

# Driftwood

## Marie Brennan

In the days before their world shattered, crumbled, and finally fetched up against that cluster of old realities known as Driftwood, they were called the Valraisangenek. One of their scholars once spent a week lecturing me on that name alone, before I was allowed to learn anything else. Valraisangenek: echoing their once-proud world of Valrassuith, “The Perfect Circle”—itself based on the ancient root word of *velar*, “totality”—and their race’s legendary founder Saneig, “Chosen of San,” chosen of the Supreme Goddess, from whom they were all descended (*genkoi*). A name full of meaning, for those who know how to read it. But most people think the name of the Valraisangenek is too long and difficult to be worth remembering, especially when there are so few of them left. These days, everyone just calls them the Greens. After all, that name has the advantage of being so obvious anybody could remember it—or at least attach it to the appropriate target on sight. Somebody walks in with hair like sea foam, eyes like emeralds, and skin like moss? You’re looking at a Green. Slap on whatever the word is for “green” in your language, and you’re set to go. Or “blue/green,” if your people don’t distinguish those two colors, or “red/green” if your race is color-blind, although in that latter case you might run a risk of confusing a Green with a Kakt. But the red-skinned Kakt are numerous enough, and well-known enough, not to mention horned enough, that if you’re not smart enough to tell them apart from the Greens, you won’t last long in Driftwood anyway. The Kakt’s world is so newly-Drifted that on three sides it still borders on nothing but Mist. The calendrists I know figure within a year it’ll share a boundary with Egnuren—a Kakt year, that is; nearly two Egnuren years—but I don’t recommend telling the Kakt that. Most of them still deny the Driftwood thing. They’re new; they’re proud. They don’t want to admit that their world is gone, and they’re all that’s left of it. The Greens know better. Hard to deny the death of your world when it’s shrunk down to a small ghetto whose name hardly anybody bothers to remember. There are theories on how to slow the decay, of course, and back in the day the Greens tried them all. Stay home, and pretend Driftwood isn’t there. Speak only your own language. Breed only with your own kind. And pray, pray, pray to your gods, as if Driftwood is some kind of test they’re putting you through, or a bad dream you can wake up from. None of it helps. I should know. But no one listens when I tell them. ? ? ? Alsanit found him in a Drifter bar. Had her mission been any less urgent, she would not have gone; she was pure Valraisangenek—a “one-blood,” in Driftwood parlance—and among the mongrel Drifters she stuck out like an emerald in sand. But the Circle had wasted too much time already in doubt; once the decision was made, she left within the day. The whispers and stares of foreigners were nothing, the contempt and even the risk of being mugged, when weighed against her people’s need. The bar was called Spit in the Crush’s Eye, and it lay nearly across the Shreds from what was left of Valrassuith. Greenhole, to its neighbors, and even most of the Valrai called it that, these days. That was why Alsanit was braving the stares of the Drifters. Two days ago, *she* had called her home Greenhole. If something didn’t change, they were doomed. She went from Greenhole to Wash to Heppa to Hotside, and then after that she was into Shreds she didn’t know. She got snowed on in the place after Hotside, and two Shreds after that got chased by things that looked like dogs but weren’t, but the directions she’d gotten were good, and after about four hours of walking she found herself on the border between Chopper and Tatu, at Spit in the Crush’s Eye. The bar suited its name, being defiantly cobbled together from fragments of a dozen worlds, patched with reed bundles, sheets of scrap metal, even what looked like half the trunk of a tree. Alsanit received the expected stares and mutters when she walked through the

door, but this was far from Valrassuith, far from where her people were known; they were reacting to her as a one-blood, a non-Drifter, not as a Green. She wasn't the only one-blood in the bar, though, for at the far wall, she saw the man she sought. He was tall enough to draw the eye even when sitting; that was how Alsanit first spotted him. Drifters, crossbreeds that they were, tended to average out the range of heights found among Driftwood's races. And even in the murky light of the bar, his skin shimmered a silvery blue, undulled by any foreign pigmentation, against which his black hair made a sharp contrast. But the sight of a fellow one-blood did not reassure Alsanit. There was a certain uniformity to the unpredictability of Drifters. One-bloods had their own ways, and she did not know what this man's ways were.

Walking over to him took much of her courage. "Are you Last?" she asked, in one of the more widely-used pidgin dialects of her side of the Shreds. "I am," he said easily, in the same dialect. "You?" "Alsanit." His teeth glinted pure silver when he smiled. "I'm honored, then." Alsanit blinked. "Honored?" "Your name. Sworn to San? No, Faithful to. You're one of the Valrai. High-ranking. Only your important women have San's name in their own."

Alsanit wondered if her jaw was on the floor. Valrai. Not "Greens." And he *knew* them, knew their ways. They were in a bar clear across the Shreds from Valrassuith, and he knew what her name meant. Even the people of the neighboring Shreds didn't bother with that. Last's smile widened into a grin. "Come on—you came looking for me; didn't you know what to expect? I'm a guide. It's my job to know things like that." With effort, Alsanit regained her composure. "Yes. But I thought I came from outside your usual territory."

"You do. But happens I used to have a lover who was Valrai. I still remember some things." Alsanit wondered who the lover had been. If the stories were true, then odds were good the woman or man was long dead. She decided not to ask, though whether it was because she feared she wouldn't know the person, or because she feared she *would*, she could not have said. Last leaned back in his chair and interlaced his long fingers. The nails gleamed dark—natural color, or some kind of lacquer? Meaning could be hidden in the smallest of details; for all she knew, among his people, dark nails were the mark of an assassin, or a slave, or nothing whatsoever. All she could do was try to ride the waves of interaction as they rose and fell. She thought of the stories her people's priests still told, about waves, about the sea, and swallowed tears. The sea was ages gone.

"Let's get to business," Last said. "What is it you need? Interpreter? Somebody to tell you the ways of another Shred? Business contacts?" "Answers," Alsanit said, raising her chin and meeting his deep black eyes. "An answer. To the only question worth asking in this place." He did not move, but the life drained out of his face, leaving his expression mask-like. Finally he clicked his tongue sharply, a Shreds mannerism that meant absolute negation. "Wrong person, Green." The name hurt, but she didn't let it show. She clicked back at him, adopting his own slang. "You answered to the name. You fit the description. I know who you are—*what* you are—and I *need* that answer."

Last stood, abruptly, his thighs hitting the table and scraping it sharply across the floor. Conversation in the bar stuttered to a halt as heads turned to look. "Wrong person," he repeated, his voice carrying to the far corners of the room. "I have no answers. Sorry you came all this way for nothing." His long legs carried him quickly out of the bar. Alsanit leapt to her feet, intending to pursue, but found her way blocked by a pair of Drifters almost as wide as they were tall, who either didn't understand any of the pidgins she spoke or were pretending not to. They advanced on her until she found herself backed up to a door on the other side of the room, and then they stood there until she gave up and left. Outside, in the streets of Chopper, she tried to find Last, but he had vanished. ??? Life is different in the Shreds. Out on the very edges of Driftwood, places like Kakt, a determined person can live her whole life pretending her home is still its own world. A little further in, when things have gotten smaller and you're not by the Mist anymore, you start thinking of your world as a country; you learn about your neighbors, trade with them, set up embassies in their territory. But in the Shreds, there's no ignoring the weirdnesses of Driftwood, the way it's summer on one street and winter on another, day here and night there, obedient to your laws of reality in your own ghetto, but operating by a totally different set of rules three houses down. Don't ask how it works. It's Driftwood. Patchwork of world fragments, illogic made concrete. It just *is*,

and you learn to live with it. And if you learn to live with it well enough, you can even make some money at it. Pack as many languages into your head as you can, figure out the rules at work in some given set of ghettos, and set up shop as a tour guide. Or something like that. I hate giving tours to Edgers, when they come into the Shreds for kicks. Not because I'm bitter—I got over hating Edgers for their big, solid realities long ago—but because they're oblivious. They don't get how the Shreds work, and they don't want to.

I'm here for the Shredders, for people whose business takes them out of familiar territory, and who want—or need—to learn the ropes where they're going. Vigilantes, crosser-merchants, scholars who have abandoned the decay of their own worlds in favor of trying to figure out how it *all* works. They pay me in the coin of their own realms, if there's any left, or in gems, valuable items, even food. How is it that ivnyils only come from the Rooters' reality, but practically everybody has emeralds? How come most food—but not all—is edible for all races? Why are some things so similar, when others are wildly different? Those are the kinds of questions my scholarly clients want to answer. Me, I don't bother. It's enough that Driftwood exists, and I exist within it—still, even after all these years.

Every so often, though, somebody decides I must have the answers. It's hard to be truly famous in Driftwood; at the Edge, people don't talk much about stuff outside their own reality, and in the Shreds, stories get stopped by language barriers every few blocks. To really become famous, you have to be around for a long time, and then you run into the problem that, oops, you and your reality have been pushed right to the Crush, and you've faded out of existence entirely, along with everybody who knew you.

Pretty much the only way to be famous throughout Driftwood is to still be here, long after the Crush should have gotten you. Most people figure it's just a story. Sure, I've been around so long even your granny thinks I'm old, but with the way time varies between realities, and the differences in lifespans—the Gnevg live for barely ten of their own short years, the Ost for hundreds—really, there's got to be a way to explain it. And if you're not sure what reality I come from, well, *somebody* has to know, right?

Only a few people chase the stories far enough to notice this hypothetical “somebody” doesn't seem to exist. People can tell you where I live, or where I spend my time, or how to find me, but they can't tell you where I *come* from. And of those few people who chase the stories far enough, a very few make the leap of faith to *believing* the stories.

Those are the ones who come and find me, not to hire me as a guide, but to ask me questions.

A question, really. They all ask the same one. ??? Alsanit hadn't come across the Shreds to hire a guide, but she ended up doing so anyway. She was too far out of familiar neighborhoods; there were too many language and cultural obstacles in her way for her to search without help. So she hired someone, a Drifter, paying him in the seashells the Valrai used as currency, which had merit in some Shreds as medicine, though not for the Valrai themselves. She sent a messenger back home to explain her continued absence, then grimly settled into the task of running Last to ground. It was a dangerous proposition. She had no way of knowing whether the people she hired or spoke to were trustworthy; it was safest to assume they weren't. But Alsanit didn't have to return home and speak to the Circle to know what they would tell her. If she failed in this mission, her life was meaningless anyway, along with that of every last Valrai. So what did it matter, that she was risking it here? Her guide turned out to be reliable, even if several of the informants they approached tried to kill them. Alsanit lost track of how much time they spent searching; away from Valrassuith, she found it hard to maintain familiar standards of time, and days and nights were of different lengths in every Shred she went through. Instead she kept track of how many shells she had left, and worried over how quickly she was spending them. Before much longer, she would have to return home for more—and she had no idea how much Last would charge for his answer, should she persuade him to give it. Maybe more than all of her people had to give.

But they would find a way to pay. When Alsanit's shells were nearly gone, her guide found him. The guide's final service for Alsanit involved kicking in Last's door. Then he was gone down the stairs, off to enjoy the wealth he'd earned, leaving Alsanit standing in Last's doorway with Last's knife at her throat.

“I've killed people for less than this,” he told her, calmly, as if the information were no more significant than directions to the nearest Shred boundary. “Kill me, then,” Alsanit said. “It doesn't matter. I'm dead anyway. *All* of my people are.” “Everyone's

dead,” Last said. “That’s Driftwood. In the end, every person, every street, every world will fade and crumble and die.” “Except you.” “Verdict’s still out. Who says I won’t die someday, like everyone else?” “You’ve lasted longer than everyone else. You’ve cheated Driftwood so far. And I need to know how.” For a moment he stood there, knife pressed against the soft skin of her throat, and Alsanit truly didn’t know whether he would do it or not. “It might be a mercy, to kill you,” he whispered, as if talking to himself. The sure knowledge that her world would die without his help gave Alsanit a simultaneous calmness and recklessness that made her words much more than mere bluff. “So do it.” The knife pressed more sharply. “Or answer my question.” Last’s hand trembled. “Save my world,” Alsanit said, “or kill me now.” He did neither. He grabbed her by the shoulder, shoved her to the floor, and left. Alsanit should have chased him, but her legs were too limp. She sat on the tiled floor of the room he rented in a Shred whose name she had already forgotten, shaking and on the edge of tears, and knew her people were doomed. ? ? ? There’s a lot of crackpot theories out there about me. One of my favorites, in a black-humour kind of way, is that my world was the first one, the original core the rest of Driftwood drifted up against. A special variant on that theory says I was the first being of that reality, formed by the local gods out of clay or corn or wood or shit or whatever, that I’ve been here since the beginning, and will be here until the end. It used to embarrass me, that people said that kind of thing. It makes me into a demi-god, and I’m not; I hate it when people treat me like one. But after a while, the embarrassment wears off, and you learn to deal. It’s a creative theory, at least, better than some I’ve heard. But no—my world wasn’t the first one, and I’m not the first man. Even the people who don’t buy into that theory tend to treat me with a reverence that makes me uncomfortable. I’d rather live my life as a guide, teaching people how to make their way across the wilderness of the Shreds, until the Shreds I know shrink down and slip into the Crush and I have to learn some new ones. I’ve gotten over mourning the loss of those worlds. They all die, in the end, so you might as well get over it. Sometimes I get hired by scholars who want to know about realities that are long gone, and then I get melancholy, remembering songs no one sings anymore, friends and lovers dead for ages, restaurants I’ll never eat at again. My memory goes back a long way: the only immortality any of these places get. But I don’t remember how Driftwood began. I’m not *that* old. For all I know, it’s gone on forever, and never had a beginning; maybe there have always been worlds out there, having apocalypses and falling apart and eventually fetching up against the ever-shifting face of Driftwood. Maybe Driftwood is an agreement among the gods, a final mercy, giving their worlds a chance to come to terms with death before it finishes happening. Or maybe Driftwood is their joke on us. Part of me hopes so, and hopes that the gods are getting a good laugh out of it. Nobody else is. ? ? ? She stayed in Last’s rented room, first sitting numbly on the tiled floor, later curling up and going to sleep. When she woke, she looked around and wondered if there was any point in staying. He had possessions here, yes, but a man who had outlived the death of countless worlds probably did not attach much importance to mere objects. There was no reason to believe he would return. But if there was no point in staying, neither was there much point in moving. What would she do? Go home? She could get more seashells, start another search, maybe find Last again. But he would not give her the answer. So she might as well go home and admit defeat to her people. And then wait for Valrassuith to finish dying. She would probably die before her world did. They had perhaps another two generations left—maybe more, maybe less; no one knew what hastened or slowed the inevitable decay. Except Last. If that was all that going home held for her, then Alsanit might as well stay here and die. It would hurt less than facing her people with her failure. Night came and went; it seemed longer than night in Valrassuith, but perhaps despair lengthened it. Alsanit sat with her back to a bedpost of carved bone, stared at the wall, and wondered what she should do with herself. Commit suicide? Starve to death? Set up a new life, exiled from her own world? The question filled her with such apathy that when Last reappeared in the doorway, she simply stared at him, dully, half-believing him a figment of her imagination. He looked down at her for a long moment. The morning light coming in through the room’s one small window made him shine slightly, like a god. “I make no promises,” he finally said, in a quiet, heavy voice. “Other people have

tried this, and it didn't work for them. They must have done something wrong. But it's the best I can give you." "I don't ask for promises," Alsanit whispered. "Just for hope." He nodded, slowly. "Very well. "Lots of people try to stay in their own realities, and never go anywhere else. Doesn't save them. But you can't abandon your own world, either; it needs you to survive. So you have to compromise." Alsanit waited, the words burning themselves into her memory, blazing with the possibility of survival. "Have someone—your own shoemakers, if you still have any—make boots with hollow spaces in the heels. Take soil, or small stones, from Valrassuith, and put this into the spaces. Wear the boots at all times. If you do that, you bring your own world with you, wherever you go. You'll always be standing on the ground of Valrassuith, no matter where you are. And this may—*may*—save you." Hope gave Alsanit new life; she roused from her stupor and began to crawl across the floor to where Last stood. Tears of gratitude fell from her eyes. Last stepped back before she could kiss his feet. "Don't. Please. Just go back to your people." "I will," Alsanit whispered. "And—thank you. Words are not enough, but . . . *thank you.*" And carrying his words like the treasure they were, she went to give her people hope. ? ? ? The night after I saw Alsanit for the last time, I drank myself into a stupor. If you want to solve problems, that's a shitty way to do it, but if you want to wallow in your misery, drinking's the way to go. My problem had no solution. All I could do was wallow. Alsanit wasn't the first to ask me that question, nor the last. I've sworn to myself time and time again that I won't answer when they ask, that I'll just leave, hide, stay away from them. And I try. But they always hunt me down. What else can they do? I'm their one chance at salvation, their final hope for saving their dying worlds. They can't leave until they get their answer. So I give it to them. No one ever wants to hear the truth. I've tried telling them, and they refuse to accept it. They prefer lies. So I tell them what they want to hear. I make up some interesting falsehood, something that sounds plausible; maybe I take it from the rantings of a streetside preacher who died four hundred years ago, and to them it sounds new. And they smile, and weep, and thank me; sometimes, like Alsanit, they try to kiss my feet. And then they go away, and their worlds die. The lie I gave Alsanit is a special one. It's one I actually tried, along with all the people of my world, back when there *were* such people, back when there was a world I called my own. We put stones in our boot-heels and prayed it would make us safe. It didn't save them. And it didn't save me. I kept those stones in my boots for seventy-five years after the rest of them were gone, thinking they were the only things keeping me in existence, until the day I got mugged in Ettolch and the mugger stole my boots. Then there was nothing keeping me "grounded," keeping me on my native soil, and still I didn't die, didn't fade, didn't vanish. I don't know why. That's the truth no one wants to hear. I don't have the first clue why I'm still around. I've outlived the normal lifespan of my race many times over; even if my world hadn't gone away, I should be dead. I tried all the theories that were in fashion back then, but so did everyone else around me. They're gone, and I'm not. Maybe the answer lies in some subtle interaction of the things I tried; maybe you need to spend precisely this amount of time in your own reality and that amount of time outside of it, while simultaneously eating specific food in specific weights, and if you get the numbers exactly right, behold, immortality. I doubt it. But then again, what do I know? Not much. Except that I'm still here, unlike everybody else.