

Bittersweet

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Three thousand died in the town of Nightshade when a lifestone let in the red wind. The colonists of Bittersweet knew their adopted planet could be cruel, but this news struck fresh fear into their hearts. When the stone in Ambivalence showed warning signs, the town requested aid from the Lifestone Guild.

The Guild's stonetalker, Honorii Turner, arrived three days later. There was a stir among the townsfolk when he appeared on Main Street, walking in through the veil, because he wore neither skinsuit nor breather — just a dusty old longcoat. But around his neck hung a shining crystal pendant on a leather cord. No one had ever seen a "personal" lifestone; most stones stopped working if chipped or uprooted. By this the townsfolk knew Turner must be a great stonetalker — one of the best.

It fell to the mayor's daughter, Atlehina Delgado, to escort him. From the first she was skeptical, for Turner hardly looked the savior. He was a thin brown man with a quiet manner and a noticeable slouch.

"I'll see the stone first," he said when Delgado met him. She had never heard an accent like his, slow and thick as oil.

"And fix it?" she asked.

"Depends."

So Delgado led Turner toward the pavillion at the center of town. Children peeked out from alleyways along the dusty streets, staring wide-eyed at the first stranger most had ever seen. Adults watched through the windows, their faces wary and taut.

"What do you think is wrong with the stone?" Delgado asked.

"Tired, most likely."

"Tired? You mean depleted?"

"I mean tired."

"So you'll... what? Recharge it?"

"Some'n' like that."

His non-answers angered Delgado. "They say the Guild knew Nightshade's stone would fail," she said, to provoke him.

"We knew there'd be trouble, yeah."

She was amazed that he admitted it. "And?"

"And we warned 'em. They'd started usin' harmonic drills in their mines. The stone was unhappy. We told 'em to stop."

"*We* use harmonics."

"Your mines are far away. Nightshade's weren't."

Delgado folded her arms. "Harmonics are expensive. We had to mortgage ourselves to Industrial for forty years to afford ours."

"S what Nightshade said. I imagine it'll take the survivors longer to pay that debt now."

Unconcern in his voice. No hint of sorrow in his face. "What they say is true," Delgado said, scowling. "You Guildfolk don't feel anything human. You care more about rocks than people."

Turner only shrugged.

They reached the pavillion where the lifestone jutted up from the earth, its pearlescent glow shifting in slow pulses. There were dark whorls among the pale bands which hadn't been there a month ago.

"This stone is very tired," Turner said. He frowned as he said it; the first concern he had yet shown. As Delgado watched, Turner touched a facet of the stone and murmured under his breath. Delgado strained to hear, but the words — if words they were — escaped her. For a moment the stone's shifting light stilled; in a jolt of intuition Delgado realized it was *listening* to him. Then the stone's pulse resumed and the dark blotches vanished.

"You fixed it!"

"No," Turner said, "but it knows I'm here now. It'll hold awhile." He turned to her, solemn again. "I'm tired too."

So Delgado led Turner to the mayor's house and up to her room, where she dutifully offered him her own bed. No one shared the tiny attic chamber; Turner looked around contemplatively. "Privacy. Lucky."

Delgado shrugged, undressing. "It's why I drew the duty of hosting you. As for the privacy — my father's rich."

"Still. Some towns, even rich families share."

"Until somebody makes a veil that covers the whole of Bittersweet, that's the way it has to be."

Turner lay down, though he had the grace to remove his boots and longcoat first. "That could be done," he said. "A big veil, I mean. But the price'd be steep."

Delgado stared. "For freedom from the veils and winds? No price is too steep for that." She tried to imagine that kind of freedom. No veil. No baby quotas or elder buybacks. No job assignment. Just running where she wanted and thinking what she wanted and choosing her own path. The daydream gave her a shamefully selfish thrill.

To her surprise, Turner smiled. "I felt that way once."

"When did you stop?"

His smile faded; for the faintest of instants he looked troubled. "Didn't realize I had."

More riddles. Delgado sighed. "Will you pay in gen? My father will take money otherwise, or a discount on your Guild fee."

"Town doesn't look low-pop."

"Our numbers are fine. But we could always use gendiversity."

"You ripe for it?"

"I don't know. If it doesn't happen naturally, though, I can always have the doctor put the leftovers in a growth vat. Would've done that anyway."

Turner sighed. "Gen, then." So Delgado lay beside him and opened her legs, but he put his hand down there instead.

"Quit that," she said, annoyed.

"Don't you like it?"

"You said you were tired. I am too. Get on with it."

He lowered his eyes. "I thought you were different. Sorry." He unzipped and spent awhile readying himself, then finally moved onto her.

"No room for difference," she said, quoting her father. "No time for waste. Pleasure's for people with plenty." She chuckled, more bitter than amused, and relaxed under his steady movement. "People who don't live on this planet."

"Wasn't always like this," he murmured between breaths. "Then again, once we had a whole world to ourselves."

Delgado knew the histories: the poisoned homeworld, the crippled colony ship, a hundred generations adrift. "We're smarter now," she said. "We wouldn't take it for granted again."

"Yeah, we would," Turner said. His breath grew rough for a moment; his body tightened. Then he exhaled and lay beside her again. When he had caught his breath, he continued.

"Some'd take the choicest spaces, and others'd hate 'em for it. People wouldn't need to cooperate anymore. There might even be wars."

"What are those?" But then Delgado shook her head; it didn't matter. "Anything is better than this. We're not really alive. Just existing."

He put his hand between her legs again, and she let him because he was a guest, after all.

He asked, "Where would you go, if you could? What would you do?"

"I don't know." She closed her eyes, stifling the yearning as she always did. Hot flickers moved through her, vaguely similar — yearning, desire. Both cravings for something beyond necessity; both shameful, greedy. Then Turner did something that made her gasp, and the pleasure made her tongue loose. "I'd give anything to find out, though."

The stonetalker fell silent. After a time, warmer and comfortable, Delgado slept.

In the morning Delgado led Turner to the pavillion again. But instead of setting to work, the stonetalker removed his pendant.

"I asked it to protect you 'tween the veils," he said, pressing the crystal into her palm. "Travel straight east, you'll reach a city called Love. The Guild college there'll teach you to talk stone."

Delgado stared at the pendant, then him. "I don't understand."

Turner's face filled with such emotion that for an instant Delgado almost didn't recognize him. The man in front of her was sad, nostalgic, amused — not at all the same cold-eyed fellow who had walked through the veil. "You said you'd give anything."

"I can't leave town! What are you talking about?"

"The stones take life." Turner reached out and touched her cheek, startling her into silence. "Years, but also passion, pleasure — all the things that make life worth living. You'll get more of that, talking stone, than you ever could here." He gestured about at the pavillion, the dusty streets, the old brick buildings. "But there's a price."

She could hardly think. Her cheek tingled where he'd touched her. "What?"

"Well, talkers burn through life awful quick. 'S different for everybody — years for most, months for a few — but eventually there's nothin' left but tired. When we get like that, it's hard to go on." He turned from her and went over to the village-stone, gazing into its swirled-marble surface. "Isn't it?"

It took a moment for Delgado to realize he was speaking to the stone. But before she could question him, Turner touched the stone. For an instant eagerness filled his face; anticipation for a new experience, for a well-earned rest. Then he crumpled to the ground. Horrified, Delgado crouched beside him, but it was too late. He smiled at her, closed his eyes, and died.

The townsfolk came and raised a great cry when they saw Turner's body. Yet their horror was tinged with relief, for everyone could see by the stone's brightness that he had bought them many more years of safety. He had given the stone all the life he had left.

He had given other things to Delgado, it seemed. In the hours after Turner's death she found herself thinking more and more about duty and selfishness, freedom and its price, and whether she really would give anything to finally have a life worth living.

So when they passed Turner's body through the veil, where it would decompose rapidly in the devouring air, Delgado went with it. She carried around her neck the pendant, and she carried in her mind duty, and she carried in her heart a love of life. By these things the world knew she would one day be a great stonetalker. One of the best.