

# Follow Me Light

by Elizabeth Bear

Pinky Gilman limped. He wore braces on both legs, shining metal and black washable foam spoiling the line of his off-the-rack suits, what line there was to spoil. He heaved himself about on a pair of elbow-cuff crutches. I used to be able to hear him clattering along the tiled, echoing halls of the public defender's offices a dozen doors down.

Pinky's given name was Isaac, but even his clients called him Pinky. He was a fabulously ugly man, lumpy and bald and bristled and pink-scrubbed as a slaughtered hog. He had little fishy walleyes behind spectacles thick enough to serve barbecue on. His skin peeled wherever the sun or the dry desert air touched it.

He was by far the best we had.

The first time I met Pinky was in 1994. He was touring the office as part of his job interview, and Christian Vlatick led him up to me while I was wrestling a five-gallon bottle onto the water cooler. I flinched when he extended his right hand to shake mine with a painful twist intended to keep the crutch from slipping off his arm. The rueful way he cocked his head as I returned his clasp told me he was used to that reaction, but I doubted most people flinched for the reason I did—the shimmer of hot blue lights that flickered through his aura, filling it with brilliance although the aura itself was no color I'd ever seen before—a swampy gray-green, tornado colored.

I must have been staring, because the squat little man glanced down at my shoes, and Chris cleared his throat. "Maria," he said, "This is Isaac Gilman."

"Pinky," Pinky said. His voice ... oh, la. If he were robbed with regard to his body, that voice was the thing that made up the difference. Oh, my.

"Maria Delprado. Are you the new attorney?"

"I hope so," he said, dry enough delivery that Chris and I both laughed.

His handshake was good: strong, cool, and leathery, at odds with his parboiled countenance. He let go quickly, grasping the handle of his crutch again and shifting his weight to center, blinking behind the glass that distorted his eyes. "Maria," he said. "My favorite name. Do you know what it means?"

"It means Mary," I answered. "It means sorrow."

"No," he said. "It means *sea*." He pointed past me with his chin, indicating the still-sloshing bottle atop the water cooler. "They make the women do the heavy lifting here?"

"I like to think I can take care of myself. Where'd you study, Isaac?"

"Pinky," he said, and, "Yale. Four point oh."

I raised both eyebrows at Chris and pushed my glasses up my nose. The Las Vegas public defender's office doesn't get a lot of interest from Yale Law School grads, *summa cum laude*. "And you haven't hired him yet?"

"I wanted your opinion," Chris said without a hint of apology. He glanced at Pinky and offered up a self-deprecating smile. "Maria can spot guilty people. Every time. It's a gift. One of these days we're going to get her made a judge."

"Really?" Pinky's lipless mouth warped itself into a grin, showing the gaps in his short, patchy beard. "Am I guilty, then?"

The lights that followed him glittered, electric blue fireflies in the twilight he wore like a coat. He shifted his weight on his crutches, obviously uncomfortable at standing.

"And what am I guilty of?"

Not teasing, either, or flirtatious. Calm, and curious, as if he really thought maybe I could tell. I squinted at the lights that danced around him—will-o'-the-wisps, spirit lights. The aura itself was dark, but it wasn't the darkness of past violence or dishonesty. It was organic, intrinsic, and I wondered if it had to do with whatever had crippled him. And the firefly lights—

Well, they were something else again. Just looking at them made my fingertips tingle.

"If there are any sins on your conscience," I said carefully, "I think you've made amends."

He blinked again, and I wondered why I wanted to think *blinked fishily* when fishes do not blink. And then he smiled at me, teeth like yellowed pegs in pale, blood-flushed gums. "How on earth do you manage *that*?"

"I measure the distance between their eyes."

A three-second pause, and then he started to laugh, while Christian, who had heard the joke before, stood aside and rolled his eyes. Pinky shrugged, rise and fall of bulldog shoulders, and I smiled hard, because I knew we were going to be friends.

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In November of 1996, I lost my beloved seventeen-year-old cat to renal failure, and Pinky showed up at my door uninvited with a bottle of Maker's Mark and a box of Oreos. We were both half-trashed by the time I spread my cards out on the table between us, a modified Celtic cross. They shimmered when I looked at them; that was the alcohol. The shimmer around Pinky when he stretched his hand out—was not.

"Fear death by water," I said, and touched the Hanged Man's foot, hoping he would know he was supposed to laugh.

His eyes sparkled like scales in the candlelight when he refilled my glass. "It's supposed to be if you *don't* find the Hanged Man. In any case, I don't see a drowned sailor."

"No," I answered. I picked up my glass and bent to look closer. "But there is the three of staves as the significator. Eliot called him the Fisher King." I looked plainly at where his crutches leaned against the arm of his chair. "Not a bad choice, don't you think?"

His face grayed a little, or perhaps that was the alcohol. Foxlights darted around him like startled minnows. "What does he stand for?"

"Virtue tested by the sea." And then I wondered why I'd put it that way. "The sea symbolizes change, conflict, the deep unconscious, the monsters of the Id—"

"I know what the sea means," he said bitterly. His hand darted out and overturned the card, showing the tan back with its key pattern in ivory. He jerked his chin at the spread. "Do you believe in those?"

It had been foolish to pull them out. Foolish to show him, but there was a certain amount of grief and alcohol involved. "It's a game," I said, and swept them all into a pile. "Just a child's game." And then I hesitated, and looked down, and turned the three of staves back over, so it faced the same way as the rest. "It's not the future I see."

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In 1997 I took him to bed. I don't know if it was the bottle and a half of shiraz we celebrated one of our rare victories with, or the deep bittersweet richness of his voice finally eroding my limited virtue, but we were good in the dark. His arms and shoulders, it turned out, were beautiful, after all: powerful and lovely, all out of proportion with the rest of him.

I rolled over, after, and dropped the tissue-wrapped rubber on the nightstand, and heard him sigh. "Thank you," he said, and the awe in that perfect voice was sweeter than the sex had been.

"My pleasure," I said, and meant it, and curled up against him again, watching the firefly lights flicker around his blunt, broad hands as he spoke softly and gestured in the dark, trying to encompass some inexpressible emotion.

Neither one of us was sleepy. He asked me what I saw in Las Vegas. I told him I was from Tucson, and I missed the desert when I was gone. He told me he was from Stonington. When the sun came up, I put my hand into his aura, chasing the flickering lights like a child trying to catch snowflakes on her tongue.

I asked him about the terrible scars low on the backs of his thighs that left his hamstrings weirdly lumped and writhed, unconnected to bone under the skin. I'd thought him crippled from birth. I'd been wrong about so many, many things.

"Gaffing hook," he said. "When I was seventeen. My family were fisherman. Always have been."

"How come you never go home to Connecticut, Isaac?"

For once, he didn't correct me. "Connecticut isn't home."

"You don't have any family?"

Silence, but I saw the dull green denial stain his aura. I breathed in through my nose and tried again.

"Don't you ever miss the ocean?"

He laughed, warm huff of breath against my ear, stirring my hair. "The desert will kill me just as fast as the ocean would, if I ever want it. What's to miss?"

"Why'd you come here?"

"Just felt drawn. It seemed like a safe place to be. Unchanging. I needed to get away from the coast, and Nevada sounded ... very dry. I have a skin condition. It's worse in wet climates. It's worse near the sea."

"But you came back to the ocean after all. Prehistoric seas. Nevada was all underwater once. There were ichthyosaurs—"

"Underwater. Huh." He stretched against my back, cool and soft. "I guess it's in the blood."

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That night I dreamed they chained my wrists with jeweled chains before they crippled me and left me alone in the salt marsh to die. The sun rose as they walked away singing, hunched inhuman shadows glimpsed through a splintered mist that glowed pale as the opals in my manacles.

The mist burned off to show gray earth and greeny brown water, agates and discolored aquamarine. The edges of coarse gray cloth adhered in drying blood on the backs of my thighs, rumped where they had pulled it up to hamstring me. The chains were cold against my cheeks when I raised my head away from the mud enough to pillow my face on the backs of my hands.

The marsh stank of rot and crushed vegetation, a green miasma so overwhelming the sticky copper of blood could not pierce it. The pain wasn't as much as it should have been; I was slipping into shock as softly as if I slipped under the unrippled water. I hadn't lost enough blood to kill me, but I rather thought I'd prefer a quick, cold sleep and never awakening to starving to death or lying in a pool of my own blood until the scent attracted the thing I had been left in propitiation of.

Somewhere, a frog croaked. It looked like a hot day coming.

I supposed I was going to find out.

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His skin scaled in the heat. It was a dry heat, blistering, peeling, chapping lips and bloodying noses. He used to hang me with jewels, opals, tourmalines the color of moss and roses. "Family money," he told me. "Family jewels." He wasn't lying.

I would have seen a lie.

The Mojave hated him. He was chapped and chafed, cracked and dry. He never sweated enough, kept the air conditioner twisted as high as it would go. Skin burns in the heat, in the sun. Peels like a snake's. Aquamarine discolors like smoker's teeth. Pearls go brittle. Opals crack and lose their fire.

He used to go down to the Colorado river at night, across the dam to Willow Beach, on the Arizona side, and swim in the river in the dark. I told him it was crazy. I told him it was dangerous. How could he take care of himself in the Colorado when he couldn't walk without braces and crutches?

He kissed me on the nose and told me it helped his pain. I told him if he drowned, I would never forgive him. He said in the history of the entire world twice over, a Gilman had never once drowned. I called him a cocky, insincere bastard. He stopped telling me where he was going when he went out at night.

When he came back and slept beside me, sometimes I lay against the pillow and watched the follow-me lights flicker around him. Sometimes I slept.

Sometimes I dreamed, also.

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I awakened after sunset, when the cool stars prickled out in the darkness. The front of my robe had dried, one long yellow-green stain, and now the fabric under my back and ass was saturated, sticking to my skin. The mud seemed to have worked it loose from the gashes on my legs.

I wasn't dead yet, more's the pity, and now it *hurt*.

I wondered if I could resist the swamp water when thirst set in. Dehydration would kill me faster than hunger. On the other hand, the water might make me sick enough that I'd slip into the relief of fever and pass away, oblivious in delirium. If dysentery was a better way to die than gangrene. Or dehydration.

Or being eaten. If the father of frogs came to collect me as was intended, I wouldn't suffer long.

I whistled across my teeth. A fine dramatic gesture, except it split my cracked lips and I tasted blood. My options seemed simple: lie still and die, or thrash and die. It would be sensible to give myself up with dignity.

I pushed myself onto my elbows and began to crawl toward nothing in particular.

Moonlight laid a patina of silver over the cloudy yellow-green puddles I wormed through and glanced off the rising mist in electric gleams of blue. The exertion warmed me, at least, and loosened my muscles. I stopped shivering after the first half hour. My thighs knotted tight as welded steel around the insult to my tendons. It would have been more convenient if they'd just chopped my damned legs off. At least I wouldn't have had to deal with the frozen limbs dragging behind me as I crawled.

If I had any sense—

If I had any sense at all, I wouldn't be crippled and dying in a swamp. If I had any sense *left*, I would curl up and die.

It sounded pretty good, all right.

I was just debating the most comfortable place when curious blue lights started to flicker at the corners of my vision.

I'm not sure why it was that I decided to follow them.

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Pinky gave me a pearl on a silver chain, a baroque multicolored thing swirled glossy and irregular as toffee. He said it had been his mother's. It dangled between my breasts, warm as the stroke of a thumb when I wore it.

Pinky said he'd had a vasectomy, still wore a rubber every time we made love. Talked me into going on the Pill.

"Belt and suspenders," I teased. The garlic on my scampi was enough to make my eyes water, but Pinky never seemed to mind what I ate, no matter how potent it was.

It was one AM on a Friday, and we'd crawled out of bed for dinner, finally. We ate seafood at Capozzoli's, because although it was dim in the cluttered red room the food was good and it was open all night. Pinky looked at me out of squinting, amber eyes, so sad, and tore the tentacles off a bit of calamari with his teeth. "Would you want to bring a kid into this world?"

"No," I answered, and told that first lie. "I guess not."

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I didn't meet Pinky's brother Esau until after I'd married someone else, left my job to try to have a baby, gotten divorced when it turned out we couldn't, had to come back to pay the bills. Pinky was still there, still part of the program. Still plugging away on the off chance that eventually he'd meet an innocent man, still pretending we were and always had been simply the best of friends. We never had the conversation, but I imagined it a thousand times.

*I left you.*

*You wanted a baby.*

*It didn't work out.*

*And now you want to come back? I'm not like you, Maria.*

*Don't you ever miss the ocean?*

*No. I never do.*

But he had too much pride, and I had too much shame. And once I was Judge Delprado, I only saw him in court anymore.

Esau called me, left a message on my cell, his name, who he was, where he'd be. I didn't know how he got the number. I met him out of curiosity as much as concern, at the old church downtown, the one from the thirties built of irreplaceable history. They made it of stone, to last, and broke up petroglyphs and stalactites to make the rough rock walls beautiful for God.

I hated Esau the first time I laid eyes on him. Esau. There was no mistaking him: same bristles and thinning hair, same spectacularly ugly countenance, fishy and prognathic. Same twilight-green aura, too, but Esau's was stained near his hands and mouth, the color of clotted blood, and no lights flickered near.

Esau stood by one of the petroglyphs, leaned close to discolored red stone marked with a stick figure, meaning man, and the wavy parallel lines that signified the river. Old as time, the Colorado, wearing the badlands down, warden and warded of the desert West.

Esau turned and saw me, but I don't think he saw *me*. I think he saw the pearl I wore around my neck.

I gave all the jewels back to Pinky when I left him. Except the pearl. He wouldn't take that back, and to be honest, I was glad. I'm not sure why I wore it to meet Esau, except I hated to take it off.

Esau straightened up, all five foot four of him behind the glower he gave me, and reached out peremptorily to touch the necklace, an odd gesture with the fingers pressed together. Without thinking, I slapped his hand away, and he hissed at me, a rubbery tongue flicking over fleshless lips.

Then he drew back, two steps, and looked me in the eye. His voice had nothing in common with his face: baritone and beautiful, melodious and carrying. I leaned forward, abruptly entranced. "Shipwreck," he murmured. "Shipwrecks. Dead man's jewels. It's all there for the taking if you just know where to look. Our family's always known."

My hand came up to slap him again, halted as if of its own volition. As if it couldn't push through the sound of his voice. "Were you a treasure hunter once?"

"I never stopped," he said, and tucked my hair behind my ear with the brush of his thumb. I shivered. My hand went down, clenched hard at my side. "When Isaac comes back to New England with me, you're coming too. We can give you children, Maria. Litters of them. Broods. Everything you've ever wanted."

"I'm not going anywhere. Not for ... Isaac. Not for anyone."

"What makes you think you have any choice? You're part of his price. And we know what you want. We've researched you. It's not too late."

I shuddered, hard, sick, cold. "There's always a choice." The words hurt my lips. I swallowed. Fingernails cut my palms. His hand on my cheek was cool. "What's the rest of his price? If I go willing?"

"Healing. Transformation. Strength. Return to the sea. All the things he should have died for refusing."

"He doesn't miss the sea."

Esau smiled, showing teeth like yellow pegs. "You would almost think, wouldn't you?" There was a long pause, nearly respectful. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Come along."

Unable to stop myself, I followed that beautiful voice.

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Most of a moon already hung in the deepening sky, despite the indirect sun still lighting the trail down to Willow Beach. The rocks radiated heat through my sneakers like bricks warmed in an oven. "Pinky said he didn't have any family."

Esau snorted. "He gave it the old college try."

"You were the one who crippled him, weren't you? And left him in the marsh to die."

"How did you know that?"

"He didn't tell me. I dreamed it."

"No," he answered, extending one hand to help me down a tricky slope. "That was Jacob. He doesn't travel."

"Another brother."

"The eldest brother." He yanked my arm and gave me a withering glance when I stumbled. He walked faster, crimson flashes of obfuscation coloring the swampwater light that surrounded him. I trotted to keep up, cursing my treacherous feet. At least my tongue was still my own, and I used it.

"Jacob, Esau, and Isaac Gilman? How ... original."

"They're proud old New England names. Marshes and Gilmans were among the original settlers." Defensive. "Be silent. You don't need a tongue to make babies, and in a few more words I'll be happy to relieve you of it, mammal bitch."

I opened my mouth; my voice stopped at the back of my throat. I stumbled, and he hauled me to my feet, his rough, cold palm scraped the skin of my wrist over the bones.

We came around a corner of the wash that the trail ran through. Esau stopped short, planting his feet hard. I caught my breath at the power of the silent brown river running at the bottom of the gorge, at the sparkles that hung over it, silver and copper and alive, swarming like fireflies.

And standing on the bank before the current was Pinky—Isaac—braced on his canes, startlingly insouciant for a cripple who'd fought his way down a rocky trail. He craned his head back to get a better look at us and frowned. "Esau. I wish I could say it was a pleasure to see you. I'd hoped you'd joined Jacob at the bottom of the ocean by now."

"Soon," Esau said easily, manhandling me down the last of the slope. He held up the hand that wasn't knotted around my wrist. I blinked twice before I realized the veined, translucent yellow webs between his fingers were a part of him. He grabbed my arm again, handling me like a bag of groceries.

Pinky hitched himself forward to meet us, and for a moment I thought he was going to hit Esau across the face with his crutch. I imagined the sound the aluminum would make when it shattered Esau's cheekbone. *Litters of them. Broods.* Easy to give in and let it happen, yes. But litters of *what?*



"You didn't have to bring Maria into it."

"We can give her what she wants, can't we? With your help or without it. How'd you get the money for school?"

Pinky smiled past me, a grin like a wolf. "There was platinum in those chains. Opals. Pearls big as a dead man's eyeball. Plenty. There's still plenty left."

"So there was. How did you survive?"

"I was guided," he said, and the blue lights flickered around him. Blue lights that were kin to the silver lights swarming over the river. I could imagine them buzzing. Angry, invaded. I turned my head to see Esau's expression, but he only had eyes for Pinky.

Esau couldn't see the lights. He looked at Pinky, and Pinky met the stare with a lifted chin. "Come home, Isaac."

"And let Jacob try to kill me again?"

"He only hurt you because you tried to leave us."

"He left me for the father of frogs in the salt marsh, Esau. And you were there with him when he did—"

"We couldn't just let you walk away." Esau let go of my arm with a command to be still, and stepped toward Pinky with his hands spread wide. There was still light down here, where the canyon was wider and the shadow of the walls didn't yet block the sun. It shone on Esau's balding scalp, on the yolky, veined webs between his fingers, on the aluminum of Pinky's crutches.

"I didn't walk," Pinky said. He turned away, hitching himself around, the beige rubber feet of the crutches braced wide on the rocky soil. He swung himself forward, headed for the river, for the swarming lights. "I crawled."

Esau fell into step beside him. "I don't understand how you haven't ... changed."

"It's the desert." Pinky paused on a little ledge over the water. Tamed by the dam, the river ran smooth here and still. I could feel its power anyway, old magic that made this land live. "The desert doesn't like change. It keeps me in between."

"That hurts you." Almost in sympathy, as Esau reached out and laid a webbed hand on Pinky's shoulder. Pinky flinched but didn't pull away. I opened my mouth to shout at him, feeling as if my tongue were my own again, and stopped. *Litters.*

*Whatever they were, they'd be Pinky's children.*

"It does." Pinky fidgeted with the crutches, leaning forward over the river, working his forearms free of the cuffs. His shoulders rippled under the white cloth of his shirt. I wanted to run my palms over them.

"Your legs will heal if you accept the change," Esau offered, softly, his voice carried away over the water. "You'll be strong. You'll regenerate. You'll have the ocean, and you won't hurt anymore, and there's your woman—we'll take her too."

"Esau."

I heard the warning in the tone. The anger. Esau did not. He glanced at me. "Speak, woman. Tell Isaac what you want."

I felt my tongue come unstuck in my mouth, although I still couldn't move my hands. I bit my tongue to keep it still.

Esau sighed, and looked away. "Blood is thicker than water, Isaac. Don't you want a family of your own?"

Yes, I thought. Pinky didn't speak, but I saw the set of his shoulders, and the answer they carried was *no*. Esau must have seen it too, because he raised one hand, the webs translucent and spoiled-looking, and sunlight glittered on the barbed ivory claws that curved from his fingertips, unsheathed like a cat's.

*With your help or without it.*

But litters of *what*?

I shouted so hard it bent me over. "*Pinky, duck!*"

He didn't. Instead, he *threw* his crutches backward, turned with the momentum of the motion, and grabbed Esau around the waist. Esau squeaked—*shrieked*—and threw his hands up, clawing at Pinky's shoulders and face as the silver and blue and coppery lights flickered and swarmed and swirled around them, but he couldn't match Pinky's massive strength. The lights covered them both, and Esau screamed again, and I strained, lunged, leaned at the invisible chains that held me as still as a posed mannequin.

Pinky just held on and leaned back.

They barely splashed when the Colorado closed over them.

Five minutes after they went under, I managed to wiggle my fingers. Up and down the bank, there was no trace of either of them. I couldn't stand to touch Pinky's crutches.

I left them where they'd fallen.

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Esau had left the keys in the car, but when I got there I was shaking too hard to drive. I locked the door and got back out, tightened the laces on my sneakers, and toiled up the ridge until I got to the top. I almost turned my ankle twice when rocks rolled under my foot, but it didn't take long. Red rock and dusty canyons stretched west, a long, gullied slope behind me, the river down there somewhere, close enough to smell but out of sight. I settled myself on a rock, elbows on knees, and looked out over the scarred, raw desert at the horizon and the setting sun.

There's a green flash that's supposed to happen just when the sun slips under the edge of the world. I'd never seen it. I wasn't even sure it existed. But if I watched long enough, I figured I might find out.

There was still a hand span between the sun and the ground, up here. I sat and watched, the hot wind lifting my hair, until the tawny disk of the sun was halfway gone and I heard the rhythmic crunch of someone coming up the path.

I didn't turn. There was no point. He leaned over my shoulder, braced his crutches on either side of me, a presence solid and cool as a moss-covered rock. I tilted my head back against Pinky's chest, his wet shirt dripping on my forehead, eyes, and mouth. Electric blue lights flickered around him, and I couldn't quite make out his features, shadowed as they were against a twilight sky. He released one crutch and laid his hand on my shoulder. His breath brushed my ear like the susurrus of the sea. "Esau said blood is thicker than water," I said, when I didn't mean to say anything.

"Fish blood isn't," Pinky answered, and his hand tightened. I looked away from the reaching shadows of the canyons below and saw his fingers against my skin, pale silhouettes on olive, unwebbed. He slid one under the black strap of my tank top. I didn't protest, despite the dark red, flaking threads that knotted the green smoke around his hands.

"Where is he?"

"Esau? He drowned."

"But—" I craned my neck. "You said Gilmans never drown."

He shrugged against my back. "I guess the river just took a dislike to him. Happens that way sometimes."

A lingering silence, while I framed my next question. "How did you find me?"

"I'll always find you, if you want," he said, his patched beard rough against my neck. "What are you watching?"

"I'm watching the sun go down."

"Come in under this red rock," he misquoted, as the shadow of the ridge opposite slipped across the valley toward us.

"The handful of dust thing seems appropriate—"

Soft laugh, and he kissed my cheek, hesitantly, as if he wasn't sure I would permit it. "I would have thought it'd be 'Fear death by water.'"

The sun went down. I missed the flash again. I turned to him in a twilight indistinguishable from the gloom that hung around his shoulders and brushed the flickering lights away from his face with the back of my hand. "Not that," I answered. "I have no fear of that, my love."

The End