

FOREST AT THE EDGE
~ Book Seven ~

"Teeria Rigoff; Age--Over 50"

A SHORT STORY FROM BOOK SEVEN:
*THE SOLDIER IN THE
MIDDLE OF THE WORLD*

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*A short story from the Forest at the Edge series, Book 7:
The Soldier in the Middle of the World*

By Trish Mercer
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The woman refused to burst into screams like everyone around her.

She'd never been one for such displays, but prided herself in being reserved and thoughtful. She forced herself to remember that as she glared at the lieutenant colonel on the platform of the village's largest amphitheater, explaining how a segment of their population was to sacrifice themselves for the greater good.

Or rather, how people her age were supposed to be executed.

"Oh, no I won't," declared the sixty-two-year-old under her breath. The crowd around her—a mix of young, middle-aged, and now "too old"—was wailing at a deafening roar, and soldiers were striding down the aisles with their swords drawn, shouting for silence.

"Just be quiet," she murmured uselessly to the mob. She flinched as a man—one who she knew to be in his fifties—slugged a soldier, then was cut down by another soldier's blade. If the army thought that would silence the audience, they were mistaken. These were hearty citizens who found themselves facing yet another act of senseless devastation. They would not be so easily stilled.

She could barely stay on the bench in her fury, but sat tall and proud to glare at the lieutenant colonel who had no hope of calming down this angry crowd in Orchards.

Colonel Shin would have known how to restore order.

No, never mind.

Colonel Shin never would have allowed something like this to happen. But Colonel Shin was long gone, having died in the forests above Edge more than 25 years ago. Now *there* was an officer!

But *here* were idiots.

Lieutenant Colonel Netka—conveniently in his late forties—paced the edge of the platform holding his hands in the air and shouting for calm.

"Why should they be calm?" the woman exclaimed, knowing no one could hear her over the screams.

Soldiers sliced down a few more men intent on charging their commander. But somehow the anxious officer pretending to be in charge caught her eye as if he heard her. Somehow people always heard her. He stopped in his pacing and gave her a challenging look.

She threw it right back at him. He'd been a mere lieutenant under her husband. Her now-dead husband. But Teeria Rigoff remembered

every last soldier who had served under Colonel Milo Rigoff. And the insipid Netka now in charge of her husband's fort would never have been equal to her husband who had tried to train him.

Netka led only because all the better officers were now dead. He should be ashamed of himself, Teeria fumed, for his support of General Thorne and for going along with such a gruesome plan.

No longer able to hold her furious gaze, Netka turned his back on her, just as he turned his back on Colonel Rigoff when, as a self-important young officer, Netka defected to Thorne's faction.

Teeria watched him and he knew it. That's why Netka's shoulders were now twitching in agitation as he tried again to call for order. The soldiers joining him on the platform with drawn swords helped reinforce his request.

Reluctantly, the crowd sat back down, many of them sobbing and glancing at the stilled bodies of the protesters.

"What are we going to do?" whispered Teeria's white-haired neighbor. The poor woman's hearing was so far gone that her whisper was practically a shout.

"Shh," Teeria put a finger on her lips. "He just mentioned posting an appeal."

Netka was describing the process for requesting that one's "ushering into the great and glorious next world be postponed."

He announced, "Those who care for the needy, or provide a service—"

Teeria sighed in relief. Since the volcano had erupted a season ago, and wiped out half of their population, she'd taken in many homeless villagers into her large house. People had always known they could come to the commander and his wife when they were in distress, because years ago Milo and Teeria had learned from Colonel Shin that the forts should first help those with the greatest needs.

Officers protect the villagers. Commanders defend the weak and terrified.

It was General Thorne who confused it all, now using the villagers, now condemning the weak and terrified to death.

But Teeria was providing a service, so if the right person read her—

"—appeals will be sent to Colonel Wanes—" Netka droned on.

Teeria groaned and held her head.

"What is it?" her neighbor prodded. "I didn't catch that. What about peelings?"

“Appeals,” Teeria said heavily. “To prove the community still needs you.”

“Do it!” the old woman encouraged. “We need you.”

“But it’s going to Colonel Wanes,” she wailed softly. “Wanes!”

“So?”

Her old neighbor had been a seamstress. She had sewed the officers’ uniforms for many years. But she knew nothing of the men who wore them, who lied, who were traitorous to Milo, who would still remember the name of Rigoff, even after eleven years . . .

Colonel Wanes would still see the last name of Rigoff as an enemy.

She could make up a new name—

No, they just said appeals had to have references.

She could lie about her age, pretend she was another Rigoff—

No, Netka would see all the appeals first. He knew Teeria blamed him for her husband’s downfall.

And if the appeal should happen to make it to Wanes? He’d be thrilled to see Teeria slump to her death.

“They’re getting up,” the wrinkled woman next to her said loudly, shaking Teeria out of her frantic thoughts. “Time to go home!” she added cheerily.

She obviously hadn’t understood. The shouting, the violence—then again, the seamstress’s eyesight was going, too. That’s what happens when you’re eighty-four, a full thirty-four years beyond the age of “necessity.” For some random reason, age fifty was considered the cutoff for those “to be of use for the rebuilding of the population and the world.”

Interestingly, the decree came from General Thorne who, Teeria knew, was fifty-three. If anyone was no longer “necessary,” it was the general of the world. Yet the useless man would live.

Teeria exhaled in despair, watching the soldiers coax the trembling citizens out of the amphitheater. Rectors—or whatever the world assumed rectors to be—would be coming, Netka had said, to bring comfort and understanding.

Teeria suspected what that really meant: rectors “specially trained” with no understanding as to who the Creator was supposed to be, would be coming to indoctrinate the hesitant.

No one really knew about the Creator anymore.

Miss Mahrree, Teeria's school teacher when Teeria was a teenager, had believed in the Creator and frequently referenced The Writings when she taught. But that was back when believers were seen as mostly harmless and a tad old-fashioned. Then over two decades ago rectors and congregational meetings were banned, since they were deemed spreaders of "dangerous ideas about a fake Creator."

And now General Thorne had decided a Creator was *useful* again, as were rectors. Twenty-five years ago the Creator had been denounced as only a clever dictator; now it seemed Lemuel Thorne was assuming the role himself.

Creator, Destroyer—whichever title served his purposes for the week. Politicians were flexible that way.

When the aisle cleared, Teeria took her neighbor's arm and lead the shuffling woman to the exit with the fewest steps. A cluster of soldiers snickered at them, undoubtedly thinking they wouldn't have to worry about slow-moving women in less than a week.

"Everything all right, dear?" the old seamstress asked as Teeria's pace became even slower than the hobbling of her elderly friend. She tried to look at Teeria in the eyes, but all Teeria saw was her blue eyes, clouding. "All will be well, dear."

Blue. Clouding.

Instinctively, Teeria looked up at the sky. It was morning: an odd time to force a village-wide gathering, but also a time most people would willingly leave their work for something else. She stared at the sky and wondered, How long had it been? How long since she'd looked to the sky when Miss Mahrree would say, "Tell me, Teeria: what color is the sky?"

Too many years ago.

The sky was gray now. Just like the floating bits in her friend's ancient eyes. The sky had been gray for weeks, ever since Mt. Deceit erupted.

But what color was the sky before? Teeria hadn't looked, for so long. Maybe if she had, she might have seen some of this coming.

Someone tried to get her to see it, years ago, shortly before Milo was killed.

There had been a midwife who Teeria had seen frequently in the market. They'd smile at each other. Eventually they chatted. And then one day they talked.

The midwife said to her on that day, "You seem like the kind of person who used to check the color of the sky. The kind of person who knows it's

never *just* blue.”

For some reason, the midwife had reminded her of Mahrree Shin, although her skin was the color of the richest soils and her hair was dark and curly. Miss Mahrree had been pale and slight and the shortest woman Teeria knew. She rarely thought of the Shins—

That was a lie.

Teeria found herself skirting their memories daily as if she was ignoring a raging fire in the middle of her gathering room. The Shins were always there. She had loved them so much. Mahrree had become like an older sister to Teeria when Teeria’s life became the army. Miss Mahrree had married an officer, the first to come to their tiny village of Edge, then she introduced Teeria to the shy new Lieutenant Milo Rigoff.

And Mahrree’s husband, Colonel Perrin Shin . . . well, he was like the older brother you really wanted to get to know, but he intimidated you into dithering. It’s not that he was harsh or mean, but that he was just *so large*—in body, in presence, in determination to do the right thing at all costs . . .

But mostly in body.

Teeria couldn’t help but cower around him. How Miss Mahrree, barely half his weight, stood up to him—or rather, just up to his chest—Teeria could never understand. But that was just Mahrree Shin: nothing intimidated her, ever. That was one of the many reasons why Teeria still idolized her, twenty-five years after they were both lost in the forest above Edge.

Teeria couldn’t let go of them because she always had the prickly feeling that there were details she didn’t know, information that had been kept from her about their deaths.

It was like those long math problems Miss Mahrree would set her class to solve, numbers and functions and more numbers, until at the end she asked for their results. So often they had the wrong answers because they became lost in the process. They’d slam their slate pencils on their boards and declare it was all stupid.

But Miss Mahrree would just smile and say, “It’s not the numbers that are stupid. Nor is it you that is stupid. Something just got misplaced or was manipulated incorrectly. When you think about it, so much of life is like that.”

Everything with Miss Mahrree turned into a “life experience.”

Teeria loved those moments.

“Our very lives,” Miss Mahrree told her teenage students on more than one occasion, “are like complicated math problems. We often don’t have all of the numbers given to us, but still we have to muck through the equation as best we can, hoping it will all make sense in the end.

“If you never learn to correctly do this math, remember this instead: there are always details that are missed, items that aren’t written down properly, and information that’s presented incorrectly.”

That’s how Teeria remembered the past: huge gaps of the equation were missing, and she chose to believe those numbers made all the difference in the final answer.

Then Miss Mahrree would add mischievously, “Especially if that information comes from the government!” Then she’d look dramatically out the window for anyone that was listening in, and her students would giggle.

It had always been a joke, until the government came one day because Mahrree Shin had finally said too much.

So when that midwife asked her about the color of the sky, Teeria felt as if she were looking at Mahrree Shin in disguise. She’d somehow grown larger, younger, darker, but still spoke such powerful, familiar words.

But Teeria had balked at the suggestion that she looked at the sky. No one did. Schools had been teaching for years that it’s only blue and *always* blue; ignore every other color and cloud and star.

The woman said she understood. They’d met to talk a few more times after that. The midwife always looked deeply into Teeria’s eyes as if waiting for the right moment, whatever moment that may have been.

Finally one day Teeria said, “I just can’t. I don’t know what you want from me, but I just can’t. I can’t look at the sky anymore. To realize that it’s not blue like everyone says it is, to see what colors really are there, what storms are coming—it’s just too much. It makes me too sad.”

“It doesn’t have to,” the midwife had said earnestly. “There’s much more going on in that sky than you can ever realize.”

“I know. And that’s what makes me so sad—”

“No, no, no!” the midwife insisted, “That’s what makes all the difference! I can show you so much more—”

It wasn’t that Teeria didn’t believe her. Quite the contrary. It was that Teeria didn’t think she could handle anything more. At that time, the enemy’s armies were marching down on them. General Karna was telling

Milo he suspected traitors in their midst . . .

. . . and then suddenly here was this woman claiming to know much more.

It was the joy in her eyes, Teeria decided, that so offended her. The light that shone from the midwife in those dark, terrible days that Teeria was sorely envious of. Only much later did it occur to her that perhaps the midwife was trying to share that light with her, with everyone. But Teeria just couldn't imagine someone wanting to help them. No one could be trusted then. And not so much now, either.

A couple years later, once the battles had paused and the north had fully invaded the south again, Teeria looked around for that woman but she was gone. There seemed to be no one left with such pure light and joy in their eyes. Sometimes she wondered if her conversations with the midwife were all her imagination, her yearnings for someone like Mahrree Shin in the world again.

And that morning, as she shuffled back to her large home which held a dozen other worn down, too old, permanent houseguests, she desperately wished there was a Mahrree Shin somewhere. Someone to assure her that somehow, everything might make sense in the end.

"Who are you thinking about, Mahrree?"

"So many of our old friends. Our too-old friends, those who are supposed to die a 'glorious death' at the end of the week. Who survived the wars? Who survived the eruption of Deceit? Now who's going to survive the stupid stabbings of Thorne?"

"I figured as much. I'm keeping a morbid running tally in my mind as well."

"Shem, how can we just sit here?"

"Mahrree, what would we do?"

"Nothing. We can do nothing. Do you know how much I hate doing nothing?!"

"Unfortunately I do."

Half an hour later Teeria looked around her gathering room at the twelve faces anxious to hear the news. There was no easy way to put it.

“General Thorne has come up with a solution to the crisis in our world. There’s not enough food to get us through the Raining Season, as we all know.”

Her houseguests nodded glumly. Teeria had been rationing her supplies, but even while the elderly had diminished appetites, her cellar would be empty in eight weeks.

“There doesn’t seem to be any food stores further north, either. Therefore, to keep all of the world from starving, Thorne has . . . well, it sounds ridiculous to say it, and I don’t know what to make of this, but he believes he’s had a ‘revelation’ from the Creator.”

Her houseguests had been making various bobbing motions around her, as old people tend to do, but that last piece of information froze everyone in place.

“That’s impossible,” said one man with a perpetual sneer. “The Administrators determined years ago that the Creator wasn’t some great eternal Being but merely a *showman* who manipulated the world to do what he wanted. Then the world killed him three years later.”

Another elderly man scoffed quietly. “A *showman who manipulated the world* . . . Sounds like General Thorne, don’t you think, Mrs. Rigoff?”

In any other gathering, people would have recoiled at open disdain for the leader of the world. But Teeria had known Lemuel Thorne back when he was an overambitious captain, intent on apprehending the Shins after Mahrree had said too much in front of too many people. Thorne had chased the Shins into the forest above Edge, and Teeria had never forgiven him.

Neither had the people in the room.

“Lemuel—” and she poured out her disdain as she said only his first name, as if he were still a young man needing to be castigated by his commander, “claimed that the Creator said it was time to remember Him, that He would save the world from starvation. But first the world must perform a great sacrifice: everyone aged fifty and older will ‘willingly’ submit to dying by the end of the week—” she ignored their gasps, “—so that those who remain will have enough food to survive until Planting Season. Lieutenant Colonel Netka insists it will be ‘humane’ and ‘painless.’ Some kind of packet of deadly herbs one simply inhales and,” she snapped her fingers. “Included in that sacrifice will be anyone

chronically ill, lamed, deaf, blind or simply senseless—at any age.”

They were understandably aghast.

Teeria clasped her hands in front of her, waiting for them to come out of their astonishment.

Eventually one of her more quiet houseguests said, “So that’s it, then.” He patted his oozing leg that would never heal. “I’m done for.”

His wife, her hands trembling more than usual, began to weep quietly. He put an arm around her and whispered, “But we go together.”

Teeria swallowed. She remembered wishing eleven years ago she could’ve gone with Milo, instead of holding him as he shook violently from his sword wounds. His loyal soldiers had rushed him home to her, since the battle took place only five roads away.

She had cradled him, letting her breath mingle with his last ones as he gasped and tried to tell her he loved her. He never got the words out, but she saw it in his eyes just before they went still. Oh, how she longed to be able to go with him then.

So many things were cruel then.

But today?

Teeria hated herself for thinking it, but there was twisted compassion about letting these old people die together—

—What kind of a world did she live in that let her come up with such rationalizations?

She looked around the room at her “family” of the war-weary, permanently wounded, and hopelessly aged. Someone would undoubtedly be waiting to claim this large house when it was all over. Teeria quietly seethed in rage.

“But I don’t want to die!” exclaimed a woman of fifty-one. “We still might find my son, and his little girls would need their grandmother since they lost their mother—”

No one said it, but if they hadn’t found her son by now, so many weeks after Deceit buried his village, neither he nor his daughters were still alive.

“Well,” said another man. “They’ll have to shove those herbs into my nose, since I’m blind! I guess even if I was a youngin’ I’d be going?”

Teeria nodded sadly. He used to teach at the school for the blind and deaf. The school that would no longer be of use. Then,

remembering that he couldn't see her nodding, she cleared her throat to answer him.

"Please don't," he said wretchedly. "I know what you'll say and I don't want to hear it. Please, no one tell me."

It went that way with each of them. All acknowledged their lives would be over at the end of the week. They even elected to make a cake with the last of the sugar, in celebration.

And to make sure none of it remained for the soldiers to steal.

Still, that night Teeria drafted appeals, not only for herself, but for all of them.

She refused to believe the sky was "only" blue. There were other colors, other disturbances, other ways around all of this. There had to be! She knew it!

Besides, Mahrree Shin wouldn't sit back and let the soldiers take her. She'd fight it to the end!

At least, that's what they *said* she did in the forest. Teeria loved that image: little Mahrree Shin, shouting at the soldiers who tried to take her, then falling into that bottomless pit—

Mahrree Shin went down fighting.

And so too would Teeria Rigoff.

"But mostly I'm thinking about Teeria."

"Teeria?"

"You remember, Calla—she was one of my many former students who had eyes for your husband. Look at him: Shem's still blushing about it."

"No, I'm not. And fortunately she never tried to kiss me. Stop giggling behind your hand, Calla."

"That's true, Teeria never tried to kiss you, Shem. She was a good girl. An excellent girl. Bright, sharp, quick-witted—"

"—a little dull."

"What did you just mumble, Shem?"

"Sorry, Mahrree, but that's what Perrin thought of her: that Teeria was a little dull."

"Well of course he thought she was dull—she was terrified of him! I can remember only a handful of times she actually dared speak to him."

Once, back when she was still a teen and trying to get your attention, she asked Perrin to get you to talk to her or something, and I think he responded with, ‘What kind of “something” are you hoping for?’ Such a shy girl—naturally she was horrified by his response! Yes, Calla—keep giggling. That was probably the last time Teeria tried to talk to Perrin. Years later, after she married Milo—I matched them together, you know—best match I made next to you and Shem. Anyway, even after she was married and Milo was serving in Perrin’s fort, Teeria still didn’t dare address Perrin.

“But she was a good girl, and became an excellent woman. She became my friend. My friend who I could never rescue . . .”

“I’m still sorry about that, Mahrree. Mrs. Hifadhi spent as much time as a midwife in the village of Orchards as she could, but—”

“I know, Shem. It’s all right. She took so many risks just to even reach Teeria. When she returned she told me of their conversations. It just wasn’t the right time. And then the north invaded, and we lost Milo—”

“It was a horrible time. The army lost a lot of great men, and a lot of their wives and families.”

“And all we could do was sit uselessly and get reports. Shem, you never knew this, but after Milo was killed, Mrs. Hifadhi suggested she try to go down one more time.”

“She never told me that! She would have had to first get permission—”

“We knew that. We were discussing if it could somehow work—”

“But Mahrree, the south became even worse—”

“Obviously, Shem! That’s why we quit planning. We realized it was too risky, that she might not survive another incursion into the world, even if we doubled or tripled her undercover guards. That’s why you never heard about it. I still feel like I failed. As if maybe I could have remembered something else Mrs. Hifadhi could have relayed . . . some additional key words or hints or—”

“Mahrree, it was years ago. You can’t still think about ‘what if.’”

“Shem, she was my friend, and I failed to rescue her. And now she’s going to die. Because of Thorne, of all people! I failed to rescue my friend. I failed . . .”

On the Day of Doom, as Teeria had decided to call it, she dressed in her finest silk gown so that no one could have the pleasure of looting it later. Predictably, her appeals had been denied. She had a feeling *all* appeals had been denied, but still she sighed in satisfaction, stretched her legs on her longest sofa where she reclined, and licked the remaining crumbs of cake off her fingers. It had been on the sweet side, since they'd used every last crumble of sugar in it, but today Teeria wasn't worried about toothaches.

She was alone in her gathering room; her houseguests had been taken away over the past few hours by soldiers who insisted it was time.

Unlike the rest of Orchards, none of them had gone willingly. "Rectors" had come to the village as promised, and over the past few days had told all their neighbors of the wonders that awaited them in death: solid gold houses and solid gold roads and solid gold clothes—as if the rectors had actually been to the other side and scouted out the future neighborhood.

To Teeria, it all sounded a bit gaudy, and if Paradise were really that glitzy, she hoped she wasn't going there. Unsurprisingly, none of the very persuasive rectors seemed ready to Move Upward with their new congregations of the Doomed—or rather, *Elevated*.

But the "sermons" had worked on many of the greedier villagers, who had quite literally rushed that morning to the place of Upward Movement (no one was quite sure what the correct title was, but all of the options sure *sounded* nice). The elderly were in their finest clothes with their fanciest hats and the last of their face paints artfully coating their flesh, as if hoping to be the most dazzling to enter Paradise.

Teeria's housegirl had been stealthily running to the Moving Upward Pit dug at the edge of the village to observe the dying, then rushing back to the Rigoff mansion to give Teeria and the others updates.

Only six days ago the aged of the village had cried out in dismay that their lives were abruptly ending. But so persuasive had been Thorne's rectors about what lay ahead that now people were happily running to their deaths where prosperity and riches awaited. People would do the strangest things for wealth.

How does one's spirit even *wear* solid gold clothing?

Teeria had always been too logical and sensible to be gullible. She slammed the door on the rector's every time they forced it open to "share Thorne's vision."

Her houseguests applauded her each time.

They weren't about to easily surrender their lives, which Teeria had always thought were a precious gift given by the Creator—the *real* Creator, who was an Eternal Being but didn't seem to be showing up because He likely didn't want to be associated with General Thorne right now. Instead, Teeria and her houseguests allowed the soldiers to carry them away as if they were kings and queens who deserved to be borne away by strong men.

It worked. Each of her elderly friends chuckled as they were carted out, not weeping and shrieking as the soldiers likely expected. Grinning, she waved each of them majestically away, cake crumbs still on their chins and savoring life to its very end.

But each soldier who barged into her house to come after her had stopped in surprise, then decided to let someone else retrieve her.

And so Teeria's housegirl gave Teeria the last of the massive cake as the final old man was carried off, calling out sarcastically, "Thank you for the lift, my good men!"

Teeria beckoned to the young woman once they were alone again. "You've been wonderful these past few years. Thank you for all your help. You're only nineteen and have a chance for life. Take it. And take the bag you'll find under my old stockings in my trunk. It may be too much gold and silver slips for you to carry, but find a clever way to do so, and let no one know you have it. Make a life for yourself in whatever world is left after all of this."

Tearfully the girl kissed Teeria goodbye on the cheek and rushed out of the gathering room. A minute later Teeria heard her exclaiming in surprise at the weight of the bag of gold as she dragged it out the back door and out of sight of the soldiers patrolling for those who should have sacrificed themselves but hadn't yet died.

Teeria licked the cake plate and was about to put it on the floor when she had another thought. Why leave it for the looters? With a mighty heave, she flung it against the wall where it shattered into a thousand marvelous pieces.

"Oh, I should have done that with everything!" She laughed and regretted sending her housegirl away before they could have shattered

all the plates together. She was just pondering how they could have destroyed her kitchen when she heard the voices—and there were a lot of them—outside her front door.

She brushed away any remaining crumbs to make sure she was presentable.

The door swung open, angry footsteps stomped through the foyer, and then into her grand gathering room there came the man himself—Lieutenant Colonel Netka.

“Mrs. Rigoff,” he announced as he strode into the elegant room which would soon be ravished by the younger survivors waiting at Teeria’s gate watching for her to finally leave. “I heard you’ve been uncooperative . . .” His voice trailed off when he saw her.

She smiled pleasantly as she picked up her bow and drew back an arrow. “One for one, shall we?”

But it wasn’t her bow and the quiver full of arrows that startled him, but the fact that she was tied to her massive sofa. Every rope in that part of Orchards must have been used, because it was at least a foot deep of knots, from her chest all the way down her legs. Untying them would take hours.

The sudden *THWACK* of her releasing the arrow made Netka instinctively dodge out of the way as the arrow whizzed by his head and embedded in the stucco wall behind him.

“Mrs. Rigoff!” he exclaimed, and she nonchalantly nocked another arrow.

Now Netka realized why the other soldiers accompanying him had taken cover. She’d already sent two men to the surgeon’s.

“Yes?” she said sweetly, and let another arrow fly.

Netka dove out of the way, rolling on the ground and on to the broken dish. With a cry of dismay, he realized he’d cut his hand on the sharp fragments.

Teeria grinned and pulled out another arrow.

“This is unbecoming behavior!” he told her.

She bobbed her head. “*This is unbecoming behavior,*” she mimicked. “Who cares? Who should *be coming* right now on the Day of My Doom?”

Netka barely rolled out of the way in time as another arrow pinged off stone chimney behind him. “Soldiers!” he bellowed. “Get in here and disarm her!”

Peering around corners, six soldiers waited for her to launch her next arrow—which narrowly missed a scrambling Netka—before rushing in.

They wrenched the bow and quiver from her hands.

Primly she folded her hands on her piles of ropes and smiled slyly at Netka.

He stood up, brushed himself off, and took out a kerchief to wrap around his bleeding palm. “Now, Mrs. Rigoff—get out of those ropes.”

“I can’t,” she said simply. “It took us hours to tie them around me. So if you want me, you’re going to have to take me with my sofa.”

His jaw dropped, and he turned to the soldiers who were eyeing the massive knots.

“Then . . . then we’ll slice through them! With our knives!”

A sergeant rubbed his chin. “Sir, that’ll take a long time. Look at the diameter of that rope. It’s two inches thick. I didn’t even know they made rope that thick.”

“It was used in the mines of Trades,” Mrs. Rigoff said conversationally. “I requested a load to be delivered from that village and it arrived last evening. As for the variety of smaller thicknesses of ropes,” she went on as if merely discussing a sweater she’d knitted, “we gathered those from the many who are so *fortunate* as to be moving Upward today. Amazing how much rope can be found in barns and houses and even at the fort.” She blinked innocently at Netka, whose chin shifted.

“You stole rope from the fort?”

“You stole the fort from my husband,” she said sharply. “After you had him killed, that is.”

As Netka’s chest began to heave, his sergeant cleared his throat. “Everything’s supposed to be *finished* before sundown,” he reminded. “We’ve got less than half an hour.”

Netka spun to face him. “So what do you suggest?!”

The sergeant gestured lamely. “I see only one alternative. It’s why we brought the long wagon, after all.”

Teeria smiled a combination of syrup and vinegar. “I’m ready for my final exit, boys.” Gesturing grandly with her arms, she announced, “Take me away!”

“Are you drunk?” Netka demanded.

“Never had a drop of mead in my life!” Then she laughed and laughed and laughed, so that the soldiers positioning themselves around the sofa glanced at each other uncertainly.

The six men each took a section of the sofa, and with grunts they heaved the heavy piece of furniture, weighed down by so much rope, and struggled to get it out of the gathering room.

They needed four more men from the wagon to help get it down the front terrace stairs, while Teeria laughed and cheered and shouted.

“I’ve always been so proper!” she bellowed to whoever would listen. There was a small crowd at her gate, gawking. “But why? Nothing in the world is proper anymore!”

Netka followed, shaking his head in bewilderment.

“Oh, Netka?” she called sweetly as the men shoved the sofa into the wagon, one-third of it hanging tenuously out the back.

He stopped and eyed her. “Yes?”

“One more.” From behind her back she pulled out her husband’s old long knife and hurled it at the lieutenant colonel.

He wasn’t fast enough and caught the blade in his thigh. As he tumbled to the ground with a shout, Teeria threw her hands in the air. “Ten points for me!”

“Get her to the pit!” Netka cried, gripping his leg in agony. “Get her out of here!”

She laughed and called and cheered all the way to the massive burial pit, which was less than a mile from her house. As the soldiers tugged and grunted to get her sofa out of the wagon, she tried composing a song, shouting out nonsensical lyrics and wishing she’d tried singing earlier in her life. How much of life had she wasted by being proper!

She purposely didn’t look at the Moving Upward Pit which loomed before her as the soldiers dropped her sofa. The army had dug the pit earlier in the week, and those to be sacrificed had gathered around it in tidy columns to topple in orderly piles. It was likely full now, with a few thousand bodies dressed in their finery piled up around the edges in stillness.

Teeria ignored it all.

Villagers who remained around the pit stared as Teeria continued to yell and sing. “Never let them take you willingly! Shock them to the ending . . . ly! That’s the way Mahrree Sh—”

The Thorne-appointed rector shoved the herbs into her face, and she slumped, silent, on her sofa.

A moment later a dozen soldiers tumbled the entire bundle of ropes, sofa, and Mrs. Teeria Rigoff into the pit.

It was sundown.

It was sundown.

“It’s all over.” Mahrree sighed, rocking in the chair and cradling the great-grandbaby who dozed peacefully in her arms.

“It is,” Shem agreed dully.

“She’s gone,” Mahrree whispered. “Teeria . . . and so many others. Gone.”

“But it’s all right. It’s not too late, Mahrree,” Calla reminded gently. “It’s never too late to rescue. Perrin knows that.”

Oh, my . . .

TEERIA RIGOFF! COME NOW, YOU’RE STILL NOT INTIMIDATED BY ME, ARE YOU?

Well, Colonel Shin, seeing as how you really haven’t changed at all, except for being dressed in white, and here all these years—

NOT “COLONEL.” AND WHEN ARE YOU FINALLY GOING TO CALL ME PERRIN? AND I HAVEN’T BEEN HERE AS LONG AS YOU MAY THINK. OH, THERE’S SO MUCH TO TELL YOU, AND SO MUCH THAT WILL THRILL YOU.

So . . . I made it? Is this Paradise? I don’t see solid gold of anything, thank the Creator—wait a minute. So there is a Creator? A real Creator? And wait—you’re here!

WELL SPOTTED. YOU HAVE MADE IT TO PARADISE—ONE OF THE FEW WHO DID, ACTUALLY. AND THE WHOLE “SOLID GOLD” THING IS A RIDICULOUS NOTION BECAUSE HOW WOULD ONE WEAR SOLID GOLD TROUSERS? THE BUTTONS WOULD TEAR RIGHT THROUGH. AND YES—I AM HERE IN PARADISE WITH YOU. AND THE CREATOR IS VERY, VERY REAL.

Uh, why am I seeing you right now? Not that I’m not thrilled to see you again, Colonel sir! I mean, Perrin . . . But as the first person to greet me, I was rather expecting—

I SEE MY SMILE STILL MAKES YOU NERVOUS. I’M GOING TO HAVE TO WORK ON THAT. BUT TEERIA, SINCE YOUR THOUGHTS AS YOU EXITED THE WORLD WERE ABOUT A CERTAIN FAVORITE TEACHER OF YOURS, I’M HERE TO MEET YOU IN HER BEHALF.

She's not . . . not here. Oh no. Oh, poor Miss Mahrree—

THAT'S RIGHT SHE NOT HERE, AND WHEN YOU FIND OUT WHY YOU'LL LAUGH IN DELIGHT, I PROMISE. THAT WAS A FANTASTIC EXIT, BY THE WAY. BOW AND ARROWS? ARMY LONG KNIFE? THAT WAS AN IMPRESSIVE THROW. SINGING TO THE END? BEST DEATH OF THE DAY, NO DOUBT. WE WERE ALL CHEERING.

Really? You . . . you saw that?

OF COURSE WE DID. AND I OWE YOU AN APOLOGY; I USED TO THINK YOU WERE DULL, BUT I NEVER KNEW YOU COULD BE SO ENTERTAINING.

Wait—you said, “We did” as in you and someone else were watching my exit. Who else watched?

I WAS WONDERING WHEN YOU MIGHT ASK. IF YOU'LL LOOK BEHIND YOU, YOU'LL NOTICE SOMEONE WHO'S BEEN EAGERLY WAITING FOR YOU FOR ELEVEN YEARS AND . . .

WELL, WE CAN CATCH UP LATER. I SEE YOU HAVE YOUR ARMS FULL.

The End

[Author's note: This year I turned 50.]