

Cloudberry: A Short Story by Julien Burkhalter

We invite you to enjoy this fantasy story by BTS Technical Advisor Julien Burkhalter!



Four rangers had set out from the camp into the last stretch of wildwood that separated their regiment from the road to Saromat. Each bore the same dark hair that was common in the Dominion and even more common among its troops. And each, too, wore the same short beard that marked the three days since they had left the camp. On the third afternoon the thick brush and canopy above them suddenly gave way to a wide clearing with a leafless gray tree at its center. They stood at the edge of the wildwood for some time discussing the possibilities before their captain, Corrus- an older man with quick blue eyes and a graying beard- decided that they would cross as it could offer the regiment a faster way to Saromat. Walking silently into the clearing they felt a chill wind descend around them, rushing like cold water across the clearing floor. The men looked at each other uneasily and shook as winter wildwind bit through the early autumn air. Suddenly as it had come the wind receded, taking with it its ice and the torrential sound of violent air. In the stillness that followed the men walked towards the tree again and found themselves to be very small in the expanse of emptiness that surrounded them. The tree towered to the sky much farther away than they had thought and they could see it was missing most of its branches, some of which were visible in the grasses around it. As they made their way closer Corrus stopped and knelt. He called to the others,

"There was a sundering here."

The rest stopped and looked at Corrus. He picked up a fistful of the thin gray soil and let it sift through his fingers like sand.

"The soil is ashy."

Corrus straightened and brushed his hands against his leathers. They looked out at the tree and the thin, tired-looking one among them spoke:

"There's a field of grass surrounding that tree, though."

Garrus ran his fingers through his ragged hair and kicked at the ground. His eyes widened at the small cloud that rose and the dusting of gray ash it left on his boot, and the worry was clear in his voice as he turned back to Corrus.

"How long ago do you think?"

"I'd reckon about as long as that tree has been broken a hundred different ways. No telling, but it looks to be an old tree and it didn't get broke like that yesterday."

The others nodded grimly and they continued towards the tree. As the sun began to set the wildwood became a wall of darkness around the clearing, which itself was wholly gray and featureless save the broken tree at its center. As the tree got closer and seemed to loom higher above them they saw a thin white shape emerge from behind one of the broken branches on the ground. They stopped, each squinting and leaning forward a little to make out the shape of a young woman with red hair. Corrus began walking towards the tree again and Garrus nearly shouted,

"Stop! What are you doing?"

He was sweating and his hand shook as he put it on Alben's arm.

"Anything that's even close to as old as that tree has to be a demon. We should go."

He looked at the other two and urgently back the way they had come,

"Now."

"There are other things that live that long, Garrus."

"He's right Corrus. There might be other things but none of them are good."

Alben surprised himself with the authority in his voice. In response Corrus took a definitive step towards the tree.

"You're not in charge today Alben. You can wait here or come with me but we're going to at least figure out what's happening here before we move on."

The youngest of them followed, shrugging at the other two as he passed,

"She doesn't look like the worst demon you could run into."

They walked the rest of the way in silence, each matching the other in fear and curiosity. As they approached the tree they could see that it was petrified, the image of a tree in stone and they continued forward, wordlessly set in their endeavor. Most of the tree's

branches laid scattered in the grass and among them the lady rose to greet them. The silent air filled her gown like a cloud of flowing silk and a single braid of auburn hair unraveled down her back. She looked at the two men with eyes like flashing emeralds and stepped towards them through the shattered monument around her,

"What brings you here, are you in need of food or water?"

"Captain Corrus of the Dominion third regiment rangers, ma'am. We have rations for the night, we'd just like to find out why this place wasn't on our map and we'll be on our way."

She nodded and turned to look at the other man,

"And you, why are you here?"

"Just curious ma'am."

She took a step back and looked past them into the darkening clearing.

"Your friends back there, are they afraid of me?"

Corrus sighed and nodded.

"You can tell them they have nothing to fear from me. As for why this tree isn't marked on your map, I don't expect it would be. But I don't know how you stepped out of wherever you were on that map and into this clearing. That unfortunately I cannot answer."

The younger man's dark eyes darted to the sky, to Corrus and back to the lady,

"So why are you here? What's going on here?"

He stopped himself from asking more questions, about the tree, about the fast and early sunset and the thin crescent of blood-red moon that shone in the quickly darkening sky.

"The sun is setting. If you'd like to know more about this place I'd be happy to discuss it on a night with no moon, which...

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She looked back at the sliver of moon that hung low and crimson in the sky behind her and shuddered,

"Which should be the next time the sun sets. I have to leave now."

She turned and left to disappear behind the branches of broken stone in the grass, as

Corrus and his lieutenant's mouths hung open with demands and more questions respectively. As they stood in the gathering shadows Corrus clapped the other man across the back and declared, satisfied enough,

"Well we have our answer. If the regiment has to play fairy-tale games like waiting for a moonless night to get through here then we'd best go around."

The lieutenant nodded numbly, still looking to where the lady had disappeared behind the Sundered Stone. They walked back towards the other two men, who were barely visible in the last light of the sun.

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The men sat in an open circle and ate their rations amid sparse conversation. Corrus, having finished his meal last as an especially deliberate eater, tidied up his pack and stood, slinging it behind his shoulder. He gestured at the others and spoke matter-of-factly, "What are we waiting for boys? The regiment's best route to Saromat isn't through this clearing, we'd best get started on finding a good way around."

The other men groaned through the chorus that followed,

"I'm exhausted Corrus, can't we just make camp here tonight?"

"I'm not walking anywhere in this place at night, even out of it. I agree with Alben we should stay here until sunrise."

"There's no daylight left anyways Corrus, the sun set as soon as we got here- look."

The lieutenant pointed at the black sky and Corrus clapped his hands.

"Enough. I can see that it's dark out but we don't know anything about this place. For all we know we'll reach the Wildwood and step right back into the same afternoon we walked out of."

"I like the sound of that."

Garrus stood and dusted off the seat of his leathers. Corrus shifted in place and crossed his arms.

"I'm going. Garrus?"

Garrus nodded. Corrus turned to the others sitting in front of him,

"And you two?"

"I'm staying."

The young man said quickly. His plain smile was absent in the hard stare that locked him to the tree in the distance. Alben looked up at Corrus and over to the outsized sergeant's pack beside him,

"I can't Corrus. I'm going to stay here for the night."

"Fair enough. The two of you will meet us back at the camp in four days, yes?"

They nodded and Corrus and Garrus turned around to walk towards the edge of the clearing. As their soft footfalls receded Alben leaned back against his pack to watch the sky, and the other watched the men disappear into the shadows. He turned back to the tree and asked Alben absent-mindedly,

"What do you think she's waiting for? Waiting here with that broken tree for a night with no moon, but for what?"

"You tell me. You're the one who spoke with her."

Alben dug his heels into the loose ash and tugged at the thin grasses around him as he spoke,

"I'm just glad to be done marching for the night. As for your lady,"

He gestured limply at the tree,

"I think she's a witch. Or a demon like Garrus says, either way no good can come of it. I'll be out of here at first light tomorrow."

The lieutenant had meant to say something, but in the silence that followed both men fell asleep beneath the black sky.

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Alben was true to his word and left at dawn. The lieutenant waved him off and settled against a branch of gray-white stone to ask himself the questions that had become the dreams he'd woken from, and to give himself the same worrisome answers. In the morning sun he could see the edge of the clearing and the wildwood, a jade wall that encircled him and the broken tree that drew him there. He wondered what had brought the red-haired woman there and he wondered how long ago she'd come, and why she stayed instead of leaving. He wondered if the tree had ever been alive or if it was some primordial monument of stone. And he wondered, more than anything else, what could

have shattered such an ancient and colossal thing into the thousand pieces he saw scattered like an overgrown ruin around him. And in that wondering the lady approached without him hearing and surprised him by appearing at his side with a small tray. She sat and set it down between them and with a slight smile she handed him a waterskin,

"Are you having a good day?"

The tray bore dates, a few small apples and a hard cheese of sheep's milk. He wondered where the food and water had come from but another question found his voice.

"What happened to the tree?"

He asked, gesturing towards it as he reached for the tray.

"I don't know. I've never seen it any different."

"It was broken when you came here?"

She swallowed a mouthful of apple and spoke quietly,

"Yes."

He didn't press the question. They ate their meal and spoke of smaller things, the names of other trees, the signs of winter, the different voices of the wind. And in that reverie the sun set beneath the wildwood, painting the sky orange and red and fading again to the starlit darkness of a night with no moon. She rose and asked him to join her at the base of the tree. He followed her and they sat among the roots with their backs to the cold stone, watching the stars take their places in the darkening sky. She spoke in pieces of an answer, the only things she had come to know about her clearing and its broken tree, "This is a place outside of time. The sky here is split between sun and moon, and here they fight for prominence with no regard for the ubiquity of time. Without sequence, without the elemental order of time there is no regularity to their coming and going. The stars see this from their primeval moorings in the eternal outer sky, just as I watch it myself from the grasses around this tree. And so above this clearing night and day pass the sky between them according to their power, outside of time and its universal order."

"What about the sudden wind when we arrived here?"

"Wind is the voice of nature that would defy time. Fire fades as it consumes its fuel, and so is bound to time. The waters of the oceans ebb and flow with the movements of the moon, and so, too, they are bound to time. And earth and soil and the life that springs from it are made with the passing of the seasons, and in this way the natural voice of earth, the living element is bound to time and no different from the others. But the wind would defy this, coming from nowhere, seeming to be everywhere and appearing and

disappearing in sudden bursts of waking. And so the wind, the ethereal and the storm, are the only part of nature that would dare to exist outside of time. I find it fitting that in this station the voice of wind would announce your crossing into this place.”

He nodded but stayed silent.

"Nothing here ever changes. This gray clearing and the broken tree at its center have always been this way."

She looked to the stars and continued,

"Men have come upon this clearing with far finer weapons and far finer clothes than yours. And so too I've seen much worse. There is no order to their coming: I've met men from the time before time began and I've met others who spoke of the empires that defeated your Dominion."

He opened his mouth to speak and she interrupted him,

"And no matter how the world around it changes this place stays the same, locked away from time and the changes that time would bring. But anything that comes here, the gifts and the men who bring them can only continue in their own time. The men fade with the light of the rising sun, and their gifts stay here to wither as time directs their aging in a place it barely touches."

"So why don't you leave?"

"Unfortunately it's not as simple as walking out the door."

"Well I could guide you. Get you to the camp, and any city in the Dominion from there." He looked over to find her staring deliberately at a faraway corner of the sky and tried another question,

"And you then. Who are you?"

"My name sounds different every time I hear one of you say it."

She looked up at the tree. The bases of the branches jutted out to varying lengths, and she looked down again at the rest of it lying like broken pillars around them.

"This tree seems to have been hurt as much as I have. Each broken branch could be a different story of love lost to me."

He nodded in uncertain agreement and watched the shadows play across the pale stone of the branches on the ground. He pointed to one that formed a small wall at their feet and

asked,

"Could you tell me that one's story?"

"Corven. That one would be Corven. He had a hundred different ways to say he cared about me, and gifts, too."

She shook her head.

"Except none of it was true. My brother caught Corven with another woman, more than one actually. And still he lied to me and tried to keep me as his own."

She stopped and they sat in silence. He looked at her and wondered to himself if he should break that silence and she saw, and said,

"Come. There's another one I want to show you."

They rose and walked to the bigger branches that laid farther from the tree. She stopped at one and laid her hand on it.

"This would be Turmas. He was a traveler, we spent a summer together on the coast along the center sea."

"What happened to him?"

"He left, as travelers do. I begged him to stay, to be with me and be happy together. But Turmas was a traveler and so he left. He swore to write letters, and he did."

He stayed silent and they continued to walk among the branches. He stopped in front of one that towered to his shoulder, stretching like a broken column into the darkness that surrounded them. He pressed his hand against the cold stone and asked,

"And what would this one be?"

"The moon."

"The moon?"

She sat back against a segment of the branch and bade him join her. He did, and she breathed deeply and closed her eyes.

"When you call to a person with their name they answer, yes? In the same way someone who knows the name of the moon, and the universal language it's spoken in, could call the moon by its name and it would answer."

"A wizard..."

He let the thought trail off and become a question. Wizards were a thing of the distant past, like the creatures that hunted men or the gods that walked the earth to slay them.

"Yes,"

She said quietly and looked up at the sky,

"Before I came here, a man who knew the moon by its first name used it to hurt me. He took the moon away from me and bound me to this place and its tree of stone, and in doing so he lost himself in the darkness outside of time. But the moon is still lost to me, and the providence of time continues to elude me by magic that long outlives its speaker."

"So you wait for someone to come here and stay on a moonless night, and then what?"

He swallowed, regretting the question. He remembered what Garrus had said and worried himself with thoughts of the things demons could want from mortal men. Still looking at the sky, she put her hand over his at his side and spoke softly,

"And then I feel like I can breathe again, and marvel at the night sky without waking hurt and sadness in myself."

She rose and held out her hand. He took it and followed her as she led him away from the tree to a spot where it was barely visible in the starlight. They sat, and again turned their attention to the sky.

"That one's Polaris, the north star. You'll never meet a ranger who doesn't know Polaris, since it shows true north no matter where you are."

She laughed,

"That one's always been the north star, and always Polaris, too. I want to hear something new, a star with a name from your own time."

He scanned the sky and pointed up,

"Do you see that one, the smaller one above us with the steady golden light?"

"I do. What do you call it?"

"Well what do you call it first? I'd like to hear a name from the time before time began."

"That's fair enough. I call it Ianna."

"Ianna?"

"There was a priest here, a mendicant preacher who told me the story of his goddess, Ianna. That every year she would find her father the god on a frozen mountain and devour him. And that in this ritual the god would be returned to men and born again in the coming spring, and Ianna would return to her home in the stars."

"Oh, Iona."

"Iona?"

"Yes, but otherwise the story is the same. At the end of every year the god Arin leaves the world to climb the frozen mountain. And every year Iona and her sisters find him there, and descend on the mountainside to devour him so that he might be returned to the world of men. And then Iona, with her gilded wings flashing in the frozen air, returns to her fixture in the sky, the star that bears her name."

"So you call that star Iona?"

"We do. They say the names of stars never change, though our language might."

"And that, then, what do you call that?"

She pointed through the darkness and he laid his head against hers to follow her arm.

"The cluster of stars there?"

"Yes, do you have a name for it?"

He lifted his head from her shoulder and leaned back on his elbows, thinking as he spoke,

"Claudius at the central university says that's where stars are born, a giant cloud that's thick with new stars and the stuff they're made of. He calls that one Demirus- the crucible."

"That's amazing,"

She laid back to join him, and with her hands behind her head and awe in her voice she continued,

"You live in an incredible time."

"Why would you say that?"

"Being separated from time doesn't teach me any secrets of the stars. There's no university here, no books- most come with questions I can't answer, not stories or answers of their own."

Her tone softened and she looked over to him,

"There's nothing for a person here, except for the small flowers you can sometimes find in the grasses."

"So you can't leave?"

"No,"

She admitted,

"No matter how far I go or how long I wait to sleep I wake up here. I used to wonder if this place and my life here was all a dream. And I'm sure you'll wonder the same thing in the morning, after the sun rises and sharpens the lines that separate time from the things outside of it. And eventually you'll stop wondering, too."

She leaned forward and looked towards the edge of the clearing, distantly at the curtains of darkness where it would be in the daylight. He waited, and spoke to break the silence,

"Do you want to name one then?"

"What?"

"A star,"

He sat up and pointed to have her look again at the stars in the black sky,

"If you can't leave, but you name a star and I take that name with me,"

He paused, and put all his sincerity in his voice,

"Well in a way then, a part of you has left."

She looked seriously at him, and back at the sky and spoke happily,

"People have left things for me here but this is new. I like this."

She paused to enjoy the feeling of smiling, the tightness in the corners of her mouth and

the whisper of happiness inside her,

"And which one would you have me name?"

The new brightness in her voice surprised him, and caught off guard he stumbled,

"Any, I guess. Whichever really, any you don't have a name for."

"How about that one?"

She pointed at the sky and he followed her to find a small star glowing faintly red.

"That pinkish one? It's not very bright."

"Yes, but you try to find a brighter one without a name."

"That's true I suppose."

"Now. I'm sure you understand that I have to think hard about this, if it's the only part of me that's ever getting out of here."

"Of course."

He lay back again and named to himself the other stars and their stories: Altair, the flying star, the brightest star and the eye of the immortal eagle. Alnilam, the sapphire, the gem in the sash of the celestial hunter. Camah, the fifth of the five chariots of the harvest and Palesium, so named for its orange fire. And there was Alamia, the guardian, and Kabaz, which formed the crossguard of the primal sword. And above Kabaz was Polaris, the tip of the broken blade, the north star where they had started.

"Cloudberry."

"What?"

"There was a merchant here who gave me fruits from the northern lands. They were small and segmented like raspberries but a little bigger and orange, and smoother and stiffer. He told me that in the summer after flowers filled the fields between the mountains you could go there and find cloudberry among the grasses. They were beautiful, with a sour and bitter taste I'd never had before. I'll always remember that taste and how they felt in my hand,"

She looked down at him,

"It was so nice to have something new here."

"I've seen them before, they still grow in the north. Don't you think that's an odd name for a star?"

"I think it's a very good name for a star."

He paused to briefly entertain a few worrisome possibilities and asked,

"And the merchant, what happened to him?"

"The same thing that happens to all of you. He faded into the red light of the sunrise to wake in whatever time he came from."

He sat up and settled against her, feeling her heat and the cold silk of her gown. He spoke quietly and more to himself than to her,

"I'll tell people. I'll tell them the name of your pale red star."

In the silence that followed he wondered out loud,

"Where did you come from, are you from the Dominion? Or whatever it is they called it when you came here, the forest and the plains beneath the central mountains."

"I am. We called it Eluria."

"And what was precious to you there, in Eluria?"

She continued to look forward and leaned closer against him,

"My younger brother Eren. My mother and father. The letters from Turmas, when they came."

She rested her head against his shoulder,

"Do you have a family out there?"

"Not really, not since my mother died. I've been with the Dominion army since, for about five years."

"They're your friends, then?"

"Yes, some of them. Corrus will be back at the camp soon, trying to explain this place and the way around it to the commander. I imagine he'll have a hard time of it, too, the commander doesn't believe in stories about places like this. Alben I only met this

summer, I'm actually wondering if he'll go back to camp or head home."

"And what about you, then? What is most precious to you? Your friends in the army?"
He sat silent for a moment as he considered the things he could say, and quietly gave her the truth,

"I don't know."

He took her hand and laid in it a ring of grass with a small flower and said,

"I want you to have this."

"What's this?"

"This is what I would leave with you, something new in this place with only grass and hidden flowers."

He gently pressed her hand shut. She opened it in her lap and slowly traced her fingers along the flat ring of braided grass in her palm.

"You did this in the dark?"

"I did."

She carefully slid the ring on her finger and looked at him,

"This will dry out and unravel eventually. It won't last, same as the cloudberry or any other joy to be had in a place that never changes."

He told her he could make more and she asked if he would make her one every morning. He said he would, and promised to weave for her a ring of flowers and leaves of grass that never fades. She told him about the pale blue flowers that were her favorite, and they left words behind to ask themselves the secret questions of their lives. And in that silence and stillness she allowed herself to kiss him, beneath the stars and their immortal names and the branches of her broken heart. And then they waited through the gentle winds of dawn, and watched every color of the sunrise chase across the black sky of a night with no moon.