

"Illness in a Word"

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PREFACE

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This is one of the first of my professionally published works. It is a nice little morality tale in the manner of classic, traditional science fiction (you can call it space opera if you want, that won't hurt my feelings). Though it is a free download, remember that I am the author. No changing the story and no taking of credit where it isn't due. Remember, this is a copyrighted work. Why not try to sell the anthology rights? It's a tiny story, it wouldn't bring very much. I'd rather give it to my readers for free.

— R. P. Bird
May 2001

"ILLNESS IN A WORD"

Increasingly, the debates in the Council of Thirty-seven have become more and more vociferous. It worries me, but I have spoken to no one of it. When I was young, before the humans came into our lives, the oratory in the Council was less inflamed. I consoled myself by remembering that we are not habitually violent creatures.

We were returning from Council along the ancient and green paths that led to my summer villa. I could see that my human was quite agitated. They are like children, even to their size. This slave's name was Holand. He was tall for his kind, yet no more than a yearling's height. "What is it child?"

"Master, I heard the insults Kor-Keiimani hurled at you from the speaking circle. Yet you had no reply! How can you endure such abuse?"

I stopped. My tail flicked about in irritation as I soothed down the feathers on my flanks. I suppressed its movement. "What might I do, child?" Violence between Urmani was unthinkable, impossible. My pet Holand knew this, it was a part of every human's first education. They all knew it was forbidden by custom to engage in violence, one Urmani against another. It was a matter of law as well as custom: since the eleventh archonship, before the Age of Spaceflight, all intraspecies violence has been circumscribed — unless, of course, one was granted a government sanction.

"I . . . I do not know." He bowed his head. Holand realized he had spoken out of turn. I was glad he found it unnecessary to cower. Other Urmani took pride in the intricate patterns of scars their whips brought up on human backs. Some of my peers preferred white slaves to dark because the scarification was more prominent on white bodies. I preferred my slaves unblemished. Humans are intelligent after a fashion; they can be trained to behave. As to colors, I actually preferred the brown. Over half my retinue were brown. All were unblemished, even the white ones.

"He insulted you. What of your honor?" he said, his head still bowed.

"These matters are of no concern to you! Urmani need no interference in their affairs from slaves. I must insist you speak no more of this. I have great affection for you, Holand. I have great affection for the entire household, but I will impose discipline if I hear any more of this nonsense. Do you understand, child?"

"Yes, master."

The poor thing was confused. Just because Urmani use physical coercion to keep discipline among slaves, just because we shatter the worlds of our enemies, that does not mean we are a violent people. I proceeded to my residence in silence, my anger slowly dissipating. I paused at the gate to admire the intricate carvings in the dark wood of the arch. By tradition, it was replaced every year. The new arch had been up only a day, and I had already received compliments from my neighbors on its convoluted beauty. I was renowned for breeding the best human carvers. This would only increase their value.

Inside, under the peaked roof of my mothers, I was tended by my body slaves. They soothed my feathers and sang softly as I was fed. The shutters were open so that I might admire the garden, with its scented plants and colorful flowers. Red, yellow, blue, and gold — some were also imports from the human planet. It was a fortuitous voyage that took our sojourners to the ruined Earth. They found humanity desolate and huddled among the ruins of their civilization. Out of the kindness of our hearts, we extracted them and gave them a purpose: to serve us. They were the best by far of all the others we had ever used. They were so short-lived, though. Others have claimed that it is the hard labor they do on our behalf which shortens their lives. This is foolishness; hard work is good for them.

After the evening meal, I concerned myself with the reports that would be taken up at the next council meeting. They contained many accounts of dueling among the humans. It was forbidden, yet they did it. They did not own themselves, so by harming themselves and other humans, they were damaging valuable property. They depreciated their value to us. Though banned, yet it continued; according to some owners, quite widespread. I summoned Holand.

"Yes, master?"

"Do you duel, Holand?"

"I do nothing out of pleasure for myself, sire. Only what is necessary for you."

I took that as a no. "Come lie by me, Holand. Stroke my feathers and sing me a song."

His soft voice and kind hands guided me to Cu-uth-alan, the place of dreams, where I conversed with my ancestors. They alarmed me by speaking of the Old Times, of blood and honor, of vengeance and holy war. They wished to instruct me in the old ways. I refused. They stomped and shouted with anger, but I would not relent. All Urmani were of the sacred blood. What we did to outsiders we could not do to ourselves. The bony skeletons of my ancestors mocked me. *Feast, before you are feasted upon*, they warned me. They did not fool me; they were selfish. They wanted only to eat long and drink deep for themselves, not for me.

I was awakened by my slaves. They were afraid, and some were injured. The story was quickly told to me.

After my body had lain quiet for a time, Holand went to the kitchen. Many of my slaves were gathered there. Holand told them of the council meeting.

"This is beyond belief!" they said. "Our master did nothing? We cannot dwell in shame, under his shadow. Something must be done."

Holand had lately been listening to the teachings of old slaves, those who were too aged to perform most tasks. They were kept alive, a few of them, to open doors or sweep walkways. Their days were full of idle hours to confabulate lies to tell to others.

"I have learned," Holand announced to those in the kitchen, "of the history of our race. What have we if we do not have honor? Our honor is worth more than our lives, even more than our Earth. Did not our venerable ancestors teach us this? They sacrificed their lives, their fortunes, their planet, and their freedom for honor. They did not turn away from the harsh path, the hard journey. Our master does not understand. We must stand in his place and defend his honor. We go when the moons rise."

When the three crescents of our moons were in the night sky, they left. Only the best, the strongest, left with Holand. The rest stayed to watch over me as I lay in the darkness, among the pillows and colored hangings, my soul with my ancestors. Holand, my sweet-voiced child, he led them.

My mind filled out the bare facts my slaves told to me. Other humans, the slaves of my political rival Kor-Keiimani, were waiting in a barren field outside the precincts of the city. It is where the rendering companies toss the bones of dead slaves, after their last worth has been boiled off of their dead bodies.

"We seek satisfaction for wrongs your master has committed."

"You will receive it, the servants of Kor-Keiimani know their responsibilities."

Holand and the others drew sharpened hand spades from beneath their tunics. Originally made for garden work, only humans could take such a simple tool and give it a sinister purpose. Every human had a weapon, even if it were only a paving stone.

They charged. When they met, the battle became a swirling, spinning melee. Human males and females hacked and stabbed at each other in a frenzy of hate. There was very little sound as the small noises of blows and the occasional moan or scream echoed up into the night sky. In the timid light of the three moons, Holand lunged again and again at the other male, trying for a quick victory. His opponent stumbled back into the mob. Holand pushed in after him, the combat becoming a wrestling match. He kept his blade close to his body, grappling with his free hand for an advantage.

Kor-Keimani had followed his missing slaves to the field of bones. "Stop this! You will all be disciplined."

As he shouted, Holand, my Holand, found his enemy's weakness and stabbed him in the side. The male went down, Holand triumphant over him.

Kor-Keimani saw his beloved at Holand's feet. Unmindful of my lovely slave, he hurled Holand aside with a blow.

As Kor-Keimani cradled his injured slave, my humans tried to rouse Holand from where the blow had thrown him.

I interrupted their tale to ask: "Where is Holand?" They would not say at first. They found him dead. They ran away, back to their home.

No more would I hear his voice raised in song; no more would his hands soothe my feathers and caress my face. They were so afraid, they left the body behind.

Someone outside struck the guest bell. As its tone was heard in the house, my slaves cringed, as if fearing a mere sound.

The caller was brought to me, a messenger from Kor-Keimani. The human did not make obeisance as he should have. "Look to your proper station, slave!" I cried out.

The creature made a perfunctory bow. "My master is displeased at the behavior of your slaves and wishes to make his feelings known to you. He demands your immediate presence at his dwelling."

"I will comply, and your insolent behavior will be on my lips when I arrive there."

Kor's messenger had the temerity to strut away without any word of leaving. My slaves made a move toward him, but by my voice I maintained their discipline. The lowly thing left unharmed.

My humans stood before me. "You should not go alone," one of them said. For a moment, memory took me back to Cu-uth-alan, the dream place, where I had watched my ancestors capering and leaping in the Blood Dance. It was a forbidden thing, banned for many centuries. I relented, giving the order that all but the old and the tiny should accompany me to my enemy's house.

The gardener and the woodworkers opened their tool chests, to pass out all manner of sharp things. I let it happen. I did not tell them to stop. I passed under the carved arch of the gate, my slaves behind me.

The moons had set; we walked in the deep black of the night with only the lanterns to light our way. They had been placed along the paths at public expense to aid the night traveler. I had never before bothered to notice the yellow tint to their light. Some might find the color a comfort in the dark. My legs carried me far out in front; I too

was anxious for this rendezvous. Holand's face had been a delight I had not cherished enough.

Kor-Keimani's compound was lit and astir with movement. From his gateway, I could see him standing on the steps to his dwelling. Behind me, I could hear my followers. I did not wait, I strode in.

As I came near Kor, without preamble, most impolitely, he began to speak: "I demand discipline for your slaves, Tir-Tokkmani. They have sinned greatly."

A shape lay a short distance from the steps. Kor's slaves fell back as I approached it. Holand's body lay in the dirt, carried there from the field of bones and dumped, unceremoniously, on the ground. I had imagined that my humans, silly as they sometimes were, had judged him dead who was merely unconscious. I expected him to meet us on the path. This was not so. I felt my internal organs compress themselves, a vacuum forming in their rightful places. I knelt down by his small body.

Kor continued to speak, assuming that I was listening. "They are arrogant whelps, your slaves. You are too weak with them, Tir. It is as I said in council: your frailties and affectations restrict your judgement."

His little body was light in my arms. My ancestors whispered to me, softly, ever so softly. Like dripping water before the deluge. In front: the memories of Holand's soft touch, the echoes of his voice as it sang. Behind, like an accompanying musical instrument: the scratchy, tinny voices of my ancestors as they whispered. I held him a moment longer, before lowering him back into the dirt.

Kor spoke again: "Listen to me. I will present these events to the Council for judgment. Tir, do you hear me?" My enemy said it most rudely, using the familiar form of my name.

Anger began to mold my features. I had never felt it before in this way. The power of hate had entered me. My head echoed with the chants of my ancestors. Each syllable, each guttural sound banged into me, each time doubling in magnitude, increasing in force.

"Holand!" I shouted as I sprang at Kor.

I killed him with my bare hands. I tore at his eyes. With my beak, I ripped at his throat. His ineffectual grapples slid off my feathered shoulders. One eye blinded, he tried to scream, but my beak once again sought his throat and pierced flesh. I let his body drop.

My slaves had routed the enemy and were now in the midst of the slave quarters. Their lust was mine. The screams of the dying swam in the night. My sainted ancestors laughed and danced, I could see their shadows move in the flicker of the firelight. I would

teach my slaves in the shaping of spikes and spears, in the manufacture of even deadlier weapons. Weapons to kill my kind. I would summon all my slaves, from my farms and factories. I would teach them all. When next the Council meets, then might I have something to show them.

The bloodletting was over. The screams in the slave quarters had ceased. My people came back to me, their hands red, all red. The gardener spoke for them: "They are dead, high one, every one. Praise you, what are your wishes?"

I gave the orders. "Set spies upon the paths to look for the night watch, the commotion may have alarmed those nearby. Quickly! Put the enemy in their dwellings and set them afire. Pick up all our dead. I will bear Holand back myself." They hurried to obey me.