

The Brides of Heaven

by [N.K. Jemisin](#)

No one realized the extent of Dihya's madness until she was caught sabotaging the water supply. Even then the madness was difficult to see as she sat in Ayan's office with her hands tied and her headscarf still askew from the struggle. She did not wrap her arms around herself and rock back and forth. She did not talk or weep incessantly, or fidget. Indeed, Ayan observed, to judge by her calm demeanor and the odd little smile on her face, Dihya might have been saner than any woman in the colony. This irritated Ayan to no end.

"You never attend the evening storytellings," Dihya said. She had kept her silence up to that point. "Why not? Don't you like tales?"

"Only true ones," Ayan replied. "For example, the tale of why you broke into the purification facility."

"To save us."

"I cannot see how it saves anyone to be robbed of our only source of clean water."

Dihya shrugged. "What good is water, to us?"

"Life."

"Water makes no difference. Illiyin is covered in life. Everything grows on this planet except us."

Ayan leaned her elbows on the arms of her chair and steepled her fingers. "And that very fertility is why we purify the water, Dihya, and take other precautions. But then, you would know better than I how dangerous this world can be."

Dihya flinched, her smile fading at last, and some of Ayan's irritation turned to shame. She had meant only that Dihya was the colony's sole xenobiologist, but her words inadvertently recalled Dihya's son Aytarel, who had been the first of the children to die on Illiyin. Ayan had seen Aytarel when they'd found him, after he'd slipped out of the house to play in a disused area of the colony compound. Animals had been at the corpse, but the greater desecration lay in the contaminated puddle-water he'd drunk, and the microscopic worms in it. They had not stayed microscopic.

Dihya's eyes turned inward. Seeing Aytarel, perhaps. "Death holds no fear for the faithful," she murmured. But abruptly her expression hardened. "At least, not when the dead are respected."

Ayan shifted in her seat. "Cremation was the only way to contain the organisms, Dihya. They had already destroyed the body."

"*You* destroyed the body." Dihya's lip curled. "But I expected nothing better from a woman like you. You pray, you recite the hadith when it suits you, but you have no true faith. You ignore tradition—"

"Tradition?" Ayan uttered a single bitter chuckle. "Tradition is the cause of our troubles, as far as I'm concerned." Then she shook her head, rejecting that notion. It was not tradition itself that she blamed, but the decision to appease a few zealots in tradition's name.

"Were you so eager to expose yourself to strange men?" Dihya raked her a contemptuous glare, her eyes settling last on Ayan's unveiled head. "I see. No faith and no modesty."

"It was coldsleep, Dihya. Even the most proper woman would find it difficult to feel immodest in a coma."

And only the most self-righteous woman, she almost added, would continue to veil when there was no one left to veil for. But to say such a thing would touch on a point of pain that no woman in the colony acknowledged if she could help it.

Abruptly she realized she had allowed Dihya to distract her. "Enough. Why did you do this?"

"Even if I tell you, you cannot understand. It's more than faith. You've never been a mother. You've never created a life."

Heat, then chilly anger, ran through Ayan. She stared down at her hands and tried not to think of the nights she'd lain alone in her temphouse bed, longing for all the things she had once blithely put off for later -- a husband, children, a life beyond her career in the diplomatic corps. She tried to remind herself that Dihya was grief-mad, clinging to rhetoric and orthodoxy because there was comfort in such rigid confines. Dihya had no idea how much her words hurt and could not be held fully responsible for them even if she did.

But Ayan's voice sounded harsh even in her own ears as she said, "Will you count worms among the lives you've created when the rest of us lie dying like Aytarel?"

Dihya stiffened. Privately and belatedly Ayan cursed her own temper; she wanted answers from this madwoman. But to Ayan's surprise, Dihya did not retort or resume her stubborn silence. Instead she rubbed her belly — doubtless remembering Aytarel again — and then the little smile returned, more infuriating than ever.

"You cannot understand," Dihya said again. "You would rather waste the rest of your life tilling ever-smaller fields, keeping order in this graveyard. But suicide is anathema to God, and I will not sit and wait for extinction."

With that, she began her confession.

Three months earlier and five years to the day after Aytarel's death, Dihya had decided to leave Illiyin. As xenobiologist she could claim priority use of the colony's landcrawlers, so it was a simple matter to take one and head off in no particular direction. The others tried to call her back over the shortcomm before she got out of range. They needed the landcrawler, needed her expertise, needed her presence as a sister of the heart. They feared for her — mostly that she would do harm to herself. It was hard enough, they argued, when everyone was together. Solitude sounded like a death sentence.

How could Dihya explain that it was *they* who ground away at her spirit? Their stagnation. Their hopelessness. Ever since the landing, when they'd emerged from the coldsleep unit naked and healthy and horrified to discover that the men's unit had malfunctioned, Illiyin Colony had been dying. Oh, there'd been hope for a time, in the form of the boy-children who had shared the women's unit with their mothers: Dihya's Aytarel and two others. But Illiyin was a hard world. Though most of its life-forms were harmless to Earth biologicals, a few were compatible enough — and opportunistic enough — to be a threat. Aytarel's death was the first and worst. Then little Hassan took a strange fever which killed him in hours. Last and hardest was Saiyeed; they had tried so much to protect him. But confined at home, bored and restless, he had waited until his mother's back was turned to climb a set of shelves. With him had died their last hope.

So Dihya drove, stopping only when it grew too dark for the landcrawler's solar cells. Sometimes she got out to collect samples of some new fruit or insect, more out of habit than any scientific interest. Sometimes she hunted for meat to supplement her protein rations, taking care to say the proper rites as

she cut the animals' throats and placed them in the sterilization cabinet. If anyone had been present to ask what she sought on her journey, she would have replied nothing, save perhaps the company of living things to ease the memory of her son's corpse. Growing things, unlike Illiyin Colony.

But when she found the strange, silent grove of spindly-branched trees, and the iridescent pool at its heart, she realized that she had indeed been searching for something. There, in the grove, was proof of the truth that she had been seeking in her heart ever since the landing tragedy. God had not abandoned them. He had simply waited for them to seek Him out.

A knock at the tempbuilding's door interrupted Dihya's confession. Resisting the urge to sigh, Ayan called enter, and the door opened to admit Zamra, flanked by the two other women who made up the colony's police force. With them came Umina, the imam. She looked more awake than Ayan felt, but this was not surprising; she had probably been up already, preparing to lead the dawn prayer.

"No devices," Zamra said. She eyed Dihya. "At least, none that we've yet found."

"I told you. I wasn't trying to blow anything up," Dihya said, favoring Zamra with a cold look.

"Dihya," Ayan said with brittle patience, "you have returned to this colony in the small hours of the morning, unannounced. You deactivated part of the perimeter fence to get in. You hacked the purification facility's maintenance and entry programs. Given all that, and the fact that you won't tell us why you broke in, you must forgive us if we doubt your purpose was wholesome."

"My purpose was wholesome," Dihya replied, "but neither you nor any woman here would believe that. You think I'm crazy."

"But you don't." Umina's voice, soft and professional, broke the tension in the room. Her talent for projecting calm was what had made her a good psychologist back on Earth. That she had expertise in ancient texts as well made her the obvious choice as the colony's replacement imam.

Dihya smiled again. "No, I don't believe I'm crazy. But then, are the truly mad ever aware of their own madness?"

"Surprisingly often, yes," Umina replied. She focused on Ayan. "I'd like to observe, if I you don't object."

Privately Ayan did object, but pragmatism warned her not to refuse. She had not missed the fact that Dihya seemed more relaxed in the imam's presence. "No objection," she said to Umina, but then to Zamra she added, "Search the facility again."

Zamra scowled. "I tell you, there was nothing in the place but dust, the monitoring computers, and a closet full of cleaning supplies. I've had the doctor scan an outflow sample for toxins and known biohazards, but the indicators are all green."

"We must be sure, Zamra. None of us will sleep well tonight unless someone double-checks and triple-checks and then checks again. Please."

Zamra sighed. "Fine. Should we issue an alert?"

It would start a panic, Ayan knew. All for the sake of a madwoman who might've done nothing. They'd caught her only moments after the administrative system had registered the hack. And Zamra had said the scans were green.

"Not yet," Ayan said. "Do it at the first hint of any problem."

Zamra nodded and led the other policewomen out. Umina took the other chair in front of Ayan's desk, sitting quietly with her hands in her lap.

Dihya gazed after Zamra for a moment. "That one is a sinner. She lies with other women."

Umina said nothing for a moment, but then nodded. "Many in the colony have committed that particular sin."

"How can you permit it? You are responsible for the order of our community. They should get the hundred lashes."

"Sometimes allowances must be made for circumstances," Umina replied. She gestured around them — at the colony and the world beyond it, Ayan gathered, but it was the walls of the tempbuilding that caught her own eyes. In the early days, Ayan had encouraged the colonists to replace their temphomes with permanent structures of wood or stone, but in the end even she could not bring herself to move into one of the new buildings. The tempbuildings were ugly, but at least their bland, uniform walls held the promise of eventual replacement. Real walls implied a false permanence in the case of Illiyin. Real walls echoed despair.

To take her mind off that, Ayan said to Umina, "Dihya has appointed herself our savior."

"*God*, most gracious and merciful, has appointed me," Dihya snapped.

"All things are possible through Him," Umina said, throwing Ayan a quelling look. "But for we mortals to verify such a thing, Dihya, we must hear the full account."

With a last sullen glare at Ayan, Dihya resumed speaking.

The light in the grove was gray-white through the filter of the spindly trees' canopy. In that light the pool's surface was still, cloudy translucence a-swirl with an oily sheen of color. Dihya knelt beside the liquid but did not touch it, some part of her mind retaining enough cold scientist's rationality to keep her cautious. The rest of her was enraptured. A tendril of mist hung above the liquid's surface, curling slowly in the still air as if to beckon her. Such was the aura of the place that it seemed wholly natural to whisper aloud, "Hello?" And even more natural to wait for an answer.

So she was not surprised when the surface of the pool rippled. The motion had no discernible start-point — no concentric ripples or splash. Just a faint shiver of surface tension, flicker and then still. Before Dihya could decide whether the ripple had been chance or imagination, the surface suddenly heaved upward. A rounded peak formed, gradually lengthening and attenuating until a small sphere, like a bubble, cohered and rolled off to one side. As she watched in amazement more bubbles formed, the edges of the pool rapidly growing thick with them. And she caught her breath when, as new bubbles rolled down, those already at the edge moved aside to make room.

In the space of perhaps ten seconds the pool transformed, becoming a basin of shimmering marbles in constant, hectic motion. Then the motion stopped. Dihya tensed, her cold rational self ready to flee. The rest of her hungered to lean closer. She had no doubt that what she was witnessing was a special, perhaps holy, thing. Humankind had discovered a cruel truth in the centuries of space exploration: sentience, not life, was the true rarity of the universe. Life appeared on hundreds of worlds — nearly every one they'd found with liquid water. But never once had another species been found which

possessed any sort of measurable intelligence. God had spread His children to a thousand new worlds, and on every one they were alone.

Yet did that not confirm what the Qu'ran, and even the holy books of other faiths, had long ago suggested? God had made Adam, and by extension Adam's species, in His image. Therefore, intelligent or not, the pool could only be a gift from God, placed on Illiyin to aid His human creations. It would be millennia before new colonists arrived from Earth, if ever. She could not believe God would leave them to die alone on this planet.

So when dark spots like nuclei — or eyes, since they shifted to follow Dihya's movements — formed within each of the little spheres, she took that as a sign. It was her duty to study this phenomenon; to bear witness and carry word back to her sisters in the colony. More importantly, if the pool was what she thought it might be, what she *hoped* it might be, then it promised the salvation of them all.

"I'm hungry," Dihya said abruptly. "May I have food?"

"In a few moments," Ayan said. "Tell me more about this pool."

Umina gave Ayan a mild look of reproach. "She should have food, Ayan. And water, and rest. For that matter, she should also be examined medically, in case she was injured during her capture."

What was the point, Ayan wondered, of making sure Dihya was healthy when the penalty for sabotaging the colony was death?

As if reading Ayan's thoughts — or more likely, her silence — Umina's expression hardened. "Are we barbarians now?"

With a sigh, Ayan touched the intercom and called for someone to bring food and drink, then for the doctor to come when she had completed the tests at the purification facility.

"Our governor has already condemned me, I think," Dihya said to Umina. She was still smiling.

"Your actions have condemned you," Ayan said. She took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes. "But you're right in that I've run out of patience. I've had enough of this fairy tale about a magic pool. I was willing to take extenuating circumstances into account, but if you won't tell us why you did this, I have no choice but to render my judgment based on the evidence at hand."

"Extenuating circumstances?" Dihya's eyes gleamed. Ayan could not read the look in those eyes — anticipation? Fervor? She would have to find some way to take Dihya's madness into account when she pronounced sentence. If only they had psychotropic drugs, spare personnel to guard a mental ward... but they had neither. A quick death was the only mercy the colony could offer.

But Dihya said, "What of divine inspiration, Ayan? Is there no room in your justice for that?"

"What are you talking about, woman?"

"Fairy tales," Dihya replied. Her smile was positively manic. "Magic pools. You should attend the evening storytellings sometimes, Ayan. They're very enlightening."

"I have other demands on my time," Ayan said. She kept her voice flat as a warning: her patience was past gone.

"You've missed many good stories," Dihya said. "I once told a tale which upset some of the women, about the Amazons. Not that Greek nonsense of women who cut off their breasts and used men like houris. I told them the version that has been passed down through my people, who once rode the desert as warrior-women themselves. In my version the Amazons had no need to cut off a breast, for they grew only one. They had no desire for violence, either, though they were fierce in defending themselves if necessary. And they had no need of men." Her lips quirked. "That was what upset the others. Such pure women are we, to regard celibacy as heretical."

Umina abruptly grew very still. Ayan frowned at her, but it was the expression on Dihya's face which held Ayan's attention. Like a child, she realized at last. Dihya looked like a child bursting to tell some juicy secret. It had been so long since Ayan had seen a child, she had almost missed it. But did that mean all Dihya's prior calm had been an act? She thought back, trying to recall when Dihya had changed, and realized: when Ayan had grown tired of humoring her. When it no longer made a difference whether she withheld the truth or not.

"Not heretical," Ayan said. She spoke slowly to cover her unease. "Just nonsensical. God made men and women to complement one another, after all."

"That was not an issue for the Amazons," Umina interrupted. Her knuckles, Ayan noticed, had turned white above the loose dark silk of her pants. "I recall that version of the Amazon myth. Some claim it represents the ideal woman, free from material or fleshly obsessions. When one of their kind wanted a child, she went into the forest and found a sacred pool. When she waded in it and prayed, God sent a child into her womb."

Ayan's blood chilled as Dihya smiled her smug, triumphant little smile again.

"Yes," she said to Umina. "*You* understand."

"Give me a child," Dihya whispered to the pool.

The little spheres churned at the sound of her voice. Near the center of the pool, something stirred, and after a moment a tendril rose — several dozen of the spheres linked together in a delicate-looking chain. It was beautiful; a string of translucent pearls winking in the pale light. When it was the length of Dihya's arm, it turned and began to sway towards her.

Taking a deep breath, Dihya reached out to it.

The tendril whipped around her hand at once. She braced herself for pain, but there was none, just the peculiar touch of something moist and gelid and surprisingly warm. The tendril wound about her palm several times, several of the spheres separating off to track their way down her fingers before returning to the mass. One of them moved down her arm a ways, leaving a damp trail, before it too hastened back to rejoin the tendril. Examining? Judging? There was no way to tell.

She summoned up all the yearning within herself, all the ache of all the years of loneliness and unfulfillment, and said again, "Give me a child."

The tendril released her. It withdrew into the pool, and suddenly the roiling mass of spheres grew still. The dark spots faded, vanished. Dihya frowned at this until she realized that the spheres were melding back into one another. After a few moments, the pool was as she had first seen it — still, silent. Waiting.

Yes.

She got to her feet and undressed. Kneeling on her garments, she bowed to the eastern sky and prayed for God to find her worthy, to take away her fear, to show her the true way. Then, trying to hold the peace of the prayer in her heart, she steeled herself and stepped into the pool.

Liquid surrounded her, like warm oil. A step brought her in up to her knees; another step and the liquid surrounded her thighs and tickled her labia; a third step and the ground dropped away beneath her feet alarmingly. She cried out in spite of herself, but the drop was not far, just a foot or two. She was up to her chin in the white pool now, deeper than she'd meant to go.

But submission to God was the way of faith.

So she closed her eyes and prayed again as the liquid began to shift around her, tickling and touching, sensual against her skin. She shivered in pleasure and took it as a sign of God's approval. And when the moment came, when she felt something enter her body and go up and up until it touched her very womb, she cried out again. But this time her cry was the ecstasy of the exalted, of those who receive the reward for their faith after long waiting. God was great, His purpose had been revealed, and now at last Dihya and her sisters could be saved.

Now at last, Illiyin could become the paradise for which it had been named.

Ayan's hands trembled as she pressed them against her desk, rising to her feet. "You lunatic," she breathed. "What in God's name have you done?"

"*Everything* in God's name." Dihya lifted her chin, the light of rapture shining in her eyes. "I have kept faith like no other in this colony. That is why I was the first rewarded. But I had a duty to share His blessing with all of you."

The door opened to admit one of the younger women, who set a tray of food and a flask of water on Ayan's desk. It also admitted Zamra, who carried a clear plastic jug in her hands.

"We've searched three times," the policewoman said. "The only thing we found was this. I thought at first it was from the facility's cleaning supplies, but it's the kind that fits into a landcrawler's storage bin. And look—" She tilted the jug for Ayan to see. Its inner surface was damp, empty but for a scrim of thick, cloudy liquid sloshing about.

Ayan looked at the flask of water sitting on the tray. Faint iridescence sheened the water's surface.

"Stalling," she whispered, staring at the flask but speaking to Dihya. "You were stalling for time."

It was almost dawn. The women of the colony would be rising to begin the day's work. Bathing before their morning prayers. Drinking water with breakfast.

As Ayan herself had done, before coming to begin the interrogation.

She sat back down; her knees would no longer support her. Umina was silent as well, her expression hollow. Dihya smiled again and reached for the food, picking up a piece of fruit with only a little awkwardness given her bound hands. She had been a good mother before Aytarel's death, Ayan recalled through a haze of horror. She would be diligent now about caring for herself and whatever was growing inside her.

Ayan put her face into her hands and wept.