

## The Age Of Ice by Liz Williams

**Liz Williams is a science fiction and fantasy writer living in Glastonbury, England, where she is director of a witchcraft supply shop. She is currently published by Bantam Spectra (US) and Tor Macmillan (UK), appears regularly in Realms of Fantasy, Asimov's, and other magazines, and is the secretary of the Milford SF Writers' Workshop. Some of the author's most recent books are Banner of Souls, Nine Layers of Sky, The Poison Master, and her short story collection The Banquet of the Lords of Night, which was published by Night Shade Books. Her forthcoming novels include The Snake Agent, The Demon and the City, and Precious Dragon. Her latest science fiction story is set so far in the future that it seems to show the truth of Arthur C. Clarke's famous maxim that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."**

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I was in a tea-house in Caud, head bent over the little antiscribe, when the flayed warrior first appeared. Everyone stared at her for a moment, tea glasses suspended halfway to gaping mouths, eyes wide, and then it was as though time began again. The shocked glances slid away, conversation resumed about normal subjects: the depth of last night's snow, the day's horoscopes, the prospect of war. I stared at the data unscrolling across the screen of the antiscribe and tried to pretend that nothing was happening.

That wasn't easy. I was alone in Caud, knowing no one, trying to be unobtrusive. The tea-house was close to one of the main gates of the city and was thus filled with travelers, mostly from the Martian north, but some from the more southerly parts of the Crater Plain. I saw no one who looked as though they might be from Winterstrike. I had taken pains to disguise myself: bleaching my hair to the paleness of Caud, lightening my skin a shade or so with pigmentation pills. I had also been careful to come anonymously to the city, traveling in a rented vehicle across the Crater Plain at night, hiring a room in a slum tenement and staying away from any haunt-locks and blacklight devices that might scan my soul engrams and reveal me for what I was: Hestia Memar, a woman of Winterstrike, an enemy.

But now the warrior was here, sitting down in the empty seat opposite mine.

She moved stiffly beneath the confines of her rust-red armor: I could see the interplay of muscles, stripped of the covering of skin. The flesh looked old and dry, as though the warrior had spent a long time out in the cold. The armor that she wore was antique, covered with symbols that I did not recognize. I thought that she must be from the very long ago: the Rune Memory Wars, perhaps, or the Age of Children, thousands of years before our own Age of Ice. Her eyes were the wan green of winter ice, staring at me from the ruin of her face. Her mouth moved, but no sound emerged. I knew better than to speak to her. I turned away. People were shooting covert glances at me, no doubt wondering why I had been singled out. The attention drawn to me by this red, raw ghost was the last thing I wanted.

I rose, abruptly, and went through the door without looking back. At the end of the street, I risked a glance over my shoulder, fearing that the thing had followed me, but the only folk to be seen were a few hooded figures hurrying home before curfew. Hastening around the corner, I jumped onto a crowded rider that was heading in the direction of my slum. I resolved not to return to the tea-house: it was too great a risk.

Thus far, I had been successful in staying out of sight. My days were spent in the ruin of the great library of Caud, hunting through what was left of the archives. I was not the only looter, sidling through the fire-blackened racks under the shattered shell of the roof, but we left one another alone and the Matriarchy of Caud had bigger problems to deal with. Their scissor-women did not come to the ruins. Even so, I was as careful as possible, heading out in the dead hours of the afternoon and returning well before twilight and the fall of curfew.

My thoughts dwelt on the warrior as the rider trundled along. I did not know who she was, what she might represent, nor why she had chosen to manifest herself to me. I tried to tell myself that it was an unfortunate coincidence, nothing more. Caud was full of ghosts these days.

Halfway along Gauze Street the rider broke down, spilling passengers out in a discontented mass. We had to wait for the next available service and the schedule was disrupted. I was near the back of the crowd and though I pushed and shoved, I could not get on the next vehicle and had to wait for the one after that. I stood shivering in the snow for almost an hour, looking up at the shuttered faces of the weedwood mansions that lined Gauze Street. Many of them were derelict, or filled with squatters. I saw the gleam of a lamp within one of them: it looked deceptively welcoming.

By the time I reached the tenement, varying my route through the filthy alleys in case of pursuit, it was close to the curfew gong. I hurried up the grimy stairs and triple-bolted the steel door behind me. I half expected the flayed warrior to be waiting for me--sitting on the pallet bed, perhaps--but there was no one there. The power was off again, so I lit the lamp and sat down at the antiscibe, hoping that the battery had enough juice left to sustain a call to Winterstrike.

Gennera's voice crackled into the air.

"Anything?"

"No, not yet. I'm still looking." I did not want to tell her about the warrior.

"You have to find it," Gennera said. "The situation's degenerating, we're on the brink. The Caud Matriarchy is out of control."

"You're telling me. The city's a mess. Public transport's breaking down, there are scissor-women everywhere. They seek distraction, to blame all their problems on us rather than on their own incompetence. The news-views whip up the population, night after night."

"And that's why we must have a deterrent."

"If it's to be found, it will be found in the library. What's left of it."

"They've delivered an ultimatum. You saw?"

"I saw. I have three days." There was a growing pressure in my head and I massaged my temples as I spoke into the antiscibe. I felt a tingling on the back of my neck, as though something was watching me. "I have to go. The battery's running down." It could have been true.

"Call me when you can. And be careful." The antiscibe sizzled into closure.

I put a pan of dried noodles over the lamp to warm up, then drew out the results of the day's research: the documents that were too dirty or damaged to be scanned into the antiscibe. There was little of use. Schematics for ships that had ceased to fly a hundred years before, maps of mines that had long since caved in, old philosophical rants that could have been either empirical or theoretical, impossible to say which. I could find nothing resembling the fragile rumor that had sent me here: the story of a weapon.

"If we had such a weapon, it would be enough," Gennera said. "We'd never need to use it. It would be sufficient that we had it, to keep our enemies in check."

Ordinarily, this would have created disagreement throughout the Matriarchy, purely for the sake of it: Gennera was thought to be too popular in Winterstrike, and was therefore resented. But the situation had become desperate. A conclave was held in secret and they contacted me within the hour.

"They remember what you did in Tharsis," Gennera said. "You were trained out on the Plains, and these days you are the only soul-speaker in Winterstrike. You have a reputation for accomplishing the impossible."

"Tharsis was not impossible, by definition. Only hard. And that was thirteen years ago, Gennera. I'm not as young as I once was, soul-speaker or not."

"That should benefit you all the more," Gennera said.

"If I meet a man-remnant on the Plain, maybe not. My fighting skills aren't what they were."

Even over the antiscraper, I could tell that she was smiling. "You'd probably end up selling it something, Hestia."

But I had not come to Caud to sell, and I was running out of time.

In the morning, I returned to the library. I had to dodge down a series of alleyways to avoid a squadron of scissor-women, all bearing heavy weaponry. These morning patrols were becoming increasingly frequent and there were few people on the streets. I hid in the shadows, waiting until they had passed by. Occasionally, there was the whirring roar of insect craft overhead: Caud was preparing for war. My words to Gennera rose up and choked me.

I reached the ruin of the library much later than I had hoped. The remains of the blasted roof arched up over the twisted remains of the foremost stacks. The ground was littered with books, still in their round casings. It was like walking along the shores of the Small Sea, when the sand-clams crawl out onto the beaches to mate. I could not help wondering whether the information I sought was even now crunching beneath my boot heel, but these books were surely too recent. If there had been anything among them, the matriarchy of Caud would be making use of it.

No one knew precisely who had attacked the library. The matriarchy blamed Winterstrike, which was absurd. My government had far too great a respect for information. Paranoid talk among the tenements suggested that it had been men-remnants from the mountains, an equally ridiculous claim. Awts and hyenae fought with bone clubs and rocks, not missiles. The most probable explanation was that insurgents had been responsible: Caud had been cracking down on political dissent over the last few years, and this was the likely result. I suspected that the library had not been the primary target. If you studied a map, the matriarchy buildings were on the same trajectory and I was of the opinion that the missile had simply fallen short. But I volunteered this view to no one. I spoke to no one, after all.

Even though this was not my city, however, I could not stem a sense of loss whenever I laid eyes on the library. Caud, like Winterstrike, Tharsis, and the other cities of the Plain, went back thousands of years, and the library was said to contain data scrolls from very early days. And all that information had been obliterated in a single night. It was a loss for us all, not just for Caud.

I made my way as carefully as I could through the wreckage into the archives. No one else was there and it struck me that this might be a bad sign, a result of the increased presence of the scissor-women on the streets. I began to sift through fire-hazed data scrolls, running the scanning antenna of the antiscraper up each one. In the early days, they had written bottom-to-top and left-to-right, but somewhere around the Age of Children this had changed. I was not sure how much difference, if any, this would make to the antiscraper's pattern-recognition capabilities: hopefully, little enough. I tried to keep an ear out for any interference, but gradually I became absorbed in what I was doing and the world around me receded.

The sound penetrated my consciousness like a beetle in the wall: an insect clicking. Instantly, my awareness snapped back. I was crouched behind one of the stacks, a filmy fragment of documentation in

my hand, and there were two scissor-women only a few feet away.

It was impossible to tell if they had seen me, or if they were communicating. Among themselves, the scissor-women do not use speech, but converse by means of the patterns of holographic wounds that play across their flesh and armor, a language that is impossible for any not of their ranks to comprehend. I could see the images flickering up and down their legs through the gaps in the stack--raw scratches and gaping mouths, mimicking injuries too severe not to be fatal, fading into scars and then blankness in endless permutation. There was a cold wind across my skin and involuntarily I shivered, causing the scattered documents to rustle. The play of wounds became more agitated. Alarmed, I looked up, to see the ghost of the flayed warrior beckoning at the end of the stack. I hesitated for a moment, weighing ghastliness, then rose silently and crept toward it, setting the antiscibe to closure as I did so in case of scanning devices.

The ghost led me along a further row, into the shadows. The scissor-women presumably conversed and finally left, heading into the eastern wing of the library. I turned to the ghost to thank it, but it had disappeared.

I debated whether to leave, but the situation was too urgent. Keeping a watch out for the scissor-women, I collected an assortment of documents, switching on the antiscibe at infrequent intervals to avoid detection. I did not see the ghost again. Eventually, the sky above the ruined shell grew darker and I had to leave. I stowed the handfuls of documentation away in my coat. They rustled like dried leaves. Then I returned to the tenement, to examine them more closely.

The knock on the door came in the early hours of the morning. I sat up in bed, heart pounding. No one good ever knocks at that time of night. The window led nowhere, and in any case was bolted shut behind a grate. I switched on the antiscibe and broadcast the emergency code, just as there was a flash of ire-palm from the door lock and the door fell forward, blasted off its hinges. The room filled with acrid smoke. I held little hope of fighting my way out, but I swept one of the scissor-women off her feet and tackled the next. But the razor-edged scissors were at my throat within a second and I knew she would not hesitate to kill me. Wounds flickered across her face in a hideous display of silent communication.

"I'll come quietly," I said. I raised my hands.

They said nothing, but picked up the antiscibe and stashed it into a hold-all, then made a thorough search of the room. The woman who held the scissors at my throat looked into my face all the while, unblinking. At last, she gestured. "Come." Her voice was harsh and guttural. I wondered how often she actually spoke. They bound my wrists and led me, stumbling, down the stairs.

As we left the tenement and stepped out into the icy night, I saw the flayed warrior standing in the shadows. The scissor-woman who held the chain at my wrists shoved me forward.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

She grunted and pushed me on, but as they took me toward the vehicle I stole a glance back and saw that the warrior was gone. It occurred to me that it might have led the scissor-women to me, but, then, in the library, it had helped me, or had seemed to. I did not understand why it should do either.

They took me to the Mote, the matriarchy's own prison, rather than the city catacombs. That suggested they might have identified me, if not as Hestia Memar, then as a citizen of Winterstrike. That they suspected me of something major was evident by the location, and the immediacy and nature of the questioning. Even Caud had abandoned the art of direct torture, but they had other means of persuasion:

haunt noise, and drugs. They tried the haunt-tech on me first.

"You will be placed in this room," the doctor on duty explained to me. She sounded quite matter of fact. "The blacklight matrix covers the walls. There is no way out. When you are ready to come out, which will be soon, squeeze this alarm." She handed me a small black cube and the scissor-women pushed me through the door.

The Matriarchies keep a tight hold on the more esoteric uses of haunt-tech, but everyone will be familiar with the everyday manifestations: the locks and soul-scans, the weir-wards that guard so many public buildings and private mansions. This chamber was like a magnified version of those wards, conjuring spirits from the psycho-geographical strata of the city's consciousness, bringing them out of the walls and up through the floor. I saw dreadful things: a woman with thorns that pierced every inch of her flesh, a procession of bloated drowned children, vulpen and awts from the high hills with glistening eyes and splinter teeth. But the matriarchy of Caud was accustomed to breaking peasants. I had grown up in a weir-warded house, filled with things that swam through the air of my chamber at night, and I was used to the nauseous burn that accompanied their presence, the sick shiver of the skin. This was worse, but it was only a question of degree. Fighting the urge to vomit, I knelt in a corner, in a meditational control posture, placed the alarm cube in front of me, and looked only at it.

After an hour, my keepers evidently grew tired of waiting. The blacklight matrix sizzled off with a fierce electric odor, like the air after a thunderstorm. From the corner of my eye, I saw things wink out of sight. I was taken from the chamber and placed in a cell. Next, they tried the drugs.

From their point of view, this may have been more successful. I cannot say, since I remember little of what I may or may not have said. Haunt-tech is supposed to terrify the credulous into speaking the truth. The mind-drugs of the matriarchies are crude and bludgeon one into confession, but those confessions are all too frequently unreliable, built on fantasies conjured from the depths of the psyche. When the drug that they had given me began to ebb, I found my captors staring at me, their expressions unreadable. Two were clearly matriarchy personnel, wearing the jade-and-black of Caud. The scissor-women hovered by the door.

"Put her under," one of the matriarchs said. She sounded disgusted. I started to protest, more for the form of it than anything else, and they touched a sleep-pen to my throat. The room fell away around me.

When I came round again, everything was quiet and the lights had been dimmed. I rose, stiffly. My wrists were still bound and the chains had chafed the skin into a raw burn. I peered through the little window set into the door of the cell. One of the scissor-women sat outside. Her armor, and the few inches of exposed skin, were silent, but her eyes were open. She was awake, but not speaking. I could not see if there was anyone else in the room. I knocked on the window. I needed her undivided attention for a few minutes and the only way I could think of to do that was by making a full confession.

"I'll talk," I said, when she came across. "But only to you."

I could see indecision in her face. It was not really a question of how intelligent the scissor-women were; they operated on agendas that were partially programmed, and partly opaque to the rest of us. Her voice came though the grill.

"I am activating the antiscibe," she said. "Speak."

"My name is Aletheria Tole. I am from Tharsis. I assumed another identity, which was implanted. I came here looking for my sister, who married a woman from Caud many years ago...."

I continued to speak, taking care to modulate the rhythm of my voice so that it became semi-hypnotic.

The scissor-women had programming to avoid mind control, but this was something else entirely. As I spoke, I looked into her pale eyes and glimpsed her soul. I drew it out, as I had been taught so many years before on the Plains. It span across the air between us, a darkling glitter. The door was no barrier. I opened my mouth and sucked it in. It lay in my cheek like a lump of ice.

The scissor-woman's face grew slack and blank.

"Step away from the door," I said. She did so. I bent my head to the haunt-lock and released her soul. It fled into the lock, tracing its engrams through the circuit mechanisms, grateful to be free of me. The door swung open; I stepped through and struck the scissor-woman at the base of the skull. She crumpled without a sound. My own â€˜scribe was sitting on a shelf: they would have copied its contents. I snatched it up and ran through the maze of corridors.

Discovery was soon made. I heard a cry behind me, feet drumming on the ceiling above. I headed downward, reasoning that in these old buildings the best chance of escape lay in the catacombs below. When I reached what I judged to be the lowest level, I ducked into a chamber and flicked on the antiscribe as I ran. I could not get a signal for Winterstrike. But then, turning the corner, I found the flayed warrior before me.

"Where, then?" I said aloud, not expecting her to respond, but once more the ghost beckoned. I followed the rust-red figure through the labyrinth, through tunnels swimming with unknown forms: women with the heads of coyote and aspiths, creatures that might have been men. I ignored the weir-wards, being careful not to touch them. Sometimes the warrior grew faint before me and I was beginning to suspect why this should be. I could hear no signs of pursuit, but that did not mean that none were following. The scissor-women could be deadly in their silence.

At last we came to a door and the warrior halted. In experiment, I closed down the â€˜scribe and she was no longer there. I put it on again, and she reappeared.

"You're no ghost," I said. She was speaking. There was still no sound, but the words flickered across the screen.

She was not conversing. The words were lists of archived data, skeins of information. I had not been entirely correct. She was not the ghost of a warrior. She was the ghost of the library, the animated form of the cached archives that we had believed to be destroyed, and that the Caud matriarchy, in their ignorance, had not bothered to find.

I knew what I had to do. I hastened past the warrior and pushed open the door, kicking and shoving until the ancient hinges gave way. I stumbled out into a frosty courtyard, before a frozen fountain. The mansion before me was dark, but something shrieked out of the shadows: a weir-form, activated, of a woman with long teeth and trailing hair. She shot past my shoulder and disappeared. I heard an alarm sounding inside the house. But the â€˜scribe had a broadcasting signal again and that was all that mattered. I called through to Winterstrike, where it was already mid-morning, and downloaded everything into the matriarchy's data store, along with a message. The warrior's face did not change as she slowly vanished. When she was completely gone, I shut down the â€˜scribe and waited.

The scissor-women were not long in finding me. They took me back to Mote, to a different, smaller cell. I was not interrogated again. Later the next day, a stiff-faced cleric appeared in the doorway and announced that I was free to go.

I walked out into a cold afternoon to find the streets thronged with people. There would be no war. The matriarchy had, in its wisdom, come to a compromise and averted catastrophe, or so the women of Caud said, mouths twisting with the sourness of disbelief.

I wondered what Gennera had discovered in the library archives that had given Winterstrike such a lever. It would most likely be a weapon, and I wondered also what I had done, in handing the power over one city across to another, even though it was my own. For governments can change, so swiftly, and benevolence never lasts. But I caught a rider through the gates of Caud all the same, heading for one of the way-station towns of the Plain and then for Winterstrike, and did not look behind me.