never be truly broken. And who can maintain perfect control of their Wishes all the time? In their sleep, who can control their dreams?"

Teacher said nothing. A Saint, in the throes of a nightmare, could bring

death and destruction to them all. Zenshara had the right of it. He was both pleased and saddened by her insight.

Nobody said anything, yet Zenshara knew that the time of her own sanctification was drawing near. Teacher took her to his study, where he

talked about the types of Wishes which Saints made. Most often, they transported ships across unimaginable distances, or held open communications networks across many worlds for as long as possible, while

people sent the highly compressed info-dumps they had been saving up. Others formed more esoteric Wishes, and not every Saint knew in advance what their Wish might be. It was useful, though, to determine in advance

if a Saint was not going to transport a colony ship, to save expense and

heartache. Zenshara said that she had no idea what sort of Wish would be

best. What she meant was, should she succeed in reaching Sainthood, she could not tell Teacher now what her Wish might be. It would be impolite to

assume that she was going to succeed.

"What are the other sorts of Wish, Teacher? What are the strangest?"

"Ah, my child." He shook his head. "Those are the Metaphysical Wishes. Wishes that have some profound effect, usually limited to that Saint's homeworld, maybe just to their own monastery. The increased

intelligence

and longevity of the human race is due to such Wishes."

Zenshara nodded, absorbed in her own thoughts.

On the day before her sanctification, Zenshara arose at dawn, and walked

out of the monastery.

No security system tried to stop her, as it would have at any other time.

No doubt it roused Teacher and some of his colleagues, but they would be

watching, not interfering, and hoping that she would return. Teacher, of

course, would have mixed feelings, for Zenshara knew he was more than fond

of her. If she did her duty and fulfilled her obligations, and achieved the greatest ambition of those who served the monastery, then tomorrow would be the last day of her life.

Sunrise touched the crystal blue roadway of the Boulevard of Hands.

Eerie

light sparked the ground as pale green canopied the sky. There were few people moving at this hour, but small dark bundles by the reaching

stone

arms were in fact beggars wrapped in their rags, with nowhere else to

sleep. Zenshara enumerated the differences in her station between now and

her previous journey along this road. Now her feet were clad in expensive shoes, and she wore a rich temperature-controlled robe instead of tatters.

Above all, she had her education.

As the sun rose higher the world came awake. Busy merchants and servants

on errands were the early risers. Many of the beggars did not stir (and Zenshara wondered how many had died during the night, never to awaken), but some were already reciting verses or scripture in the quiet morning's

cool. Though she had no hope of finding the old man who had caused her to

enter the monastery, Zenshara forced herself to examine the face of every

beggar she passed. Many of them had stumps or twisted limbs from disease

or accident. Grossly misshapen faces, with strange distortions or growing

lumps were the worst. Past Wishes had given men the ability to hang onto

life for three centuries despite crippling medical conditions. Had they been able to afford the treatments, medic machines could have granted

them

perfect health.

She used her credit ring to buy fruit at a shabby stall. The old woman who

owned it made deep obeisance to Zenshara as she handed over the fruit. Disturbed by the homage, Zenshara walked on. She had not bitten into

the

fruit at all when she saw a wizened man wake painfully from his sleep, wrapped in grey rags at the foot of a pillar. Wordlessly, she gave him

the

fruit, and passed on.

By midday she had reached a bazaar that might have been the one she had visited all those years before. Among the crowds, she spotted a grubby young urchin of a girl, picking the pocket of an old fat merchant.

Moving

swiftly, she caught the young girl by the ear.

"Now girl," said Zenshara, more grimly than she felt. "What shall I do with you?"

The girl twisted once, trying to get free, then capitulated. "Mistress, I'm sorry. I was going to give it to my master, honest." She began to snivel.

Zenshara believed her. The girl's master was probably not above using his

servant's dexterity to bring in some extra credit.

"Take me to your master's house."

It was a medium-sized dwelling, with a small garden of fruit trees and a

sprinkling fountain. It was better than the house Zenshara had lived in as

a girl, but it seemed desperately shabby compared to the monastery's expensive simplicity. She announced herself at the front door, and demanded to be let in.

The owner and his wife came fearfully to the door, and invited her inside.

The wife sent a group of servants scurrying to fetch food for their

guest,

but Zenshara stopped her. First she asked to use their terminal.

Zenshara

used this to make an enquiry about Zhiang. According to the terminal, the

boy was enrolled at a technical institute in the city, and an outstanding

student there. Zenshara's monastic access code would have allowed her to

find out more, but that was enough. A side-effect of her enquiry would have been to alert the monastery to her whereabouts, a fact which was not

lost on the owner and his wife. Nervously, they asked if there was anything else they might do for her.

"Show me the servants' quarters," Zenshara said.

She had to insist before they took her to the cold stone rooms where the

servants slept. She asked for food to be brought, and announced that she

would be staying for the night. Confused as well as frightened, the couple

tried to persuade Zenshara to take their room or a guest room, but they subsided when she coldly said no.

So Zenshara spent that night in miserable servants' quarters, hardly sleeping in the cold. The servants themselves did not speak to her and, though worried by her presence, they fell asleep long before she did. They were still sleeping when Zenshara awoke, shortly before dawn. She left the house quietly and headed back towards the monastery, to the cloisters where she belonged.

This time Zenshara better understood the ceremony. Walking into the Great

Hall, she felt detached from the onlookers, the Teachers and Administrators and acolytes, and yet she was a part of them. Kneeling, she

admired the graceful curves of the room in which she was about to die. Life, she wanted to sing, is about giving. She looked at the blue-robed archers kneeling in readiness, just now fitting the arrows to their bows.

Their ranks were picked from Teachers who had been near to Sainthood themselves, yet unable to take the final step. Her own Teacher was among

them. In the quantum state of this hall today, arrows would move at the speed of thought from those who had trained to fire without volition. Probably no-one thought the precautions were necessary today. If there were any person able to form a disciplined thought and hold it, that person was Zenshara.

A ship waited in orbit high above the planet, though Zenshara had given no

indication of which type of Wish she might make. The civic authorities responsible for organization had been told of her reputation and abilities, however, and had organized a greater ship than usual, and

had overloaded their comms systems with outgoing data pending transmission. She hoped they would not be disappointed if their preparations came to naught.

She bowed to Teacher before accepting the goblet which was brought to her.

It was an unnecessary gesture of humility, the more so since Teacher, as

one of the ceremony's archers, was not allowed to respond in any way. Nevertheless, he was the one person here for whom Zenshara felt a real affection, a true bond. The others she loved, but in the same way she felt love for all humanity.

The drink was heavenly, an exquisite blend of flavours bursting upon her tongue. The taste of death was sweet. She marvelled at the sense of well-being, the relaxation of her body and the sharpening of her mind. She seemed to slip from her body, to merge with the universe, sensing the energies beneath her as she prepared to direct the monastery's machines, to draw them into her trance state.

"I Wish," she said, "for prosperity and equality for all." A soft gasp arose from the watchers. Many of them rocked back on their heels. A Metaphysical Wish of the highest order! No-one knew of a Wish of such magnitude in living memory. Who could say what benefits such a Wish might bring to their world, maybe even to their neighbours' worlds? From words to thought. Holding the image in her mind, Zenshara began to crystallize the concept. Among the joyful onlookers, only Teacher sensed the danger.

Eyes closed, with a peaceful beginner's mind, Teacher loosed the arrow. In a sense, its velocity was infinite. At the speed of intuition, the arrow crossed the hall and ripped through Zenshara's body. Blood was torn from the exit wound, spurting from her back.

Too late. The concept already lay in the time between possibility and actuality. Wave functions collapsed. More than anyone could have imagined, the power of Zenshara's sending reached across all the inhabited worlds of humankind, through every monastery in the galaxy.

There were no flames, no explosions. The most sensitive had time to notice that the universe was entering a new order. The molecular structures comprising the buildings and their inhabitants dissipated. Like ghosts, the monasteries gently dissolved into free atoms, mixing with and becoming part of the worlds they inhabited, but free of repressive, inhibiting structure. Zenshara and the monasteries died together, in the moment of her greatest love for all her species.

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