

Starry Night

by Samantha Henderson

At the crest of the last foothill I stopped and rubbed at my left shoulder, where the pack's strap bit. Shadows lay like dregs of wine in the valley below.

I shifted the walking stick back to my right hand and limped towards the village. This was a job for a younger man.

Montverdu was a hamlet of 300 souls, at least last census-time. Whitewashed cottages and their moss-green roofs sat at odd angles to each other. A few had smoke curling from their chimneys. In the center squatted the great white church, like a mother cat between her kits.

No bells rang the hours this afternoon.

But two nights before, the bells of Montverdu clamored, not in the ringing-speech, which villages use to call for help or give warning over these hills, but in a wild jangle. Then they stopped and were heard no more. So here I was picking my way down a wet, grassy slope.

The common fields stretched, following local custom, east of the village. Two small figures bent in the furrows, digging the last of the season's turnips. I limped toward them and one rose. The other remained at her work.

Two children, girls, clad in grubby white. I could see no one else in the fields, or in the distant streets of the village.

The younger, standing, looked to be about seven. The other, still a child but at the cusp of womanhood, remained crouching in the furrow but raised her head and folded dirty hands in her lap. The basket by her side was full of turnips.

Their eyes were yellow as pale topazes, and they stared at me without blinking.

I cleared my throat.

"I am Brun DaFinu, from the village of Hersh," I said to the eldest. "I am the Magister for this district."

They ducked their heads briefly in response. I wondered if either knew what a district was.

"I have come to find out about the night two days ago — the night of the stars."

No response, save that the elder child pursed her lips.

Two nights ago the bells had rung and the skies over Montverdu boiled with light, great yellow coils in the dark blue sky like thick ropes of oil paint. The moon shivered, the full autumn moon without its springtime mate. But the skies were brighter even than the two-moon season, brighter than second spring. It looked like an exhibition of sky-fire, such as the Emperor's Court gives at darkest Yule.

The next day the courier didn't come from Montverdu. On the next I knew I must go and make my report.

"The night of the stars," I repeated, louder this time. "Do you remember?" I wondered if they were simple.

The youngest looked at the eldest, who tossed the turnip in her lap into the basket before rising.

"Come to our house, Magister," she said, in a high clear voice. "And you will see."

She gathered the basket to her hip and turned away without looking to see if I would follow. The younger girl trotted by her side. To give her credit, she did appear to slow her pace to compensate for my limp.

The communal fields ended short of the village proper, making way for tidy little gardens of daisies and who's-your-darling. Many were mulched for winter. Here and there I saw the flicker of a small figure, and a few dogs slunk between doorways. So far I had seen no adults.

I followed the girls to a trim cottage with a wooden door, painted blue. The oldest shouldered it open and went inside. The younger held it open and nodded for me to go first.

It was a double-room dwelling typical of these parts: kitchen and public areas with a sleeping chamber, probably partitioned with cotton sheets. The elder girl dropped her basket on the wooden trestle table and faced me, smoothing her skirt. I stood and waited.

"It began at dusk," she said, speaking too quickly. "But you saw. The sky was filled with burning gold. At first I thought it was a swarm of shooting stars, such as those that come at Midsummer. Then I was afraid, because I thought the hills were burning."

She paused, and I interrupted her. "What is your name, child?"

She looked startled, then blushed a deep pink and dropped a curtsy.

"I am Griselda DiCapi, Magister," she said. "And you are welcome in our house."

She indicated one of the two crude chairs at the trestle table, and I sat, grateful to take the weight off my bad hip.

"Thank you, Griselda DiCapi," I said.

The small formality seemed to calm her.

"We all went outside," she said. "Mama and Papa, and Beu, here." She nodded at her sister. "And Lari. My brother. He's the oldest. He was." She swallowed.

"Mama thought it was a hill-fire too, but then we saw no smell or sight of smoke. Everyone came out of their houses to watch. It was beautiful. Like festival-time.

"And then the angels came down."

"Angels?" I leaned forward in the hard chair. "You must be mistaken, child. Angels?"

The set of her chin was determined. I heard a noise behind me and turned to see that several other children, three or four perhaps, had crept inside the door.

"There were angels," Griselda stated, flatly. "They were dressed in white. They had great golden wings. Their faces blazed so you could not look at them. What else could they be but angels?"

I was watching the other children. One, a boy with a dirty, freckled face nodded. "It's true," he said. "They were angels come down from heaven."

I stared at them all, not because of what he'd said but because they all had the same pale topaz eyes of the two sisters. All of them: fair, dark, obviously unrelated. Eyes like rare Tokay wine.

"At first they were specks in the sky, like sparks from a fire," continued Griselda. "But they grew bigger, and they floated..."

"Flew," said the boy, and Griselda gave him a withering look.

"They floated down to us," she said. "We should have been afraid, but they were glorious, like the stained glass pictures in the church. One came to our house, to our door. Mama opened it to let the angel in."

At the door, more children had gathered. Some were older, and held babies in their arms. There could be none over fifteen.

"Did the angel hurt you, Griselda?" I asked, and the children gathered at the door started to whisper between themselves. "Where are Mama and Papa?"

She glanced past me at the others.

"When the angel came inside — it floated, like it didn't have any feet — it shone, bright as the sun. So bright I couldn't look at it. When I could turn back, Mama and Papa...and Lari..."

Her voice faltered. "They were burning."

I looked around the main room. There was no sign or smell of smoke, no charred wood.

"Burning, Griselda? I don't understand."

Her eyes brimmed. "They were burning. But the flames were going in, not out. They were frozen in place, and their bodies blazed. The angel was before them, and they were silent, burning with no heat."

I looked at the other children. Some nodded solemnly, and other just stared. The grubby, freckled boy spoke up. "It's true, Magister."

For a while there was silence, as I digested this.

There was a tug at my shirt, and I looked down to see Griselda's little sister.

"Beu," Griselda reminded me. "She hasn't spoken since...since it happened."

Beu's yellowed smock had a pocket, smudged gray. She reached in and brought out something in her small paw, holding it out to me.

It was a rounded, smooth pebble, grass-green, like a bit of slag from the glass-blower's forge. Carefully I picked it up. It was heavier than glass, and warm in my hand.

"It's Mama," said Griselda. "Beu's been carrying it around since that night."

I looked again at the pebble and knowledge half-remembered fell into place. It was an uncut emerald, big as a quail's egg.

"This is your mother?"

"After the burning...this is what was left."

She took a small, hand-hewn wooden box from the countertop and handed it to me. "That is Papa and Lari. I didn't know what to do with them. Beu likes to keep Mama with her."

Beu carefully took the emerald back from me and returned it to her pocket, keeping it balled up in her

fist. I look the crude box from Griseldi. Inside, laying on a rough piece of cloth, were two more uncut gems — a bulbous ruby, and a smaller star sapphire.

"Papa is the red one, and Lari the blue," said the girl. "I think."

I touched the gems and something gray and gritty coated my finger. Ash.

Angels. Well.

In my head I began to compose my report to the Grand Magister. Angels have consumed the adult population of Montverdu in holy cold flame, leaving behind gemstones and yellow-eyed children. A thing of wonder.

The children at the door had ventured further inside. A few held out more uncut gems in their work-roughened hands. Beryl, amethyst, tourmaline. Mother, father, Great-aunt Riki.

Griselda continued. "Then they spoke to us. They told us not to be afraid. That they would protect us, that we should wear white, and pray." She looked at her dirt-rimmed fingernails. "And that we must bring in the last of the harvest against the winter. Afterwards, in spring..."

And then she saw the adult in me, the sin in me, perhaps, and her yellow eyes went wide and she shut her lips tight.

"All the adults, your parents and elders, they all burned?" I addressed the room at large, closing the box's lid. Griselda took it from me.

The freckled boy piped up. "Amu Simple didn't burn up, and she has a baby and all."

"She is alive? I must speak to her." I started to rise, feeling the bad hip grind beneath me. An adult could give me an account for my report after all, and I could begin to get at the truth of the matter.

"Well..." Suddenly uncertain, the boy looked at the others for support. "You must come and see. She doesn't always speak."

The little rabble agreed with childish piping and I was pulled to my feet by many small hands, groping on the way for my walking stick.

"I must make the dinner," said Griselda, not looking at me. "It's my turn."

As the rabble of children pulled me through the streets I looked again, vainly, for the butcher, and the women in their aprons, the blacksmith in his shop. It could not be at all were gone. But besides the children, only a few dogs slunk around, looking dazed.

The girl in the tiny hut at the edge of the town was leaning over a cradle when we pushed through her door. She didn't seem alarmed at the sudden noise, or the resounded shouts of "Amu, Amu Simple."

As she turned to me, a vacant, gentle smile on her lips, I fought to suppress a start.

As a boy I used to climb with the others the Frayas Peak. Sometimes we found balls of bubbled rock, which, upon being cracked apart, would prove to be hollows full of crystal.

Those were her eyes. The sockets were two cups filled with crystal shards.

Blindly, she felt around inside the cradle, still with that empty smile, and I saw that Simple was not her family name. She must be about seventeen.

"Greetings, maiden," I said, gently as I could. "I am the Magister from the next village, and I have come to find out what happened two nights ago."

"But haven't they told you?" Her voice was clear and childlike. "About the angels?"

"Yes. But you, too? You saw them?"

"I did," she said. "For a while I saw a great light, and brightness on my face. And then I saw nothing at all. I can't find my mother since, and Niels has tried to explain, but I don't understand."

"No, maiden. I am sorry."

Carefully she felt around in the cradle and gathered up the baby, a fat healthy child. It stared at me and I was relieved to see it had normal, bright blue eyes. It turned away with a grumble and chewed on its mother's shoulder.

"He is hungry," she said.

"I will bring you your dinner," said the freckled boy, whom I took to be Niels. "In an hour or so."

She nodded, and began to undo her front laces. I averted my gaze.

"Did these angels say anything to you?" I said, backing towards the door.

"Only that we must take care of each other. They said more, but that's all I understood."

Outside I asked Niels: "Who is the father of her child?"

The boy looked uncomfortable. "One day she was out picking berries, and came home confused, and crying, with a torn dress and a bruised cheek. Soon after that her belly grew. She never said who hurt her, although her mother beat her a few times." He shrugged. "She's always been simple."

"Is she your sister?"

"No," he said firmly. Then, in a lower voice, "The baby's eyes — they look like my eldest brother's."

I nodded. "I see."

"I will take care of her."

I would have replied, but he was not talking to me.

I compose my report in my head, hiking as fast as I can across the hills. I still cannot decide if I should mention the angels.

It takes me the rest of the day to reach the base of Frayas Peak, and I wonder if boys still find those round stones or if we shattered them all in my youth. I used to know what they were called. Once I was an educated man, a scholar living in the Emperor's City. Now I wonder if that city lies in ruins, and our villages sends couriers running round and round the mountaintops around a dead center, rotten and dying, dried up to nothing.

My hip has stiffened badly, so it is breaking dusk by the time I am in sight of home.

As I descend the slopes where our common fields lie, I see that the skies are beginning to boil with

yellow light. I hasten, ignoring the pain. I can see that some have gathered in their doorways, eyes wide in wonder, watching the stars.

I see the priest in the doorway of the church and pause, then pass on. Who am I, after all, to lecture anyone about angels?

Madame my wife is in the doorway. I can smell her good stew. She's already put the children to bed, but I see them spying in their doorway and I bid them come out to see. Without explaining why, I kiss them on their foreheads and lead them outside. In the streets there is fear, yes, but also a festival air.

I take her hand, rough and with a moist palm, in mine. I wonder, what trace of sin will stain the gems we will become. Purple for arrogance. Red for lust. Yellow for greed.

We lean together in the doorway, watching the sky swirl, the moon in her victory dance, waiting for the angels to come.