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Editorial Review

About the Author

New York Times bestselling and award-winning author **Christie Golden** has written more than thirty novels and several short stories in the fields of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Visit her website at: ChristieGolden.com.

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Chapter One

The water was hardly inviting. Its surface was coated with some kind of algae and it smelled faintly of decay. Nonetheless, B'Elanna Torres scooped up the water with her hands and drank deeply.

It had been almost a week since she had first stepped out on trembling legs into the wilderness of Boreth. Her first instinct had been to wash off the sticky, foul-smelling combination of ash and blood that coated her body. However, it had taken her some time to find water, and by then, she had changed her mind.

The coating that the priestesses had smeared all over her naked body as part of her ordeal had distinct and important advantages as well as disadvantages. The vile stuff prevented insects from bothering her, and in this tropical climate, they were thick as, well, flies. It also helped protect her skin from the merciless rays of the sun, and even provided a sort of insulation during the chillier night. And when she walked right past a grazing *maasklak*, an unexpected encounter that had startled them both, she realized that it helped mask her scent as well.

She imagined rolling in feces would produce a similar effect, and frankly, she wasn't sure that she wouldn't prefer the latter. It had taken nearly two days before her nose had become inured to her own reek. But here in this place, she realized she needed every edge she could find.

B'Elanna hadn't been overly worried at first. Starfleet was quite thorough in training its cadets to handle emergency situations, and she had certainly had enough experience thinking on her feet in the seven years she'd spent on *Voyager*. But Starfleet had also tended to assume that when one crash-landed on an inhospitable planet, one would usually have one's emergency medical kit, phasers, and so on. At the very least, they'd assumed one would have clothes.

B'Elanna had nothing but her own two hands and her wit.

One of the first things she had done was to find water. She dimly remembered something about a few of Boreth's plants that weren't deadly, and began to forage berries, fruits, and edible tubers and roots. After about day two, she'd overcome her repugnance sufficiently to add insects to her diet. Making fire was easy -- she'd always had a knack for it and teased Chakotay about it mercilessly.

She had two goals that were occasionally in conflict with one another. The first was to simply stay alive and as healthy as was possible given the circumstances. The second was to keep moving in the direction her mother had indicated on the map. Both were challenging, but the latter more so. With no compass and a complete unfamiliarity with the terrain and even the stars that speckled the sky that arched over this world, Torres had very little frame of reference.

The map had indicated that Miral would be waiting for her somewhere to the northeast of the temple. Torres had wasted two precious days traveling in the wrong direction before she remembered that Boreth's sun rose in the south and traveled north during the day. Upon realizing her mistake, B'Elanna Torres raged with a fury that would have impressed Logt, had she been witness to it.

Her redundant organs were serving her well during this time of extreme physical duress. She recalled the conversation she had with the Doctor, when he had argued as persuasively as he was capable of doing in favor of the extra lung and other organs little Miral would have. Humans would have had a very difficult time of this, and even she, half-human as she was, fell into exhausted slumber at the end of every day.

Her feet started to blister at the end of the second day. She rubbed them with mud to soothe them and started to think about what she could use to create makeshift shoes. Her first try, wrapping large leaves around them, was a complete failure. A half-hour's worth of walking on not-very-rough terrain shredded them. She realized that she was going to need something sturdier than plants.

She was also going to need something more substantial to eat than roots and grubs. Torres began walking at first light and didn't stop until dusk, when she would search for shelter and make a fire. She was burning calories like mad and was starting to feel weak and shaky.

Reluctantly, she came to the conclusion that she would need to make a weapon. Boreth was rich with all kinds of wildlife. A single *maasklak* would provide both food and clothing. It was a logical deduction, but the thought made her feel even sicker. Torres took no pleasure in killing. She fought when she had to, and had killed in self-defense more than once, but that was a long way from deliberately setting out to take a life, even an animal's life. She imagined that for most Klingons who undertook the Challenge of Spirit, coming to grips with killing an animal was probably the least of their worries. But it disturbed her greatly.

She'd talked to Chakotay once about hunting, back in the early days when she was first getting to know him. He was, as she ought to have expected, quite philosophical about the whole thing. He seemed to have no qualms about it in theory or in practice, if there was a need.

"But you're a vegetarian," she had pointed out.

"I have access to a replicator," he had countered. "I don't need to go out and hunt my meals."

"But you would if you had to?"

"Absolutely."

"Without batting an eye."

He'd smiled then, indulgently. "Hardly. My people have elaborate rituals to prepare for hunting. We make ourselves worthy of success in the hunt by purifying our minds and body through meditation and bathing. We call on the spirits of the animals we are about to kill, asking permission to take what we need. And when we do make a kill, we thank the creature's spirit. Nothing is wasted, not bone or sinew or flesh or horn or hide. It is all viewed as a gift from the animal, and it is part of the cycle. But in today's world, there's no need to take a life when we can program the replicator for everything from stuffed mushrooms to chocolate cake."

She supposed he had a point, and had thought no more about it, even as she often asked the replicator for a thick T-bone steak, extra rare. Tom liked his steaks medium, with a baked potato and --

Just that quickly, Torres was crying. She had deliberately pushed thoughts of her husband and child to the

back of her mind when they arose, because she instinctively knew she couldn't spare the energy of missing Tom and Miral. There had only been a handful of days over the last seven years when she had not seen Tom. He was a fixture in her life even before they had gotten married, and she had carried Miral within her, brought her forth into this universe, and now keenly missed feeling the child nursing in her arms. By her count, Miral was nine weeks old today. Nine weeks. Torres suddenly realized she had been away for two-thirds of her daughter's entire life.

She had really had no choice but to leave them behind and embark on the Challenge. Intellectually she knew that, and even in her heart, she knew that. But a part of her, the part that was wife and mother, deeply mourned the abrupt severance. The tears were hot as they trickled down her face, and B'Elanna knew they were making pale furrows in the gray ash that was her mask.

At least they were safe. Tom was probably with Harry Kim right now, relaxing and joking, while Miral slept peacefully in her nursery. The Doctor, no doubt, would be making a sarcastic comment or two, but she knew better than most the depth of tenderness of which the hologram was capable. He adored Miral, and no child could have a better godfather.

She cursed. She was wasting precious water on these stupid tears. Torres gulped and wiped at her eyes, then cursed again as the motion got dirt in them and they stung.

It was only then that she heard the *grikshak*.

Its growl was low, soft, and as menacing as anything she had ever heard. Her thoughts focused to laser-sharp clarity. All distracting images of husband and child fled before the more urgent need to be alert and stay alive.

She froze, remembering just in time that movement antagonized the creature. Only her eyes darted rapidly about, trying to locate it. There -- in the tall blue grasses. Its azure coat was the perfect camouflage, but its constant low growl revealed where it had hidden itself.

She had only been permitted a few hours to read up on the flora and fauna of Boreth, but one thing had stuck in her mind. The *grikshak* was the most dangerous predator on the planet. It had little fear of humanoids, it had more teeth than any self-respecting creature ought to, and it was really, really big.

They faced each other, the animal and the half-Klingon. Torres mentally kicked herself. She knew there were *grikshaks* on this continent. She ought to have fabricated weapons on day one. Instead, she'd almost been killed because she'd succumbed to maudlin recollection. At once, she amended that thought. She might yet be killed.

She had caught a break in that this *grikshak* was a juvenile. Its coat was still bright blue, not the silver-blue of a mature female, and it was barely the size of Earth's grizzly. Its teeth, bared in challenge, were only as large as her hand. A black, wet nose moved as it snuffled the air. It seemed confused that it couldn't scent her. Torres figured that her lack of smell was the only reason she was still alive; the thing was still trying to determine what she was.

Her gaze flickered to the earth. By her foot were stones a little bigger than her hand. They would make pathetic weapons, but they were the only ones she had. She'd have to time it just right. Torres fixed in her mind the exact position of each stone, even as she returned her gaze to meet that of the creature.

It crooned and cocked its head, still trying to figure out what this scentless, still thing in its path was.

At that moment, Torres squatted, grabbed three stones, and dove for a nearby tree. She scrambled up the rough trunk as fast as her feet and hands would take her. Her movement broke the spell that had kept the *grikshak* immobile and it charged, its roar nearly shattering her eardrums. Long blue-black claws tore the earth where she had been standing a fraction of a second earlier, and it whirled with shocking speed to charge the tree.

Hanging on determinedly to the shaking branches, Torres took aim and threw the first stone. It was a perfect blow, catching the creature between its large eyes. She heard a crunch. The animal staggered, but did not fall. Torres saw a welt begin to rise and knew she'd managed to fracture the skull. Again she threw with all her strength, willing the stone to strike home. This one struck the *grikshak's* right eye. It shrieked in agony, bringing a forepaw up to its face in a very human gesture.

She had only one stone left. She had to make it count. The animal was bellowing, its sharp-toothed mouth wide open. Torres summoned all her courage, dropped from the branches to the earth, and ran toward the creature. She shoved the stone deep into its open gullet and snatched her hand back before those dreadful teeth could clamp down and sever her arm.

She wasn't quick enough to avoid a glancing blow from the *grikshak's* huge forepaw, though, and cried out as she felt the white-hot pain of claws scraping her back. She began to run as fast as her legs would carry her through the tall grass, feeling blood trickle down her back and legs, knowing that the scent was enraging the beast.

It gave chase, but in silence. The only sound was the crashing of the vegetation it trampled in its path. Torres wasn't stupid enough to slow down and look over her shoulder. She ran for all she was worth, pumping her legs faster than she had ever done before, willing her feet to find sure footholds and not slip. Three lungs gulping air filled her blood with oxygen, and adrenaline lent extra speed.

After a couple of minutes she realized she no longer heard any sound at all behind her. She kept running for another moment or two, then decided to risk a backward glance.

There was no sign of the *grikshak*.

Torres slowed and gasped for breath, glancing around for any trace of it circling to approach from another direction. She saw nothing.

Her breathing slowed. Carefully, grabbing up more stones as she saw them, she retraced her steps. She tensed as she heard a thrashing sound up ahead, but kept moving.

The *grikshak* flailed frantically on the earth, churning up huge clumps of bushes and grass in its death throes. Its mouth was open and its forepaws clawed its own face to ribbons as it tried futilely to extricate the stone Torres had shoved deep into its trachea. The struggle reached a crescendo and then the massive animal lay on the earth, shuddering only slightly, until with one final twitch, it lay still. Blood and saliva slowly trickled from its sharp-toothed mouth.

Torres stood and looked at it for a long time. Doubtless had a full-blooded Klingon killed the creature, he or she would be whooping and dancing in triumph. She felt no sense of giddy pleasure. She actually felt sick to her stomach at what she had just done, even though she had been fighting for her life. Still and harmless in death, the *grikshak* looked beautiful to her. It was only doing what instinct told it to do -- find food and stay alive, just as she was.

Slowly, she walked up to the creature, and on impulse, dropped down beside it and placed a hand on its

bloody head.

"I thank the spirit of the" she said aloud, feeling that what she was doing was both foolish and appropriate. "I will use its flesh for sustenance, and its hide as protection from the elements."

She would need a sharp stone to cut it open.

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