

Ovigonopods of Love

By Joe Murphy

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He for she, hae for shae, and a hundred thousand of us lovebuckers if there's one. Silt from the Flooding fills my mandibles, tasting of salt and marsh blossoms. Pods flattening, I stroke through the water, racing the other hes. Like them, it's my first time, and I'm filled from antenna tips to tail flukes with the urge to merge.



Upsee: four moons in a row. One for each sex. The first red as a shae's eyes. Once in four years, the alignment comes, and we're not long to follow.

The tide swells to cover the plain. Behind me, out in the sea, the twisting spires of Carnak, aglitter with phoskelp.

Downsee: mud and dying grass, underwater now. Bubbles burst as the newly born hes erupt from the chitinous ab-domes of their mothers, buried, dry since the waters last came, silent now with their mothers' passing. Wide-tailed and big-eyed, the newborns dash through the currents and search for the city lights.

The songs have been sung, the poets' words harvested. But who needs poets? Simpering in their guild spires, they call us lovebuckers. Spires the builders build, like everything else. Why waste time with words when there's so much real work? I'll never be a poet; all I've ever needed I learned in my mother's ab-dome:

*Build a tower
Build it well.
Partly pearl and
Partly shell.
Build a tower,
Every He.
Climb atop and*

Wait for She.

"Watch it, offal shell!" Another he swims by; a hindpod smacks my mandibles.

"Out of my way, stonebrain." Back I smack him. My forepod hits the bucker upside the antennae. His carapace flares; segments gleam like blades in the bright-as-day moonlight. Fool to fight because the flaring slows him down; my carapace sleek and nimble, I steal the lead.

There! Low and to the side, a flat shelf of shale swept clean by the tides. Tail flukes lash and take me down. Smooth, sweet shale, glowing dark. My pods form cups, and anchor me. Carapace flares while antennae stiffen with eager erections.



"Mine!" I shout. "Mine, mine, mine!"

Other hes surge around me, but none dash in, none try to steal my plot. Wide and glorious the tide plain, plenty of room for all, and it's a fool who fights when there's love coming.

Nipping a free-flowing strand of seagrass -- a nicely pungent bouquet, I might add -- I begin to chew. But the urge to flare my carapace becomes overwhelming. Hunching my head and thorax, squeezing my foreknees together, a sharp delicious crackling fills my ears and splits my shell.

I pull the longest segment from my back by twisting around until mandibles take hold. Regurgitating the seagrass with spit forms a milky glue -- liquid pearl, as the poets say -- to glue the shell to stone. My tower's begun.

Upsee: shadows of haes overhead, dark shapes tracking the breeze as they skim the surface. Downsee: to the left the flood plains drop away. A good site.

Have my pick of the shes when they rise from the depths.

Another strip of carapace, and then another. All hail most holy symbolism. The four longest pieces, one for each kind, form the tower's base. The four shortest pieces, one for each guild, glued atop to form a wide platform, and I climb until my antennae break surface.

Fresh in my newly shining carapace, mandibles wide and grinning, I begin to stroke the shreds of chitin from my legs and abdomen. Good grooming is a must; the outer mandibles crush the segments, the inner ones pulverize and mix with spit and the very special secretions marking my maturity. Glowpearl, we call it, or he-shine, and I dab some on each tower corner -- where it beams brightly -- then sculpt my desires in swirls and glyphs known since time out of shell.

Upsee: the first moon has passed its zenith. He-towers rise on all sides. Long slender Haes sail between them, skimming along the surface, their pods flared as sails. Shadows under the moon as shaes flit through the sky with pods spread to glassy thinness in crescent wings. The second moon nears apogee.

Downsee: the shes come!



Sleek and black as the depths, wisest in wisdom, ready to spend the glory of their final cycle, the shes' blunt bodies flow with the currents. My antennae twitch eagerly.

"Spindleye!" My mandibles click as my voice cracks. "Spindleye of the fourth quad, City Carnak, Guild Scrollthor, builder of towers and dreams extraordinary!" And the voices of other hes ring forth:

"Tanaspume of the third quad!"

"Rapanorf of the second, poet of poets!"

"Balandron, warrior supreme of the first quad."

"You look likely." A she drifts up level with me.

"Such a sheen to your carapace. Such a many-layered glint to your jewel eyes," I answer, bending my knees in a courtly bow.

"Sweet words from one with such strong-looking pods." She bobs approvingly. "But that's not enough. Have you wisdom?"

"If not, then I will build some, and surround you with it before the night is done."

"Perhaps. We shall see." Her antennae sweep forward to stroke mine, sending prickles down my underside. She tastes of mitefish, lower-depth mollusks, and the spicy breath of krill-rich currents.



"Ummm. You'll do." She surges forward, her mandibles fastening to mine. My legs snare her, forepods pulling free from the tower to fasten upon her voluptuous carapace. We swap secretions and I pull her against me.

She breaks the kiss for a moment, her forepods adhering to my carapace. "I'm Tenebrey, quad three, city Gumshir, astrologer of the southern currents."

"And you're exquisite, little mother-to-be." Bringing my tail flukes up underneath us, I slide eagerly into her hot, secreting ovigonopod. With the first thrust, she gasps, bubbles bursting from her spiracles.

The sumptuous strokes of her antennae as they twine with mine; the delicious sensation of her cerci as she feels up my abdomen; ecstasy under the four moons.

Another thrust, our backs arch, legs twitch in time and it's over. Her tail flukes sweep wide, tightening the muscles of her abdomen to force me out. My turn to gasp, and the bubbles from my spiracles wash around her ruddy carapace as she climbs atop me. Antennae twined, we upsee to watch the haes and shaes.

Thousands of haes surface-float upon backs, shining with pearl and polished with striderwax. Legs and antennae erect and stiff, out of the water into the warm

night breeze.



The shaes, resplendent in their pod-stretched wings that steal azures and umbers from the moons, ride the air. The shaes dance! Forming circles, then spheres, squeezing out to squares that erupt into cubes of light and glory.

Voices peel over the flood plains as haes call out to the dancers. Finally, the shaes flatten into a great swirling sheet of iridescence to descend in eager grace.

Each shae has picked a hae. Their limbs lock to each other. Up into the night they surge; their songs become moans, and poetic words transform to grunts and squeals.

"Delicious," Tenebrey murmurs softly against my antennae.

"It must be something," I return, nestling against her.

"Oh, it is, it is." She wriggles and I feel her pods climb up my sides until she's perched on the very crest of my carapace. "Someday you'll know."

"Tell me what it's like."

"Shush. I see one I want." Her antennae pull from mine, a loss, an eerie emptiness that makes the space between my eyes ache with longing.

Tenebrey extends her body up through the rippling surface. I upsee her carapace as her abdomen flexes overhead, lifting her ovigonopod from the water. How beautiful her cerci, pale feathers that stroke the moonlight.

"Enerous!" she cries. "Remember me?"

A hae-laden shae buzzes down to meet us, hovering just out of Tenebrey's reach. "Tenebrey! Child of Migustra of the first quad. Yes, I remember."

"Four years I've waited." Tenebrey's voice rises in pitch, a coy beacon. "O leader of the second quad, will you join us?"



"I think I might." Enerous descends, wings flailing above the water and blurring my upsee with gurgling ripples.

"The he's not much," the hae clinging to Enerous says, voice a whine shriller than the wings holding haem aloft.

"The he's a nice one," Tenebrey says. "Rich with longing, and a good firm thrust that I greatly enjoyed."

"Too delicate. The pods of a poet, I'll wager." The hae glares up at haes shae. "Fly towards the third moon. I know a good hard he over there -- a builder, if you know what I mean."

"I'll pick my own he, if you don't mind." Enerous glares down at haer suitor. "You don't have to mate with him, Trockit, but look at his mandibles. I'll bet he can suck a strawdigger right out of its shell."

"I'm a builder, too. From Carnak." I upsee haem in the eye. "And I have more than pretty words to work with."

"Have you seen the Carnak towers?" Tenebrey asks.

"Ooooh," coos Enerous. "Thick and hard and bigger than most. He'll do nicely. Thank you, Tenebrey, for introducing us."

"I still don't like him," the hae mutters and tries to tug Enerous away by jerking on haer carapace.



Enerous rocks with the motion and pulls haer antennae from the hae. "Well, I could drop you somewhere."

The threat is enough. The hae quivers up against haer, haes antennae flicking through the air attempting to trap haers. "Oh, all right."

Enerous giggles and floats gently down to us.

Hes have done shes; haes have done shaes. Now it's time for shes and shaes while hes do haes.

For a moment, we're all legs and pods in a chitin-flavored ball. Tenebrey climbs off me, rolling onto her back as Enerous flutters haer wings. The hae releases Enerous to clamber over Tenebrey to get to me. I'm taking all this weight on my pods and have to stiffen my leg joints while the tower quivers.

"I'm Trockit, third quad, city Brism, reed collector to the second scribe there." Haes upsee eyes move over me.

"Poet's guild. I should have known." But I flex my pods mightily and after a moment, Trockit gives a little shiver of approval. Hae extends a flaccid abdomen that shines invitingly in the moonlight. "You want to suck on this?"

"I'd be delighted." Opening both sets of mandibles, I take haem in. Haes secretions flow thinly at first, and I wonder if that's what it means to be old. Fastening my mandibles firmly, I blow the air out my spiracles with a mighty blast that bubbles up around Enerous and Tenebrey, making them giggle.

"Well," Trockit shivers, and locks haes pods to my carapace. "You've got the lung of a builder, I'll say that much."

I won't talk with my mandibles full, and this is much too important anyway. Our soon-to-be children depend on it. Hae tastes of cuttleweed and strummerclam, good nutritious stuff. It bloats my abdomen, churning inside as my own stored food mixes with it.

"Oooh, here it comes." Trockit gasps and shudders, carapace crackling, fissuring. Haes foreleg drops off. In the corner of my downsee eyes, Tenebrey snatches the floating limb and begins to snack.

One by one, Trockit's remaining legs and pods come off. Haes carapace caves in on itself. "Enough, enough, now."

My mandibles clamp shut. My head twists, and with a mighty jerk tears away the sagging sack of haes abdomen. Trockit squirms out of haes old body, white and pale as the third moon. Haes fresh pods spread thin, veined and stiffening.

"You were right, Enerous." Hae twists to look at us, podwings spreading. "Dear Spindleye is a sweet, sweet he." Antennae flick to tease mine. "And if you have wisdom, I'll see you in four." Trockit is now a new shae.

"In four!" I cry, proud of my mighty he-ness.



Trockit flutters haer stiffened podwings, testing them. A true gentle he is what I am; my forepods fasten on haer and lift haer up. Hindpods holding fast to my tower, my carapace arches and with a mighty thrust, I push Trockit above the shimmering waves.

Trockit's wings begin to buzz, blurring my upsee with swirls of water. Haer wings carry haer up, speckling the moon as the other new shaes swirl into the night.

"Nicely done," Enerous says, haer carapace in tatters that Tenebrey pulls off in stiff strips.

"I told you he was good," Tenebrey says between mouthfuls. "Every bit as good

as you are, my sweet." Her head swivels toward me. "Come, help me now, my he."

"With pleasure." My pods fasten to them both. Already the current changes, pulling away from the flood plain. With delicate gusto, I sink my mandibles into Enerous's wingpod, whipping my head back and forth. The wing comes loose. My abdomen engorges as I eat it.



"Ummm." Tenebrey clings and chews off Enerous's hind wingpod. "Absolutely delicious." She looks up coyly at me, the receding moons mirrored in the facets of her upsee eyes. Together we fasten our mandibles onto Enerous's remaining wingpods. Twisting our heads in perfect time, we pop them loose from Enerous's body. My forepods, fastened to Enerous's shell, pull, just as Tenebrey does, and Enerous's carapace splits down the middle.

"Free at last." Enerous, white as pearl in her new she-shell, drifts up away from us. Her tiny new legpods quiver, stroking frantically at the current that drags her from the tower. Enerous, a she now, splays her carapace to ride the waters, returning to the deep cities where the shes dwell. "Goodbye, my loves."

"In four!" I call out as the dark water takes her. Tenebrey's pods fasten to my carapace; the pull from the water almost drags us away too.

"The tide's stronger this year. Get me down, Spindleye."

"Yes, my love." Struggling against the current, taking one last glimpse of the remaining fourth moon before it follows the others into the dawn, I begin crawling down my tower. Tenebrey clings to my back, heavy now with fertilized eggs.

Silt almost blinds us, the water gushing away, and it's all I can do to fasten my pods to the smooth shale of the tower's base. The shale slopes down toward the depths to disappear in the muddy sea floor.

Tenebrey clings frantically while I struggle to face the current. With a groan, I thicken my forepods to keep hold of the shale.

Shale! Strong stone -- I can't dig through this. What a fool I've been. Mother said nothing of such things.

Tenebrey's terror shocks through me as her antennae wind desperately around mine. The water roars! Follow the current and she'll be too deep, easy prey for molesharks.

I'm blind myself now, silt stinging my eyes. We huddle against my tower. Fighting to pull my antennae free, pods throbbing, I ease us forward against the current. She must trust me fully now or all is lost.

My antennae whip forward, over the silt-scoured stone. A small fissure in the shale to my right. And this is builder's wisdom: small cracks beget larger ones. My forepods take hold and we slant along until the crack widens. A few steps further, my antennae touch mud.

Narrowing my hindpods, I finally begin to dig.

The water turns black with silt, too dark to see. Arching my carapace, blowing the air from my spiracles, I thrust my abdomen down into the mud. A beautiful agony as abdominal scales flare like barbs, pushing deep.

"I can't hold on," Tenebrey wails.

"I've got you." One of my forepods cups her carapace and I pull her down, forcing her into the mire where she begins to squirm and twist until she's wedged in the mud next to my abdomen.

Tenebrey clings to my abdomen and begins to stroke the underside. By the Pastel Trench of Giants, the feeling is indescribable. My abdomen spasms, I feel the rending, and in a blinding rush of pain I lurch free, leaving my abdomen and all the stored food Trockit and I could gather.

"Finally!" Tenebrey's shout ripples with exultation. The last thing I hear as her carapace hunkers down and fastens her to the bottom.

A last, longing stroke from her antennae, a parting touch that hints of loneliness and joy. Four years she'll stay there; our children will be born when the tide again floods the plain.

Until then the young hes will dwell within her newly formed ab-dome, a city in miniature sculpted in chitin and dreams. They'll feed off our stored reserves, and she'll teach them, as my own mother, Winil, taught me, of the Cycle of Fours. Perhaps I'll see my young when the moons converge and the tiny hes scuttle for the safety of the gleaming cities, beacons of light fair bright as the moons.

Weightless in the currents, the bud of my new abdomen already sprouting between my hindpods, I let the water spin me to the surface. A builder, I, to ride the wave of dawn until my abdomen heals. Skimming the froth of waves on my back, steering with my hindpods while my forepods spread to catch the wind, I begin to search.

It's such a twist of sensation, for upsee has become downsee, and I, once a he, am now a fledgling hae.

Four moons, four gods, let the currents sustain me. The rising sun pinks the waters and the clouds on the horizon promise a new day.

Soon I'll find my way to Carnak. Spires I've built, yet perhaps there is something more to life than working mere stone. A poet I'll become, a builder of words and wisdom, fat and sassy on my back to sing the praises of Tenebrey, mother to the end, of Enerous the beautiful shadow upon the moon, and sulky Trockit whose flavor still haunts my mind.

*Oh, grand and glorious morning,
my pods throb with yearning
for the time when four moons converge,
wild the flood tides surge,
drawing deep shes and shaes above,
the ovigonopods of love.*