

A stone wall with Gothic arches and a glowing nebula. The wall is made of dark, textured stone blocks. Three Gothic arches are visible, each with intricate tracery. In the center, a glowing nebula with red and blue colors is visible, surrounded by small, bright blue stars. The overall scene is dark and atmospheric.

Untold Dimensions

Four stories of other worlds
by Dane Whitaker

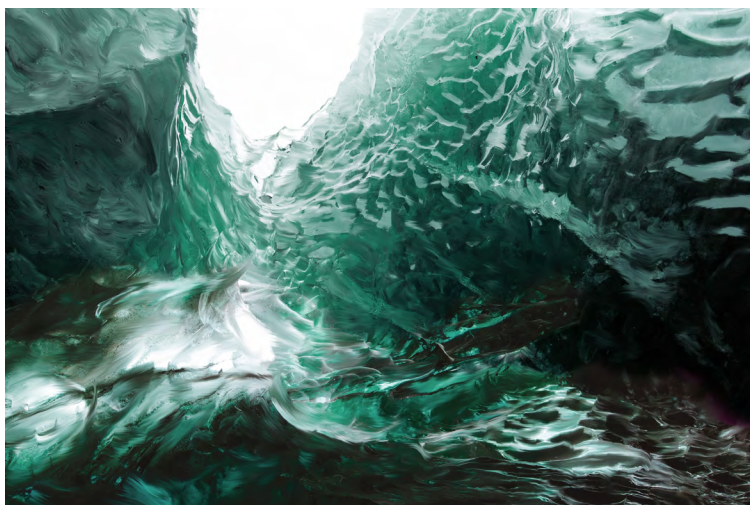
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Upon a Forest Deep

When they recovered Evans, the poor man grovelled with his uncovered, frost-darkened face and hands thrust into the snow. Oates would have thought him dead already if he weren't twitching.

Oates stayed with Evans as the other three went for the sledge. Beard hoary as if touched by death, the delirious man raved on about some creature pulling his leg, and he seemed to mean it really, in most serious terms. Evans said he'd seen a man standing before him, and he fell on his face in fear. Oates later shared this with the doctor, who of course wondered if it was the Son of God himself—something Oates might have liked to believe. God alone could save them now.

How many times over the past few days had Evans complained about loose ski shoes, climbing out of the harness only to wrestle back in. So they left him behind, thinking to warm up his lunch for when

he arrived. A well-meaning mistake, and a necessity. He'd have died no matter what the doctor or anyone did. It was the way of things on this dreadful expedition.

Sun by day and night and nothing visible! The snow was blindness. It left their eyes streaming and sometimes they lay for hours in agony, wishing to scrape the scalding jelly from their sockets. When fog or blizzard favoured them, they strained in equal measure to find the cairns through the ghastly swirl. All the world was lost in dead whiteness. And every day Oates fought longer with less energy to cram his decaying feet into their layers of hairy socks, saennegrass, and boots. More disturbing, his old thigh wound from the war had become a constant grievance, even before reaching the Pole.

The sting of defeat had depressed their spirits since that time. The Norskies might well be packing to sail home already, having swooped on the Pole in December. They had their heads screwed on right. Oates wagered they hadn't lost a single man, whilst he and his comrades would be fighting to the last to reverse their luck before it killed them.

At least they'd passed the Glacier with its pits and secret forests. Fossils of that lush past were wrapped away in the sledge, much to the excitement of Scott and the doctor. Oates hardly cared for a thing too long dead to feed him.

Where they'd shot Christopher, that devil of a pony, Oates insisted on digging up the uneaten remainder of horsemeat. The head was useless, rotting despite the frigid temperatures. That wicked old crock bit back even in death!

It was in the pony's face that Oates saw the vision.

The dead eyes seemed to form up like liquid crystal, until they were fresh orbs set between decaying lids. Oates counted four figures reflected in their glossy depths, besides himself. He felt the stiff wind pierce him to his core, seeing this other standing there. Not Evans. No, worse.

His mother.

"You should not be here," he whispered. "You must be safe at home. Arranging the books for my exams, and the caramels, to send me. Not here! Not here!"

“Laurie? Will you never come home? My darling Baby Boy!”

Her face was blurred, wrong. Something else had taken her place, a deathly creature. Then it disappeared. Only a mirage—the Antarctic world playing games on a tired mind. The eyes were dead again.

Scott was shaking him. “Oates, dear chap! Are you quite alright?”

Oates shut his eyes and let the rotting head fall. It was an effect of confronting the ponies ordeal again, surely. There were no crocks to manage now. *I have done my part*, Oates thought. *The ponies were my duty and I did it right*. Now he had only himself to care for, each man for himself, as Scott had told them not long ago.

“I’m fine. Only thinking how long we wrestled with this devil, and how relieved I am to have seen him die.”

He must be plucky, to show her he was no child. There were things worse than death. To die less than a man’s death, that was worse. To live in humiliation as a cripple, that as well. And at this point, he could not hope to rescue his feet.

Scott clapped him on the back. “You’re a first-class example of British courage, Soldier. In six months’ time we may devour ten juicy beefsteaks and flagons of brandy together, laughing at this wretched continent for trying to bring down the finest British stock.”

“We will see,” Oates said.

“What feasts we’ll have! Never a bite of hoosh or biscuit again. But in the meantime we must be watchful,” Scott said. “We cleared the Glacier; with decent weather we ought to have a straight shot home. We will spit on the hand of Fate if we can.”

“If we reach the next depot, I will kiss Fate’s hand,” Oates said.

“Always the pessimist, Soldier, but we will see, as you say.”

Despite the bravado of Scott’s words, they came hollow out of his empty belly and turned foul between lips crevassed like old Beardmore Glacier. All the talk revolved around eating these days.

Once in a while Oates managed to remember further back than his last meal. The happy days on the voyage out from Cardiff, never more trouble than a stretch of sail to mend. The fresh breeze on salty air, the waves skipping beneath the craft, good friends for company, and always the expectation of adventure beyond the horizon. Oates



Where the Body Does Not Lie

Another child maimed by his mother. Sindrap chewed her lip as she lay a stiff splint beside the fracture and wrapped the left arm, just above the wrist, with a roll of gel-smearred wax tissue. Firm but pliable, the tissue came nearly fresh from the last foraging above ground. Already that supply, packed tight in mud-lined crates at the back of the cave, was practically gone. At this rate, they'd strip the forests bare before the world died.

The boy was woozy with drug and blowing bubbles of snot through his nose. Splint and bandage encased his other arm as well. Likely those fingers would never handle a tool or clasp the hand of a friend. He'd been crying, a steady stream, without making much sound.

So many like him were maimed, broken as the world. A group of these waited in the next chamber, some of them howling as they awaited treatment. Sindrap mourned for them because she knew. All

her life she'd endured pain of all kinds, with the one small consolation that her experience with pain sharpened her vision of it.

The assistant brought another boy, this one bleeding from a severe gut wound. Sindrap winked the boy—her second eyelids flashing to grant her a view of intangible painforms. The pain engulfed him in the form of a rippling, succulent blossom. In every fold of the ethereal vision, she saw the truth. The wound was thoroughly septic.

“Upper room,” she said, keeping her tone light. The child would know the meaning of a murmur or somber words, and she could at least offer him the mercy of ignorance. The upper room belonged to the ones who couldn't be saved, in this time of shortage. Medicines must be reserved for the survivors.

Deeper within the cave system, in guarded rooms, the proven cases of plague languished. Sindrap had sent many parents there after verifying plague-induced attacks: the trauma clung bright and terrible to both a child victim and the parent who inflicted harm. Too often, however, the parents themselves carried no guilt in their stomachs.

“Give him a strip of painsleeper,” Sindrap added. That was one of few things they had in some abundance.

As her assistant took the boy away, a man stepped up. “Sindrap?”

“Yes—oh, kinsman Hinaj! Is the leadership already here?”

“No, I came ahead with a smaller group to help guide preparations for the main party's arrival. I've been grouped with plague investigation at this encampment, and we'd like your counsel for a possible case.”

“I am busy with the children just now . . .”

“I'll keep it short.”

She nodded, wary. Her right to determine how and when she worked was hardly respected. It was one thing that chafed her since joining the Tribeless and learning a new way of life. They offered security and stability, but they resented visioners as much as they needed them. Among her first tribe, Sindrap had been honored for visioning painforms. Here, she was equal in name but not in practice.

Hinaj explained, “We’ve taken a confessed murderer. Until the recent blood, she was a peaceful servant to everyone. The victim was a man known to be her friend. Over the past year they often had private meetings with each other to discuss worship traditions. Each was devoted to a different omji-theory, trying to persuade the other to change beliefs. Two days ago they left camp together, and she reentered camp alone from another direction. Afterward she was found with teeth and a severed nose, taken from the victim—that’s how we first knew what she’d done. With the evidence in hand, we had no trouble obtaining her confession.”

“Disputes of faith can kill,” Sindrap said.

“They can. We suspect disagreement was a factor, but plague too is our suspicion.”

“Did you match the evidence to his body?”

Hinaj’s gaze seemed to measure Sindrap. He said, “We have her word.”

“If he’s missing a nose and teeth, that would seem to match him. But you’ll want to know if there is any deception. Say she’s gathered multiple noses and sets of teeth. Matching the tools used to make the wounds is just as important.”

“That’s good counsel. I’m surprised you haven’t spoken of visioning yet.”

“I know visioning is one method among many, and no more fool-proof than the others.”

“Yes . . . so practical. I remember that from when you’ve treated my injuries.”

He seemed more grateful than some. But Sindrap sensed another message behind his words. “Am I the first visioner you consulted?” she asked.

“No.”

“Have any of them seen the victim?”

“Just one has, but I think now you’ll be the second.”

She frowned and glanced at her assistant, who had reappeared during the conversation with Hinaj. “When do you need my attention?”

“This moment. You’ll be relieved here, and come with me.”