

THE WIND KNOWS ALL

Defence mechanism.

BY BETH CATO

The wind knows all. Even as it roars, it listens. It understands each blade of grass, each grain of dust, the very burden of its soil. Above everything else, the wind wishes its world to survive.

It knows the girl stands ready, eyes squinting as the Lady's shuttlecraft lands amid what was once the town square.

The girl is the last to remain of this aborted colony. Humans arrived here just 15 years earlier, determined to tame this far-flung world. She was the first to be born, to take her first breath on this planet her kind dubbed Tantalus. This changed her in ways left unapparent to her until recent months.

The Lady disembarks with a contingent of soldiers.

The girl meets them. She is lanky and brown as the skies.

"Maribel Rodriguez." The Lady's voice is enhanced by her mask, which also guards her against dust pneumonia. "You've been evicted from Tantalus for your own safety. Please come with us."

"No." The wind lowers its voice so that hers may be heard. She's scared. She wishes her loved ones could stand beside her.

"Your parents are dead. The colony's been obliterated." Through the face plate, the Lady's face is kind. "It's a miracle you haven't come down with pneumonia already. Doctors will examine you on the orbital."

The Lady's orbital, the Lady's planet; as if she could own such a thing. Her corporation established the self-sufficient agricultural colony as they explored how best the planet might be utilized.

"Don't talk about miracles." The girl once pleaded to keep her family alive. Now she understands that although the wind knows all, it doesn't control all — native spores included.

Even the wind is surprised the girl still lives.

The Lady motions to her soldiers. One fires a tranquilizer dart. The wind drops it to the ground.

"How —" the Lady begins.

"You ordered us to till wide swaths of land," says the girl. The words aren't from her mind; this annoys her. "Our administrators argued that such practices had disastrous consequences back on Earth. You ordered the auto-ploughs anyway?"

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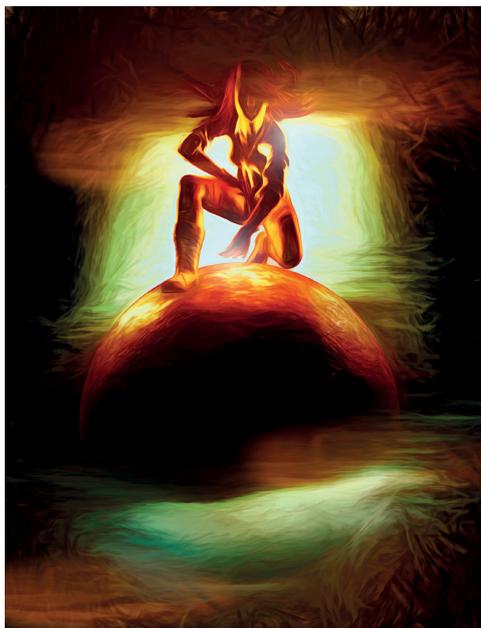
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"With the current war on Earth —"

"You knew that the

loss of deep-rooted native grasses would create a 'dust bowl' that would probably make people sick."

"I didn't want people here to get ill." The Lady looks stunned by the accusation. "But it's true, I did encourage aggressive production goals so we could divide the population and initiate the mining operation. Earth needs those minerals to —"



"We started dying and you didn't care."

"Of course I cared."

"Not enough to help us, and the administrators' logs were destroyed upon their deaths."

The wind feels the tremor of the Lady's heartbeat against her suit. "You have no proof of that." She motions to her soldiers.

Their commander replies over a private channel. "Ma'am, she's not a direct threat, and a child besides. By intergalactic bylaws —"

"She's talking about things she can't understand. She needs treatment. We must get her off world by force."

The girl almost breaks into hysterical giggles at the eavesdropped conversation, and instead fights to contain a hacking cough.

"The planet wants you gone. You cannot blast and mine this world as you planned."

The Lady cocks her head. "How could you — wait, you're speaking for the entire planet? You're delusional."

The girl thought she'd been delusional, too, when the wind first started to talk to

her, when it first included her dead mother's voice, then so many others. "Tantalus isn't Earth. You can't regard it or abuse it in the same way." These words emerge from the girl's lips, not her mind, but she fully agrees with the sentiment.

The wind chooses that moment to whip up with a hurricane's bluster. The town site vanishes within a vicious whirl of brown.

"We're not leaving without her," the Lady yells. "Something strange is going —"

"This spontaneous storm is approximately 100 miles in diameter, centred on us, and rising in strength. Our primary duty is your well-being. We must evacuate." Ignoring the Lady's protests, the soldiers drag her away.

The wind has some understanding of the human concepts of 'mercy' and 'justice'. It ignores the soldiers, and lifts up the Lady's mask far enough to deposit spores for her next inhalation. Time will do the rest.

The shuttle rises. The wind lowers its crescendo. The girl rests on all fours, coughing. The worst of her pneumonia passed in recent weeks. She'll survive what no one else did. Sometimes, she regrets that.

"You should've let me control all of my words." She prefers to talk out loud. "This hasn't ended, they'll soon send more shuttles, more machines —"

"You were scared." The voice of the planet is carried by the wind, and echoed by the combined whispers of her parents and neighbours. They've melded with the planet they died on, but despite her unusual connection with this world, the girl has not.

As her gaze traces the distant speck of the shuttle, she swallows down her childhood yearnings to see Earth. She grieves and aches for the company of real people, not these blurred-together ghosts, but she needs to stay. Tantalus is her home. She'll save it.

"I'm human. It's normal to feel scared," she says to the wind. "But I need to manage on my own. I might need to negotiate aboard the orbital some day, you know."

The wind knows this possibility, and of fear. Humanity has taught this world what it means to be scared. The girl senses the wind's mood, and her fingers stroke the breeze, as if to calm it.

Together, they watch the shuttle fade away, vigilant for whatever may come. ■

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