

**Plague Birds**  
by Jason Sanford

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All morning Cristina de Ane battled her mule as they plowed furrow after furrow of stenching black dirt. This was Crista's first time working the wheat field since the attack and Eggbeater took full advantage of her injured body, continually stopping and starting, turning left or right, and destroying every attempt to plow a straight line.

As the cool spring morning warmed to day, the mule finally refused to move, pushing Crista's lupin rage too far. She screamed at Eggbeater, who brayed with laughter, causing Crista to kick the ceramic plow in disgust with her lame right leg. Embarrassed, she glanced around the field—praying no one had witnessed her outburst—only to see Beuten Pauler walking along the nearby road. Beu waved, the fool acting for all the world as if they were still best friends.

*Rip his throat out. Split his guts and spine.*

Crista gasped as the wolf surged her thoughts. She fell to her knees—fingers gouging dank, plowed earth—and spun into dreams of chasing Beu down and tearing him to blood and meat. She wanted Beuten Pauler to pay for what he did. Wanted him to roll in pain, to scream for forgiveness. But she knew if she lost control, she'd be little better than him.

Breathing deep to calm herself, Crista grabbed the plow handles and pulled herself back up. She glared at the road, daring Beu to pretend any friendship still existed between the two of them.

But Beu was already gone. Instead, a deadly flash of red danced along the road, coming to a stop right beside the field.

Crista froze, only to be jerked forward as Eggbeater chose this moment to move. She cursed the mule and yanked the reins, but by the time she looked back the red had disappeared. Crista gripped the reins with suddenly sweaty palms. Was it a plague bird?

The mule, sensing her fear, brayed nervously. Crista pulled a carrot from her pocket and fed it to Eggbeater to quiet him, then stood on the plow for a better look. Her lame leg shook with pain, and she gripped the plow's handles to keep from falling.

The red flash was gone. Had it been an optical illusion? Or one of the rare unmodified cardinals which still nested in the nearby hills, their feathers as obscenely red as red could be?

Crista stepped down from the plow to unhitch Eggbeater. Perhaps it was nothing. Or perhaps it was a very dangerous thing hiding itself from her eyes. To be safe, she'd return to the barn.

Crista bent under the mule to unstrap his harness. When she looked back up, the plague bird stood beside her, waving a fresh carrot under Eggbeater's nose.

"Hello Cristina de Ane," the woman said. "I require a place to stay for a few days."

Crista couldn't speak. She stared at the woman's scary stock of red-burned hair, at the red line glowing from right eye to lips, at the twin red knives sheathed to her red trousered thighs.

Most of all, Crista stared at the woman's pale skin. She could almost see through that paleness to the deadly blood screaming and cursing its way through her veins.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," the woman said in a tired voice, obviously repeating words she'd spoken many times in her travels. "My name is Derena. Now please, finish unharnessing your mule, and take me to your father."

The woman laid her hand on Crista's shoulder. Crista flinched and stepped back, causing her lame leg to spasm and dump her in the dirt.

A gentle smile splashed Derena's face as she reached out to pull Crista up.

#

No one else noticed Derena as she followed Crista and Eggbeater through the village commons—a fact which unnerved Crista, though she'd known this would happen. Last year at her 18th birthday party, the village's artificial intelligence had manipulated Crista's senses in a game of hide the kiss. She remembered standing before the young men and woman of the village as Blue tickled her mind. Suddenly, she couldn't see her friends. She heard them step to her side one by one. Felt their unseen lips on her cheek as the villagers laughed and hooted. But she saw only empty air as she tried in vain to guess which invisible kiss belonged to which person.

If Blue could do that, so could the deadly AI this plague bird hid inside her blood.

Crista glanced at Blue's single-room school house. The rainbow lights and twinkling fog of the AI hovered protectively in front of the school while twenty kids of different ages kicked an old ball in a tangle of dust and shouts. Crista knew Blue saw the plague bird, even though the AI didn't react to the woman's presence. Crista wanted to run to Blue—to feel the cool, enveloping crackle of its energy across her skin. But the AI was forbidden to interfere with a plague bird's duties, so Crista simply led Derena on.

Crista's father repaired leather saddles and reins each day in the village barn, and sure enough, she heard him whistling inside. As Crista entered the barn, her father looked up from his workbench. "Let me guess," he said with a grin. "Eggbeater performed his special circular plowing!"

Normally Crista would have laughed—they called the mule Eggbeater because he'd plow circles if given half a chance—but instead she ran around the workbench and grabbed her father's hand. His brown beard and stringy hair bristled as his wolf-anger rose. "Where's that son of a bitch Beu ..." he began.

His words died off as Derena allowed him to see her. Crista's father nodded to himself. "Go raise the plague flag," he told his daughter.

"But only elders touch the flags."

"People will understand."

Crista ran as fast as her lame leg could manage to the giant flagpole in the middle of the commons. She opened the ceramic box at the pole's base, strung a red flag to the cable, and pulled it to the top of the pole so everyone would know a plague bird was here.

When she looked back down, the villagers and school kids who'd been milling around were running for their houses. Only Blue remained. As Crista limped home, the AI washed a wave of apology in and out of her mind—although what Blue needed to apologize for, Crista couldn't say.

#

That evening Crista sat on the wood stairs in her house, listening to the elders in the living room. Her father served as chief elder, and had invited the council to meet here.

"I want to know why a plague bird has appeared," boomed Ms. Pauler, as always her deep voice overpowering her sapling-stick of a body. "It's been decades since a crime of merit occurred in our village."

"I wouldn't call your son's assault on Crista without merit," Crista's father said, irritated. "But you are correct—there's been no unpunished crime to warrant a plague bird's judgment."

The other elders nodded in agreement as Blue's haze of energy and lights twinkled from beside the brick chimney. "I remind you that plague birds also visit without cause," Blue whispered in their minds. "They keep a watch on all the villages as we AIs return people to humanity."

"When did one last visit?" Crista's father asked.

"Three years ago, although only I noticed him," Blue said. "Plague birds are extremely long lived, and visit our village regularly as they wander this land. Of course, the last significant visit we had was a century ago."

The elders grumbled nervously—that plague bird had killed a quarter of the village. Since then, every villager's education included experiencing the hell plague birds unleashed if capital crimes went unpunished. Crista remembered the first time she witnessed Blue's memories of those long-ago villagers. How the plague bird's AI tore their bodies to meat and bone. Blue had tried to stop the plague bird, only to have its consciousness ripped apart and painfully stitched back together, a clear warning that the plague bird could have destroyed Blue if he'd desired.

*Fear. Scared scents. Mouths silent screaming.*

Crista closed her eyes to silence the memory. Crista smelled the elders' urine-tinged sweat, felt the nervous static from Blue, and knew everyone was reliving the same memories as she.

"Well, where is this woman," Ms. Pauler muttered.

"In our guest room, resting," Crista's father said. "She's exhausted. Perhaps ill."

Ms. Pauler sputtered in anger. "She's staying in your house? What do you plan to do, beg her to kill my son?"

Crista scented the wolf rising in her father, and for a moment thought he'd attack Ms. Pauler. Several elders growled as they sensed the same peril.

But instead of attacking, Crista's father calmed himself. "Tell them, Blue," he said.

"The plague bird intends to visit a hunter clan in the surrounding forests, and desires Crista to guide her," the AI intoned. "The plague bird also has an interest in Beu's attack on Crista—an interest we can do nothing to stop."

Ms. Pauler's face blanched as Crista stood up to protest. She didn't want this so-called interest. She wanted the plague bird to leave her alone.

But Blue whispered in Crista's mind to remain quiet, so she did. That's when Crista knew she had less choice now than she did in the days and months after Beu's attack.

#

That night, Crista sat on her bedroom's window sill, her feet dangling over the second-story drop. Crista loved the night—all moon-glow and tangy forest scents and the urge to run howling after the hunt. Not that Blue and the elders approved of such base actions, although she was sure all the villagers had sneaked away at one time or another for just such a thrill.

Crista glanced at the flickering candle-light in the guest bedroom window beside her. The pressed glass showed only the room's empty bed and furniture, but Crista's instincts whispered that the unseen plague bird stood before the window, watching.

Suddenly, a familiar scent washed over Crista.

*Gentle kiss. Beu, muzzling neck. Mating urge. Woods so sweet in spring.*

Crista ignored the wolf's pleasant memories, instead growling a warning as she leaned forward on the window sill, ready to attack. Beu stepped from the dark trees a stone's throw from the house, his hands held up in surrender.

"What do you want?" Crista whispered. She didn't want to wake her father, who would likely kill Beu for being so near their home.

"I was passing by, and saw you on the window. Reminded me of good times."

Crista smiled as she remembered the spring night a year ago when they'd last met this way. She'd leapt from her second-story window to chase him through the dark forest, finally cornering him beneath a fallen hickory. Crista sighed. She and Beu had been best friends all their lives, and she'd always believed they'd one day marry. When Beu kept control, he was a lovely man.

But the problem was that as Beu aged, his pox-gened tendencies worsened despite Blue's constant tinkering. Finally, last fall, he broke. He and Crista were walking around one of the wheat fields at night, holding hands and watching the clouds play slash and hide with the moon. Suddenly Beu attacked her. He smashed her face over and over and shattered her leg before catching himself, a gasp of horror in his yellow-glowing eyes.

The elders had restrained Crista's father for several days to keep him from killing Beu, while Beu himself said he deserved to die for his actions. However, the other elders decided against that punishment, reminding everyone the pox had gened Beu so badly not even the AI could make him whole. They branded his right hand, and warned he'd be killed if he lost control again.

Now Beu stood below Crista, seeking forgiveness for something she'd never forgive.

"Get out of here before my father scents you," Crista said. "You know what he'll do."

Beu nodded, bowing with a dramatic flair as he backed into the woods. A dark figure grabbed Beu and kissed him with a female growl before bolting into the dark. Beu looked sadly at Crista before chasing after the woman.

Crista wondered which village girl risked Beu again losing control. She tried to convince herself she no longer cared.

As Crista pulled her numb leg back into her room, she glanced a final time into the guest bedroom. The candle there flickered and disappeared as unseen lips blew it out.

Crista shivered. She realized Ms. Pauler's fears were right. The plague bird was here to kill Beu.

As Crista fell asleep under her bed's warm quilts, she asked the wolf whether Beu's death would make any difference to the life she still had to live.

*Yes. No. Yes. Confusion.*

The wolf whined so much that Crista gave up her question, and simply joined it in running through the forests of her dreams.

#

While only a few hundred people resided in the village proper, over a thousand hunters lived in settlements throughout the nearby forests and hills. In the morning, during a breakfast of hot

oatmeal, Derena announced that Crista would guide her to the Farnham settlement, one of the most secretive of the hunter clans.

Crista and her father exchanged nervous looks. "That's a long way for my daughter to walk on her bad leg," Crista's father said. "Plus, the Farnhams don't like outsiders."

"No one likes me," Derena said. "But we're still going."

Crista's father clenched his fists in irritation, struggling to remain calm. He walked to a closet and returning with an ancient ceramic pistol. Crista reached for the gun—both honored her father would let her wear it, and nervous he thought it necessary. However, Derena said no. "She goes unarmed."

Blood boiled her father's face, and he literally shook. Unable to speak, he hugged Crista tight and stalked out of the house.

"He has good control," Derena said. "I like that in a man."

Crista turned away, not wanting to reveal how badly her own instincts screamed to join her father in ripping the plague bird's throat to bloody shreds.

#

Crista picked up her wooden crutch—while she didn't need it now, she would after an hour or two of hiking—and led Derena down the old cement road, now so cracked and overgrown it was little more than a footpath. Crista had often been tempted to hike the road to the next village, which lay only a few days walk from here. But only plague birds and hunters traveled as they liked. All villagers remained under the watchful presence of their AI unless otherwise directed. It was difficult enough keeping control during the day-to-day irritations of life. But to travel beyond the calming reach of your AI—that would truly risk one's hard-won humanity.

A mile from the village they passed Beu, returning home from his previous night's fun with his unknown woman. Crista scented sex on him and, even though she told herself not to be jealous, a slick of vomit coated her mouth.

Suddenly Crista's head tingled and Beu's face flushed to fear. He stared at Derena, for the first time seeing her bright red hair and clothes. Like a rabbit bolting from a hungry coyote, Beu ran down the road toward the village.

"He still loves you," Derena said. "And your village AI is correct—his love borders on obsession."

Crista's lips quivered as she remembered Beu standing over her body, smashing and slashing as blood played across his face. "Why did you reveal yourself to him?"

"If I'm by myself, I desire people to see me only when necessary. But since you're here, people need to know that if they hurt you, they'll answer to me."

Crista didn't ask any more questions.

Soon they reached the trail leading into the forested hills. Crista leaned on her crutch as she glanced up the dim, narrow path. She'd only been here once, when she was fifteen and her father led a group of villagers in bringing an injured hunter back to his clan. She'd been shocked at how the hunters lived—in old, cramped houses and shacks, far from the ability of an AI to protect their body or mind. Now, as she stared up the leaf-greened trail, she imagined a thousand lunatics like Beu hiding behind every tree, waiting to kill her.

Sensing Crista's fear, Derena removed her red leather vest and one of her hip knives, and handed them to Crista. "So everyone knows you're with me," Derena said.

Crista's hands shook as she held the forbidden items, but she knew Derena was right. She pulled the vest on, strapped the knife to her uninjured thigh, and led the plague bird through the woods.

#

They were being watched. Dark shapes flickered and merged with the shadowed oaks and elms lining the trail. Hot scents of territory and trespass burned on the breeze—scents so strong Crista almost choked on the air.

Adding to the terror, the plague bird was in terrible shape, turning an hour's hike into two. Every few minutes she stopped to catch her breath, and as they rested Crista imagined the hunters choosing this moment of weakness to attack.

When they neared the Farnham settlement, an angry voice ordered them to leave these woods. Derena pulled her knife from its hip sheath, but instead of pointing it at the voice, she held the blade to her wrist. The voice fell silent, and Crista and Derena hiked on.

The Farnham settlement was built into the side of a hill, eight cement and wood houses beside a level plot of ground from which grew several massive oaks. Even though the noon sun beat down, only the barest ripple of sunlight fingered through the thick canopy. Crista's boots clicked over the rubble-cracked asphalt and dust of an ancient road, a reminder of long-gone times when a massive city occupied all these lands—and how millions died when that city was pulled down by hand, and claw, and tooth.

But such historic thoughts fled when Crista saw the hunters. Before Crista stood at least fifty men, women and children of the Farnham clan, with their clan leader—a massively muscled man with a white lion's mane of hair—in front. While they looked mostly human, Crista saw the pox's continued genetic manipulation. The eyes of all the hunters glowed with enhanced vision, while a number paced nervously from side to side as if cats instead of men. Many showed the stripes and fur of cat, wolf, and bear.

In the ruins of the old road sat a heavy wooden table holding food and drink. Obviously the clan desired to demonstrate hospitality to their unwanted visitors.

The white-maned clan leader stepped toward them. "I am Master Farnham," he said. "Welcome to our clanhold."

Derena laughed. "This is a first," she said. "No one ever welcomes my presence."

"We are all human, no matter our differences. Please, sit and talk."

Derena and Crista and Master Farnham sat down, with the plague bird and clan leader eying each other like animals sizing up who was prey, and who was hunt.

"I am here because there are rumors your clan has broken the agreed-upon laws," Derena said. "And not simply broken. Is it true you killed off clan Hereen?"

Several of the hunters watching them growled a low, wolverine-like warning. Master Farnham slammed his massive fist onto the wooden table to silence them, then apologized to Derena.

"They're not used to outsiders saying what we can or can not do," he said. "But our golden rule is to never attack or harass the villagers. We live as neighbors with them. We have broken none of your damn laws."

Derena leaned over to Master Farnham and whispered, "I think you have. One of your clan has meddled in village affairs."

Master Farnham's face tightened, and he roared for everyone to leave his sight. Many of the men and women and children hissed and muttered, and one young woman charged at Derena, causing the plague bird to pull her knife. Before the girl reached the table, Master Farnham jumped up and smashed her in the face with his powerful fist. The girl fell unconscious in the dust. "Take her to the house," he ordered as several wild-eyed young women dragged the girl away.

"My daughter," he explained as he sat back down beside Derena. "The pox gened her with my temper, and her mother's rage." He laughed at the joke, but fell silent when Derena didn't join in.

Master Farnham lowered his voice. "We are a good people. We keep to ourselves, and only attack if attacked. Clan Hereen raided the herbs we grow and the game we hunt. They even attacked one of my children. So yes, we killed them. But that is permitted."

Derena nodded, as if debating these people's crimes with a voice in her head. "But killing off an entire clan is extreme. Tell me: Is it true you spared their children and took them in?"

Master Farnham stroked his mane nervously. "Of course. Despite our genes, we're not animals. They will be raised as part of Clan Farnham. Do you wish to see the kids, to know they're being taken care of?"

Derena placed a red knife on the table. "No," she said. "I wish to know it."

Master Farnham stood up, knocking his chair to the dust and rubble. "Absolutely not," he bellowed. "We are a free people. We refuse to be sheep for any damn AI. We refuse to be judged on who is human by those without claim to humanity."

Derena didn't argue, but she picked the knife up and rested its tip gently against her arm. Crista remembered the histories Blue had shown her of the plague bird a century ago. How that man cut his artery, spurting an arch of blood which grew and grew until the villagers began dying.

*Flee! Flee! No talk. Flee!*

In animal panic, Crista jumped from the table, but her bad leg threw her onto the broken asphalt. Above her, Derena stared without emotion at Master Farnham.

"Are you going to make me beg?" Master Farnham asked, his face twitching as he fought for control.

"I'm going to judge you, or every member of your clan dies right now."

Master Farnham took a deep breath and extended his right hand to Derena. With a quick motion, Derena pricked her palm with the knife and grabbed Master Farnham's hand. Even though Derena moved too fast for Crista to see any blood, a slight buzzing ran her mind, just like when Blue reached into her. Crista remembered Blue's teachings about plague birds—how their blood contained an incredibly powerful AI which cared only for basic rules of right and wrong. As long as the AI was contained in a plague bird, it was harmless. But release it, and it rendered instant and deadly judgment on everyone nearby.

Master Farnham's eyes rolled as his massive body tensed and shook. Derena stared into nothingness for long seconds before releasing his hand, causing Master Farnham to collapse against the wooden table, gasping for breath as if he'd run a thousand miles. Derena wiped a slick of sweat off her forehead.

"I'm glad you told the truth," Derena said. "I will not punish your clan for the killings. But that leaves the matter of the person who meddled with village affairs."

Master Farnham started to speak, but something behind Derena caught his eye. He screamed "No!" as a young man with glowing eyes raced by Crista, a pistol in his hand, his whiskered face

as focused and intense as the panthers which hunted the village fields. The man raised the pistol to Derena and shot her in the back, a spray of blood exiting between her breasts.

Derena turned to her attacker, pain and fury on her face. She kicked the young man backward, then pointed at him and shouted, "Not them. Him. Only him."

For a moment the bloody mist in the air around Derena wavered, demanding more, before acquiescing and raining onto the young man. The air quivered to tears of justice as the man thrashed and screamed for mercy. But the AI gave none. It exploded the man's lungs into shreds of pink tissue, and ate its way through his brain—all while refusing to let him die. Finally, after a forever screech of pain, the man's body ripped in half from head to legs, and the cloud of blood returned to Derena's body. The bullet wound in her chest closed as if by magic, until only a puckered scar and a hole in her red shirt showed where the projectile had hit.

Master Farnham roared a deep lion's scream of anguish. He fell on all fours and pounded the broken pavement with his fists before finally regaining control. "The fool had it coming," he yelled at his clan folk. "You know the rules."

The hunters growled in fear, but they stared at the splash of blood and tissue soaking the ground and didn't attack. Master Farnham crawled over to Derena and kneeled before her. "Please forgive us," he whispered, his angry eyes glowing fire. "The boy wasn't thinking. He wanted to defend my honor, and forgot the consequences."

Derena nodded, and said the young man's actions wouldn't count against Master Farnham's clan. "But there is still the matter of the person who interfered with village affairs. I will return in two days to deal with that. I suggest you impress upon your people the need to avoid a repeat of this tragic affair."

With that, Derena walked back down the trail. Crista stared at the people around her as the hairs on her neck stood up. Several hunters held back Master Farnham's daughter, who had woken up and now howled in inhuman anger, fighting to reach and kill Crista. Suddenly deeply afraid, Crista picked up her crutch and hobbled after Derena.

Once they were clear of the forest and back on the old cement road, Derena sat down hard in the sunlight. She took the red knife and vest back from Crista and sighed. "That took a lot out of me," she said. "Keeping the AI from killing all those people."

"Did you have to kill that man?"

"I didn't want to, but if I hadn't given the AI someone who'd dared attack me directly, it would have gone berserk. With my body so weak, there are limits to how well I can control it."

"Must you go back there in two days? They'll be in an angry mood. Master Farnham might not be able to hold them back."

"It's worse than you know. That young man was Master Farnham's son. As we left, he was debating whether or not to give into his animal side and attack us, even if it meant the death of everyone he loved."

Crista glanced at the giant trees growing along the road as the breeze blew to the whisper and pad of angry animals.

#

Derena didn't hide herself from people's sight when they finally reached the village, causing Crista's neighbors and friends to stare at the woman in fear and shock. Crista led Derena to the house and helped her up the stairs to the guest room, where the plague bird collapsed into bed. She said she didn't want to be disturbed, then closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Not sure how to help the plague bird, Crista sought out her father, who was in the village barn with several of the elders, including Ms. Pauler. Crista told them what happened.

"The Farnham clan will kill us," Ms. Pauler whispered.

Crista's father shook his head. "I doubt they'll attack with a plague bird here. Still, it would be wise to post an armed watch tonight."

The other elders agreed, and began discussing plans for how to deal with the Farnham clan. Crista, knowing she was no longer needed, walked out of the barn.

Beu waited outside for her.

"Are you okay?" Beu asked. "I heard what you told the elders."

Crista smiled at Beu's concern, which etched so sincerely across his lean string-bean of a face. But she also saw the memory of Beu attacking her with animal hunger—of her blood spraying across that same lanky face. She cursed humanity for playing genetic gods so long ago, resulting in people so warm and human one moment, all animal and anger the next.

"I'm fine," Crista said. "But seeing that man torn apart by the AI ... forget what Blue showed us about plague birds. This was worse, far worse."

Beu reached out to hug Crista, jumping a low growl from Crista's throat. Beu stepped back cautiously. "There's nothing I can say to make up for what I did," he said. "And you're right to not trust me. It's becoming harder to stay in control. Sometimes I go running in the woods and know that's who I am. A hunter. Not a villager."

Crista gripped Beu's hands, causing a ripple of passion in his eyes which almost overwhelmed him. She also fought for control, shouting through her mind as animal impulses raced by. *Mate. Flee. Fight. Love.* She smelled the barest touch of last night's sex on Beu, and her thighs shook.

"Beu, I've always loved you, and you're a good man when you're in control. But every time I see your face, I remember what you did. I can't get past that."

"Maybe one day you will," Beu said hopefully.

"Maybe," Crista said. But even as she said the word, she remembered the anger which flashed in Master Farnham's eyes when Darena killed his son. Some things you couldn't put behind you, no matter how hard you tried.

#

The next morning, Darena stayed in her room, so Crista was free to do her chores. Even though her leg hurt from the previous day's hike, she and her father finished plowing their field and sowing it with modified wheat.

At noon, they sat in the shade of a giant oak beside the old road, eating beans and cold meat and talking about harvesting the quick growing wheat in a few months. Soon they fell to simply watching clouds scud the hot sky. That was how Blue found them.

"How goes the day?" Crista's father asked.

"Very well. The hunters don't appear to be planning an attack—at least, they are staying out of my sensing range. And the plague bird is sleeping. Restraining her AI drained Darena's body more than I realized."

Crista gazed at Blue's haze of consciousness, which bent the streaming sunlight into strange tints of rainbow colors. Blue almost seemed in a good mood, if an AI could be said to have moods. Then she remembered the rage in the plague bird's AI, and realized that yes indeed, these entities had all the moods they wanted.

"You desire to ask something," Blue stated.

"When Derena released her AI yesterday, it seemed so angry. But I've never seen you mad. Why is that AI so different?"

"We're all different, the same as humans."

"But why did people create something as evil as a plague bird's AI?"

Blue expanded outward until the AI's lights reached the top of the oak tree, before collapsing back to its normal cloudlet of haze. Crista had been around Blue enough to know that was its equivalent of a sigh.

"What I've taught the villagers about history is correct. But there's a difference between knowing something, and experiencing thousands of years of it. Humanity had changed beyond all recognition due to excessive genetic manipulation, resulting in insanity and chaos on a massive scale. So many human-animal hybrids were created without a care to what they brought to this world.

"To seek a return to order, one group of humans created empathic AIs like myself, to watch over and guide pockets of humanity back to your original ungened state. Others, seeking justice for perceived wrongs, created absolute AIs to dispense punishment. There were also the hybrid humans who liked their gened lives and didn't want to give them up. So a balance was created. The hunters could live their lives within certain constraints, while AIs like myself would attempt to return isolated segments of humanity to their original state."

"And the plague birds?" Crista asked.

"The only true balance is between three parts, so we needed the absolute AIs to enforce the agreement. But they are so harsh we couldn't trust them to freely roam the land. We placed them within the bodies of human volunteers, who keep control of the AIs' power. The plague birds restrain their AIs except when a judgment is needed."

Crista had never heard humanity's history explained in such stark terms. From the look on her father's face, he hadn't either. "Why are you telling us this?" she asked.

"Because trouble has entered our village. And while Derena has held her AI in for many centuries, her body is weakening. She won't be able to contain it much longer."

For a moment Crista didn't understand what she was hearing, but her father did. He jumped up and howled "No" in a scream ripped straight from his wolf genes. He grabbed Crista's hand and dragged her away from Blue, muttering "No, no, hell not no."

#

Crista's father calmed down before they reached home, but he refused to serve dinner to the plague bird. So Crista cooked a simple meal of eggs and rice and carried the plate to the guest bedroom. She knocked on the wooden door and Derena said enter.

The plague bird sat in the wicker chair Crista's mother had crafted in her dying days, as her pox-sickened genes turned against her body. Derena had the same look as her mom did then, exhausted and worn, but refusing to back down until the final, painful breath.

"Blue told you," she said. Not asking. Simply knowing.

"Yes. But why me?"

Derena smiled as she unbuttoned her red shirt to show the puckered scar where she'd been shot. "I haven't healed right," she said. "A century ago, a shot like that wouldn't have left a mark. Hell, the AI once healed me after my head got blown near off."

Crista felt a burn of pain shoot through her leg, and she wondered if the plague bird's AI could heal it. Maybe even end the other pains and fears and confusions which hit her every time she saw Beu's face.

"How old are you?"

"I've been carrying the AI for over two thousand years. Killed far more people than I need to remember. But I've also helped keep the peace, a simple fact I can live with."

Crista tried to imagine all the things this woman had seen in her time. For a moment, the thought of becoming a plague bird excited her—until she remembered the dead man from yesterday. She shook her head in disgust. "Again, why me?"

"Because I need someone who doesn't desire what I do. Someone who will fight the AI inside her. Only let it out when absolutely necessary."

"I'm sorry, but I won't do this."

Derena nodded sadly. "That's exactly why I want you. Still, it must be your choice. But you should know that if you don't do this, Beu will kill you."

Crista jumped back, a wolf growl in her throat. "What!?!"

"He loves you, yes, but his condition is rapidly regressing as his genes force him through changes Blue can no longer control. The problem, though, is that Beu obsesses on you. No matter how he fights it, he wants you. Blue is correct that one day, when Beuten Pauler's animal side gains more control, he will kill you."

"Then you must kill Beu."

"No. I only kill for the actions people do, not for what they may do. But Blue was right to call me here. If this isn't handled properly, many people—both villagers and hunters—will die."

#

That night, Crista stood among the newly planted furrows of her family's wheat field, leaning on her crutch as she kicked the dark soil with her good foot. Above, a quarter moon shone the clear sky, stirring the wolf inside Crista to excitement. She remembered Blue's history lessons—how human once walked on that milky world. She wondered if humans would ever do so again.

Crista heard a faint rustle from under the dark fence-line trees beside the field. She couldn't see anything, and wished she still had the gened eyes of her ancestors. The faintest of growls reached her as a black shape stepped from the trees and charged.

Crista stood calmly, refusing to flee.

Suddenly night turned to day. Above her Blue burned like a tiny sun, casting white-flicker shadows across the field and surrounding trees. Beu looked up in shock, clawing at his night eyes as he stumbled over the furrows. Crista dropped her crutch and grabbed the net at her feet and threw it over Beu as her father and Derena appeared next to her. Blue had blocked their sight and scent from Beu's senses.

"There's another," Derena said, pointing at the trees. In the beam of Blue's light Crista saw a hunter—Master Farnham's daughter, who'd tried to attack Derena the other day. The girl bolted, running amazingly fast, but other villagers appeared from where Blue had cloaked their presence and tackled her. She howled and bit and rolled, but they held her fast.

By the time Beu and the girl were dragged before Derena, Ms. Pauler had run to the scene. She fell to her knees before the plague bird. "Please," she pleaded. "He's still my son."

Derena shook her head. "He tried to attack Crista. Your own elders decreed if he did that again, the punishment was death. However, he's not the only culpable person here."

For the first time, Ms. Pauler noticed the hunter girl beside her son.

"It appears Master Farnham's daughter is interested in your son, Ms. Pauler," Derena said. "She's been encouraging his animal side. Pushing him to attack Crista. No doubt trying to remove a rival for his affections."

"Then my son isn't at fault," Ms Pauler said.

"Everyone's at fault," Derena said in a tired voice. "All that matters is who ends up dying."

#

Crista thought Derena would wait until morning to kill Beu and the hunter girl, but instead the plague bird demanded the villagers immediately drag the two of them to the Farnham settlement.

"Are you insane?" Crista's father yelled. "They barely control their animal sides during the daytime. They'll attack if we enter their land at night. And if that happens, we will also lose control."

Derena pulled a knife out and with the razor point picked at the puckered scar on her chest. The villagers glanced nervously at one another before binding the hands of Beu and the hunter girl and starting up the road. Crista watched them lead Beu away, relieved she no longer had to fear him, but also sad. Knowing what was about to happen, Beu called her name in a low, pitiful moan. He looked terrified, and Crista turned away as the wolf inside whined and begged her to free their friend and lover.

"You must also go," Blue said in her mind. "You must see this through to the end."

"If I watch Beu die, I don't know if I can keep control," she said.

"Trust me," Blue said. "You'll have control."

Crista nodded and hobbled on her crutch after the villagers.

#

Blue lit their way, a moving sun chasing off shadows. Derena could barely walk and leaned on Crista's father for support, more so when they entered the perfect black of the forest and wound their way up the hilly trail. Hunters howled and shrieked in the darkness, and every villager huddled close to the protection of Blue's light, fearful of both the hunters and their own reactions to the blood lust all around.

As they neared the settlement, the roaring voice of Master Farnham asked why his clan shouldn't kill them right now.

"We didn't want to come," Crista's father yelled back. "The plague bird forced us. She has your daughter."

Silence paused the night. Derena motioned for the villagers to continue.

When they reached the old road before the houses, Crista saw the hunters pacing back and forth in an agitated state. If they'd been scary in the daylight, now they were terrifying. Their eyes glowed fire to Blue's illumination, and their throats crackled in hungry growls and moans.

*Fight. Blood. Flee.*

Crista bit her lip to silence her instincts. She watched as Master Farnham stepped before them, a massive ceramic sword in his right hand. He leaned over his daughter, who sat in the dust and rubble of the road with her hands tied, and kissed her. He also sniffed Beu and nodded slightly before facing Derena.

"Law or not, you've no right invading our lands when the night has our blood up," he said.  
"Couldn't wait. My body won't restrain the AI for much longer."

Master Farnham's fierce face melted, and Crista scented fear rise from his body. Her father and the other villagers stepped away from the plague bird, while a few of the hunters fled into the darkness.

*Betrayal! Blood! Blood!*

Crista screamed as she realized what was about to happen. She grabbed her crutch and smashed it across plague bird's face, knocking Derena to the ground. "I won't do it," Crista yelled. "I won't be like you."

Derena nodded. "Like I said, the choice is always yours."

With that, Derena pulled a knife from its sheath and delicately cut her own throat, blood spraying in a fire-tracing arch. Crista froze in shock as the blood AI embraced its red freedom. Even Blue's illumination dimmed before the blood, as if the village AI feared what was to come.

Derena's head flopped dead onto the broken road, blank eyes staring at Crista. Crista knew she was being tricked, knew the game being played against her. But she also felt the rage rising from the blood AI as it licked its way around the hunters and villagers. She felt it caress Beu and the hunter girl. Saw it judge the worth of her father and Master Farnham.

*Flee!*

"No," Crista told herself. In a louder voice, she screamed, "No! Not them. Me!"

The blood AI turned, tasting her body, testing her resolve to defy its power, but she again ordered it to take her. Reluctantly, the AI complied, flowing into her skin and mouth and feasting on her blood. Crista fell to the broken asphalt and rolled in pain as the AI bound itself to her—gene to gene, atom to atom, blood to blood. She saw two thousand years of its judgments. Saw every human and AI condemned by this entity of purest right and wrong.

Desperate not to be overwhelmed, Crista fought back, aided by the wolf. She bit and tore into the AI, refusing to show throat, screaming that she was in charge, that there would be no judgments without her. Finally, they reached agreement. Wolf, and girl, and blood AI. Balance. A good balance.

*You'll do well,* the blood AI whispered in her mind. *You'll do well indeed.*

#

Crista woke to her father shaking her body, repeating her name over and over. However, she heard him as if listening to someone talking far across the fields they plowed each year. As if she controlled her body like the harness and reins controlled Eggbeater.

Crista stood up. The hunters and villagers stared with fear. Even Blue floated away from her.

Crista stretched her lame leg, which moved without pain for the first time since the attack. She walked over to Derena and pulled the red vest and shirt and trousers off the dead woman's body and dressed in the forbidden colors. She strapped the twin knives to her thighs and pulled one knife free. In the polished sheen of the blade, she saw her face. A glowing red line ran from her right eye to lips. Her hair burned brightest red.

She turned to Beu and the hunter girl. Ms. Pauler cried and tried to stop Crista, but Master Farnham held the woman back. However, instead of killing either Beu or the girl, Crista simply cut their bonds. She pointed the knife at Beu.

"You will never return to the village," she said. "You will live with Master Farnham's clan. Assuming Master Farnham has nothing to say against that, and lets the villagers return home in peace."

Master Farnham kneeled before Crista and thanked her, joined by a grateful Ms. Pauler. Beu and the hunter girl held hands and bowed. Beu looked at Crista with a mix of love and regret, but those emotions quickly fled as Crista allowed the blood AI to lick into him and whisper that this was his final chance. The urine tang of fear scented Beu's body.

Crista turned from Beu in disgust. It no longer mattered what he'd done to her—only what he did to others in the future. She looked at her father, whose tears streaked the dust in his beard. Right now she couldn't handle speaking even a single word with her father. Perhaps soon, but not now.

I don't want them seeing me, she thought. Instantly the AI rumbled her blood and reached out to the villagers and hunters. People glanced around nervously, trying to see where she'd gone.

Only Blue still saw her. Crista looked at the AI and saw past its deceiving cloud of light. Saw its consciousness extending into other dimensions and across time. Saw its overriding dedication to returning humanity to what they'd once been.

"There was no choice," Blue said softly. "If you'd stayed, Beu would have killed you, and we'd have to kill Beu. This way you both live."

The wolf growled. What right did Blue have to decide her fate like that? To calm Crista, the blood AI whispered a truth. In order for humanity to truly return to the way they'd been, AIs like Blue would have to cease being the protective gods of every village. When those days arrived, it would be as easy to kill Blue as for Crista's old body to crush an egg.

Blue sensed the blood AI's thoughts and shrank in fear from Crista. The blood AI laughed.

"I'll be keeping a close eye on the village," Crista told Blue. "Don't disappoint me."

With that she walked down the trail, the night scents mingling to the blood AI's whispers until she didn't care which part of her was human or wolf or hunt at all.

END