

MEDEA'S CHILDREN



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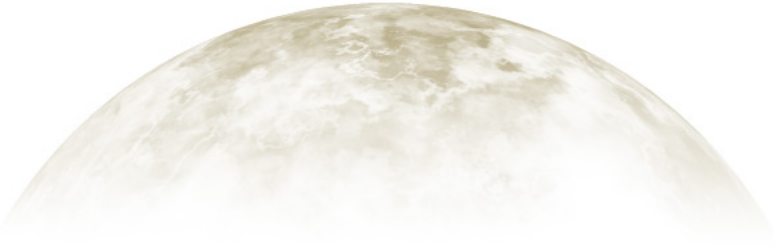
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Screaming Dreams



Anya watched the creature crawl across the dry, cracked earth, a trail of thick mucus staining the reddish-brown soil behind it. Finally, its strength gave out. It rolled slowly onto its back and stared up at her. Hatred glistened in its wet, reptilian eyes.

She had fired only once, but by now she knew exactly where to hit them. The creature's innards were leaking from the gaping hole in its torso, its organs already beginning to liquefy. It would not be long for this one. She had to be quick.

She holstered her pistol, her long leather coat snapping noisily in the buffeting wind, and crouched down close to it. But not too close.

"Where is my child?" she said, her voice flat, emotionless. "What have you done with my son?"

The creature tried to form a sneer but its body failed it. The muscles beneath the bark-like skin of its face were softening, its gimlet eyes sinking into the sockets.

"Where is my boy?" she said hurriedly, a vain last attempt.

The creature stopped trembling and its head lolled to one side. For a few moments, there was a steady gurgling sound from its throat, and then silence. Anya watched stonily as its slender limbs slowly collapsed in on themselves. Its face imploded, turning to mush. Then she saw pools of thick, cloudy liquid spreading out from beneath it. These things didn't bleed like humans. They simply returned to their essential state.

Water.

In less than a minute, the creature had become little more than a large shrivelled snakeskin, drying in the blistering sun. The pools of cloudy water soaked quickly into the soil, and the stain it made soon faded to nothing. When these things expired, they left behind nothing so environmentally-

unfriendly as bones or rotting flesh. Anya knew even the skin would disintegrate in an hour or two.

She let her head drop for a moment, as anger and frustration coursed through her. For an unknown time (weeks? months?) she had walked across the surface of this strange planet -- the place that was supposed to have been a new start for all of them, a new home -- seeking out these creatures, searching for answers.

Searching for her son.

But they would never tell. She felt so physically and emotionally exhausted that she would have cried, but Anya's days of crying were behind her. During her search, she'd become hard, as hard as the packed earth beneath her feet, and her single purpose had made her into a killing machine. A machine that would not stop until her son was found. She would find her boy, living or dead. And no tears would fall until that mission was complete.

She stood up and put the wide-brimmed hat back on her head to shield herself from the merciless sun. The presence of this rogue creature was a bad omen. Her odyssey across this unforgiving land had showed her that these things never came to the surface unless it was to attack. This meant that a human settlement was nearby. And sure enough, when she saw the column of twisting grey-black smoke rising up from beyond the horizon, a stab of icy dread touched her heart.

She found her canteen and drank the last few ounces of water from it, then began to trudge up the steady gradient. Behind her, the creature's skin smouldered in the afternoon heat.

She was thirteen when they left Earth, a child filled with mixed feelings of excitement and dread. Her parents assured her they were doing the right thing. They were pilgrims, as their ancestors had been long ago, sailing out across the ocean in search of a New World. Only this time, the New World was no metaphor. They were going to travel two hundred and thirty light years to a tiny planet called Medea, the only earth-like planet in the Hydra system.

The *Elysium*, the ship which had brought them to this distant world out beyond the Milky Way, was one of a fleet of twelve ships carrying hundreds of young families. The journey would take five years they were told; a small sacrifice for the adults, but for Anya, those five years had seen her turn from a child into a young woman. Earth became a memory.

According to the scientists, scans showed Medea to be rich in supplies of water, yet surprisingly devoid of any indigenous life. Or so it seemed. Their mistake was that they had only scanned the surface for carbon-based life-forms. In the vast water-filled caverns below the surface of Medea, something existed which had never had reason to visit the surface.

Until the ships arrived.

She stopped on the crest of the hill and looked down on the settlement. A painted metal sign, swinging lazily on a rusty hinge nearby, bore the legend: Barter Town. To the north-east she could see the skeletal remains of the colonial ship, *Odyssey*. Like the *Elysium*, the ship had been disassembled, every piece used to build the colony below.

This was always a one-way trip, she thought bitterly.

As always, the communal housing remained untouched. The Medeans came to kill, not plunder. Only the generator station had been attacked, the large dynamo uprooted and smashed into pieces. She realised with a stony feeling in her chest that they had found the gasoline store, too. The pall of black smoke which rose into the amethyst sky confirmed her worst fears. There, on the far side of the town, she found the mound of charred bodies, her eagle eyes picking out arms and legs from the smouldering stack . . .

Anya drifted through the silent town, looking for the smallest sign of hope for these people. But the spectre of death which hung over it left a hollow feeling in her gut. She knew from her own experience, that the Medeans were brutally efficient, leaving no one alive. And as she passed the chapel she saw the body of a Jack Russell dog, the town mascot, impaled on the spiked fence surrounding the churchyard. Despite her aching thirst, Anya took the time to remove the poor creature from the iron spikes and to lay it carefully on the dusty ground. When she stood up, a wave of nausea flooded through her and she stumbled against the fence.

You've got to eat, girl, she told herself. You need solid food, and fluids, too.

She grabbed the handle of the levee and pumped it a few times, before the glistening water began to run. After drinking deeply, she filled her three canteens. Then she studied the surrounding buildings, quickly locating the communal kitchen and food store.

The wind changed direction then, and the smell of charred human flesh -

a smell she had never dreamed she would know on this new planet, and one which she could never truly forget -- fell across the town. She looked across at the smouldering pile and made a promise to stop the fire somehow. That's what she had done many times before. Burying each and every one of them was a job that would take weeks and would probably rob her of every ounce of her strength. No, dousing the fire was the only humane thing she could do. And because of that she hated the Medeans all the more.

In the gathering dusk, Anya connected the hose to the levee, and began to douse the charnel pile. It took almost an hour to completely extinguish the fire, and during that time the sun had dwindled to a thin yellow ribbon on the horizon.

When her grisly task was done, she climbed a small hill and used her spyglass to try and locate Barter Town's main source of water. The surface of Medea was dotted with lakes of varying sizes, and every community had settled by two or more of these, what they termed 'watering holes'. These lakes were used for irrigation, but they were also gateways to the world below. She would find the Barter Town lakes, and once again she would attempt to penetrate the underwater caverns of Medea in search of her son. Even if it killed her.

But that would have to wait until morning. The dwindling light, and her mental and physical fatigue would ensure disaster were she to attempt such a mission now. And so she climbed up into the gallery loft of Barter Town's communal hall, and there, curled up under her coat, the exhaustion of three days walking finally took its toll . . .

As she slept, images and memories came to her of the life she had led before.

She saw the face of a boy in her dream. Jared Blake had been the same age as her, and all the girls on the *Elysium* had their eye on him. For five years he'd played the field, never settling with any one girl; and with his dark good looks, he could have had the pick of any of them.

But one night he came to her.

He had risked disturbing her parents by sneaking into their quarters, over-riding the security system and then slipping silently into her bed chamber. She had been afraid at first, but her young heart was beating so fast, burning for him. In the soft red glow of her cabin, she looked up into his face, his big brown eyes, and she had simply let herself go. It was her first time, but

he was gentle with her, and afterwards, she barely recalled any pain.

When the passion was over, he lay beside her and spoke in soft tones. He told her about the planet they were heading towards, about the Greek myth of Medea which he'd been studying in the *Elysium* classrooms; the tortured figure of a woman jilted by her husband, a man she had sacrificed everything for, and whose revenge upon him was to kill the only thing which he held dear - their own children. The planet Medea was named after her because its twin moons had been destroyed in an asteroid storm, sometime in the last millennium. Scientists believed that the destruction of those moons somehow transformed the atmospheric structure of Medea, making it capable of sustaining life. If it hadn't been for the destruction of those two moons, Jared said, they may not have had a New World to go to.

Out of death, there is always new life, he told her. It was a saying his scientist father used all the time.

She didn't know how long Jared stayed, but when she awoke next morning she was alone, and the empty space beside her was cold. Four weeks later, when she told him she was pregnant, he became cold too. Not long after that, he was dating other girls on the ship.

The baby came the first night after they landed on Medea, the first child born on the New World. Her parents delivered him in a makeshift tent, as the first buildings were still being constructed. Jared was not around. His family had moved to Miller's Gate, the second settlement nearby.

Jared only saw the child once. He was part of a troupe who came to attend the first of the monthly meetings. He saw her amongst the crowd and walked over. Their meeting was brief and awkward. He looked at the baby as though it were an alien.

"What's he called?" he asked stiffly.

"Malachi," she said. "After my father."

He reached out and smoothed the boy's downy hair. "He's mine?"

Anya had looked at him with such hatred then, and the force of her stare made him take a step back. When her anger had subsided, she said: "Actually, Jared, he's mine." Those words, spoken in petulance, told him everything else he needed to know, and he wandered away then, without even saying goodbye. There was a girl waiting for him in the deportation from Miller's Gate. She was pretty. They were always pretty.

Anya never saw him again.

The sound of feet running across hard-packed earth stirred her from her slumber. When she opened her eyes, the darkness was all-consuming, and for a moment she felt disorientated. Then she realised that night had fallen, and on Medea there was no moonlight. It was something she had never gotten used to.

She listened as the footsteps echoed around the settlement, and then ran to the large oval window in the gallery. As her eyes adjusted, she began to make out the shapes of the buildings below. Then she saw a shadow breaking from the greater darkness. It was a humanoid creature, but she couldn't see enough detail to decide if it was human or Medean. She knew that it was unlikely to be a survivor from this town. The Medeans didn't leave survivors.

The shadow slipped into one of the smaller buildings, the town eating house. Anya checked that her pistol was loaded and then headed down to the street.

She managed to make it to the rear of the eating house without the creature within noticing her presence. She peeked through one of the greasy windows at the rear of the kitchen and saw the figure rooting noisily through the cupboards. The silhouette indicated the figure was wearing some sort of bulky apparatus around its face, and she caught the flash of dull light on glass. The figure stopped its manic search and straightened up for a moment, bashing its head on an open drawer.

A man's voice said: "Shit!"

Anya felt the tension in her neck and shoulders melt away. But the knowledge that she was dealing with a man was not enough to let her guard drop completely. With her hand on her pistol, she moved to the rear door of the kitchens and pushed it open with a dry squeak.

The man whirled around and, in blind panic, pulled a short-bladed knife from his belt.

"Who's there?" he yelled, backing away. He reached up and snapped the bulky apparatus down over his eyes. A dim light came on, washing the shadows in a gentle green glow. She could see his eyes, exaggerated to twice their size in the green-tinted visor, and even through that distorted lens she knew who those beautiful eyes belonged to.

"A-Anya?" he said, lowering the pathetic homemade knife.

His hair fell loose on his shoulders in long, straggling curls. His once-hairless chin was now heavy with downy beard. He was still handsome.

"Hello, Jared," she said. "I thought you were dead."

He yanked the infra-red goggles from his head and a grin spread across his face. "I thought they got you too," he said. Then he looked past her, out into the night. "Maybe we are dead. Maybe this is hell."

In the dim light of a single lamp, Anya watched the father of her lost child go about the business of preparing hot food on the stove.

"D'you want me to make you something?" he asked. "I've got pasta and beans."

"I'm not hungry," she said, the smell of the charnel mound still lingering in her sinuses.

As he was stirring the beans, Anya noticed that the neckerchief he was wearing was hers. She'd given it to him as a love-gift after their solitary night of passion. A tangle of emotions flooded through her at the thought that he'd kept it. Despite the fact that he'd deserted her and treated her like shit, a part of her was pleased that he was still alive, and that they'd met up again. For so long now she had travelled across the planet alone. She wondered if he was as pleased to see her.

Jared made her up a plate of food anyway (his attempt at a peace offering, she supposed), but her appetite had not returned. She sat on a wooden cart at the rear of the building, her full plate untouched at her side, her nose buried in the town register. She wanted to know who had lived here in Barter Town, and consequently who had died in the massacre.

Had there been children in Barter Town? And how young had they been? Her eyes scanned the names in the dim light, tracing them across to their birth dates.

"Anya?"

She looked up expectantly. Jared was standing in the rear doorway, greedily shovelling beans into his mouth.

"I have to ask," he said. "Where's the kid?"

She stared at him for a few moments, wondering how best to answer that question. "Do you care?" she said.

Jared stopped chewing, and his shoulders sagged. "Of course I care, Anya."

"Your actions say differently, Jared. From the moment I told you I was pregnant, you didn't want to know me. The only time you ever asked me about 'the kid' was to ask me his name." She narrowed her gaze at him. "I bet you can't even remember it."

Jared looked away into the dim horizon. After a long silence, he said: "Malachi."

She dropped her own gaze now, ashamed at having been so spiteful. She had to remind herself that he deserved it.

"He's dead," Jared said suddenly, turning to face her again. "Isn't he?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"You don't know?" he said, incredulous.

"The Medeans took him," she snapped.

There was an awkward silence. "Oh, God," he whispered. "When?"

She felt suddenly weak, the way she always felt when she recalled what happened to her boy. "The night of the massacre. The night they came out of the dark and killed everyone in the settlement." She paused, looking at Jared with lamplight reflected in her eyes. "Well, almost everyone . . ."

Three days after the *Elysium* landed on Medea, the New World, when the settlers had divided into three townships, when they were exhausted from the toil of making the place fit for human habitation, the planet Medea threw up its deepest, darkest secret.

In the middle of that terrible night, Anya had been awakened by the grizzling of her baby. She sat in the old rocking chair by his cot and put him to her breast. Dozing in that place which lies somewhere between waking and sleeping, she listened to her son's suckling noises and the steady rumble of her parents' snoring. When Malachi had fed and had fallen back to sleep, she tucked him up in his cot and was about to return to bed when she heard the dog barking.

She put on her dressing gown and stepped out into the humid night. The old Alsatian, Sheba, which had been tethered near the town's front gate, went suddenly silent. A horrible wind gusted across the main street, raising the hairs on Anya's neck.

Then she saw the shapes emerging from the darkness, black human-shaped things over eight feet tall. There must have been forty, maybe fifty of them advancing towards the dwellings in utter silence. Such an awful, deadly silence. Standing in the open, Anya became paralysed, watching mutely as some of the shapes broke off from the main group, slipping into the unlocked dwellings. Who would have thought to lock their doors?

Then, too late, she realised that the sudden gust of hot breath on her neck was not the wind, but the breath of something dark and powerful. She turned,

not wanting to see, but needing to know, and found herself staring into the face of her darkest nightmares, a face made up of unreasoning hate and mindless violent intent.

With a hand that was more a club with long bony talons, the beast struck her a round-house blow that sent her up and back into the air. She remembered expecting the ground to rush up and knock the wind from her, but there was a longer fall. She crashed through the wooden doors of the underground rations store, tumbling painfully down the steps into the all-consuming dark. She was unconscious for an unknown time, but when she awoke again, consumed by pain, she was aware of the sounds of hell coming from above. Screams, both human and inhuman, filled the night. Young men, old men, women, children . . .

Her survival instinct told her to stay put, that these foul creatures had somehow forgotten her down in here in the dark. She could stay hidden and survive the massacre taking place above. But she was also a new mother, and the instinct to save her newborn child was too strong. When she tried to get up, the pain was many-layered, but most severe in her jaw -- which she suspected was fractured -- and her lower back where she had connected with the steps in her long fall. But she managed to get to her feet and to stumble up to the edge of the store opening, where she was awarded a worm's-eye view of the town.

Much of the screaming had stopped now, and she watched wide-eyed as the army of creatures dragged their human victims by the feet, away through the town gates and into the night. She scrambled through the dirt to the rear door of her own dwelling. Once inside, she threw back the curtain that stood in for a doorway to her parents bedroom. Their bed was empty. But its stark white sheets were spattered with patches of dark red. Her breath hitched in her throat.

My baby!

She stumbled down the hall to her own room, but before she reached the cot, her progress was halted by the ominous black shape dominating the confined space. The lone Medean stared back at her from the other side of her baby's cot, cradling her young son in its bristling, bark-like arms. Its green-grey eyes stared out of the shadows at her like beacons of hate. It growled, the purr of a deadly tiger. But there was something different about this one. A mass of twisted antler-like protrusions jutted from the top of its head, resembling an organic, biological crown. This, she realised, could be their

leader.

She forced her terror to the back of her mind. Her only thought was for Malachi, a three-day-old boy, cradled in the arms of an unimaginable beast, a beast that could kill at any instant. She took a trembling step forward, her arms outstretched.

"My baby," she said, the pain in her jaw flaring with each word. "Don't hurt him, I beg you."

The creature's left arm shot out, grabbing Anya around the throat. She went limp as it lifted her off the floor. It stared at her, curiously at first, and then its eyes narrowed to slits. She stared back wide-eyed as its maw opened, a dark, gaping hole thick with mucus and sabre-like teeth. And from the heart of that darkness, a projectile shot out and buried itself in her cheek. Immediately she felt a numbness spreading through her face and neck. The creature released its grip and let her drop to the floor like a useless doll.

She coughed, bringing up a gob of thick phlegm. Her already fractured jaw was now fused together, her throat paralysed. "Don't," she said, through gritted teeth. "Don't hurt my baby."

The monster stared down at her for a moment -- a flash of pity in its inhuman eyes? -- and then stepped over her in one long stride. The last thing she heard was the thin wail of her baby boy as he was carried away into the night . . .

"And you think he's still alive?" Jared said.

Anya fixed him with a steady glare. "Yes. I believe he is."

Jared shook his head. "Anya, the odds of Malachi still being alive are--"

"I don't work by odds, Jared," she said. "I go by maternal instinct, and I believe Malachi is alive somewhere on this godforsaken planet."

"But, Anya, the Medeans are animals. They paralyse their victims so that they're helpless against them, then they slit their throats, pile them high and set them on fire. What makes you believe they would treat a child any different?"

"Because he wasn't in the funeral pyre," she said abruptly.

"What?"

Anya looked away guiltily. "I never found his body."

A cramp of horror passed over Jared's face. "Jesus, Anya, are you telling me you searched through every one, every corpse?"

Anya threw the heavy town register down in the dirt and stalked away

from the building.

Jared stared after her, his mouth still hanging open. She stopped at the edge of the lamp's glow and crossed her arms, her back to him. Her shoulders trembled with the effort of fighting back tears. He got up and went over to her, but as much as she may have wanted him to, he never put his arm around her.

"Anya," he said softly. "You've been walking these plains for I don't know how long, searching for a boy who's probably dead. You have to stop looking, Anya. Stop holding on to false hope. Look at the bright side. Every settlement the Medeans have attacked, not a single person has survived -- except you."

"What about you?" she said. "You're still alive."

Jared offered a grim smile. "Only because I wasn't there the night they attacked my town. Simple chance, that's all."

Anya shook her head. "Then why was I spared, Jared? I should've been slaughtered with everyone else, but for some reason . . . I was spared."

They stood in silence for a while. Then Jared did touch her, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Listen to me, Anya. I managed to send some distress signals from the *Elysium* to the way station at Libra-Nova. I told them about the Medeans, about the massacres, and the need to abandon this so-called New World, to get us off this blasted planet. Now, I don't know if they got my messages, but if they did, and if they sent the rescue ships immediately, they should be here any day now. The best thing that you and I can do is to be at the pick-up point when they arrive. They won't come looking for us, I can tell you that, Anya. I say we gather what we can, head for the rescue station and wait." He grimaced. "Let's not waste this time chasing after ghosts."

Anya stiffened, and moved away from his grip. "I have to believe that he's still alive, Jared. I have to know one way or the other. Because, if he is alive, if he is down there with those monsters, I'm his only hope."

Jared exhaled sharply, shaking his head. Anya turned away from him, looking out into the darkness beyond the settlement.

"There's an entry hole at the bottom of each lake," she said. "I've tried swimming to the bottom of every lake I've come to, but when you get near the hole, there's a pressure, too powerful, I can't break through it."

"My God, Anya! You actually tried to enter the underground caverns? That would have been suicide!"

She looked back at him. "Jared, when the sun comes up, I'm going down there. You can either help me, or stay out of my way."

She managed to snatch a few hours sleep in the galley, but her dreams were dark and turbulent and left her with a hollow sensation when she awoke.

A plate of simple sandwiches had been left beside her makeshift bed. She glanced around, but there was no sign of Jared.

Part of her expected him to leave before morning; after all, it wasn't the first time he'd abandoned her. But it still hurt.

Weighed down by the pressure of going on alone, Anya gathered her belongings and made her way out through the rear door of the kitchens. She stopped and took in the flare of sunlight edging over the horizon.

"I never understood how she could do it."

Anya flinched.

Jared was sitting on a bench near the back wall, staring at an arrow-like object in his hands. A large maroon duffle bag rested in the dirt by his feet.

"Okay, I know she was pissed off at her husband," he went on, "but to murder her own children?"

Anya realised what he was referring to. "Medea? No, I never understood that. No mother could do that to a child."

Jared's smile faltered. "Do you really believe the Medeans would spare Malachi's life, Anya?"

"Yes," she replied.

"I think you're risking your life for nothing, Anya. Every fibre of my being tells me that Malachi's dead."

"Then how come every fibre of *my* being tells me he isn't?" she snapped back.

After an uneasy silence, Anya gestured at the object in his hands. "What is that?"

"Harpoon gun. It should help you get past the pressure wall." He picked up the duffle bag and pulled out a small yellow canister. "I found a few depth charges as well. The engineers used them to set up the irrigation systems. There's also a diving mask. The oxygen canister should give you about twenty minutes."

Anya walked over to him and placed her palm against his cheek.

"Thank you," she said.

The Barter Town lakes lay within half a mile of the settlement, two glistening oval ponds sheltered by a series of jagged hills. Irrigation pipes, disguised by crude open trenches, reached into the placid waters of both lakes. Like every other settlement, one lake brought fresh water into the camp, the other was used for waste. Jared and Anya saw how the pipes leading to the waste water lake had been pulled up from the trench and ripped into ragged pieces. Anya tried to imagine the power it must have taken to do that with bare hands . . .

Stopping at the water's edge, Anya took the bag off her shoulder and handed it to Jared. She removed her long leather coat, her boots and pistols. The guns would be no use after the swim, anyway. Jared handed her the oxygen mask, and she strapped the cylinder to her back. Then she took hold of the harpoon gun. Jared held out a handful of depth charges, but Anya shook her head.

"I won't be needing them," she told him. "I'm bringing Malachi back alive."

Jared pulled out his pocket knife. "At least take this with you," he said.

Anya looked at the puny blade.

"Please," he said. "It may come in handy."

She nodded, tucking the tiny knife into her trouser pocket.

After an awkward silence, Anya said, "You will wait for me, won't you?"

Jared sighed heavily. "If you're not back in twenty minutes -- when that gas canister runs out -- I start for the rescue point."

She studied his face, trying to fathom how someone so beautiful could be so cold.

"I'm a pragmatist, Anya."

"No, you're not. You're selfish, Jared. He's your son, too."

He had no answer for that, could only stare back at her impotently.

Anya looked down at her reflection for a moment, then jumped into the glistening silver water.

The lake was a large bowl in the earth, and along its bed lay a kaleidoscope of brightly coloured plant life. Her eyes were drawn to a dark shadow near its centre, a steady stream of bubbles drifting out of the gloom.

Anya kicked steadily down towards it, but as she neared the hole, she felt the familiar push of pressure against her. Despite her greatest efforts, her progress quickly came to a halt. She raised the harpoon gun to her eye, aiming at the dark circle below. One bolt. She couldn't afford to make a mistake.

Oxygen was limited. Time was short.

She fired. The tiny harpoon sailed into the darkness, its rope tail straggling behind it. Suddenly, the rope went taut and she gripped it, wrapping it twice around her wrist. Then, with slow dexterous moves, she began to pull herself downwards, hand over hand, until she found herself at the lip of the circular pit. The pressure had eased off, and she was able to rest for a moment. She peered down into the darkness. This was the entrance to a narrow tunnel, a crawlspace that had no visible end. The idea of descending into an impenetrable underwater darkness made her shiver. But she had no time for doubts. So she gripped the edges of the aperture, and with a strong kick, sent herself headfirst into the mystery.

She was immediately plunged into total darkness. Her outstretched arms could just about touch the rough sides of the tunnel, but as she descended, she saw no glimmer of light below. Then--

Dark hands reached out of the blackness and seized her wrists. Her oxygen mask was ripped away from her face. She shrieked, a ragged stream of bubbles escaping from her mouth. She had no idea how many were pulling her -- it felt like two, maybe three - but even though they were only inches from her face, she couldn't make out even the scantest detail. She fought against them, but her breath was all gone now. They continued to drag her down into their world. Panic filled her mind and body. She bucked wildly, but still they held fast. Before long, everything became misty and cold. She was forced to inhale, and cold liquid filled her lungs.

She knew no more.

She awoke gradually, over time, the fabric of her dreams pulling apart to reveal a waking nightmare . . .

She felt the invasion of her body first. The long, slender limb which had forced its way down her oesophagus further than anything should ever go. Her brain panicked and her natural impulse was to try and breathe through her nose, but when she tried, she found her nasal passages filled with water. Thinking she was going to drown, Anya began to thrash her limbs, only to find that they were bound by writhing vine-like tentacles just like the one in her throat. Her panic reached a crescendo, and then she forced herself to relax, to fight the involuntary instincts of her body. When she finally stopped struggling, she found that she could breathe. The vine which had secured itself to the insides of her throat was acting like some kind of life-support,

providing oxygen directly to her lungs. Stranger still was the realisation that she had no urge to exhale. She floated silently for a while, her body relaxing, and for those few moments, she remembered what it was like to be inside the womb.

She began to study her surroundings. She was at the bottom of an immense water-filled cavern. The ceiling was some fifty feet above her, lost in shadow, but she could just make out a tiny circle of light way up there in the darkness, perhaps the entrance through which she'd been dragged. The scale of this vast chamber instilled a humility in her that she had only felt once before: when the planet Medea loomed up in the observation blisters of the *Elysium*. So vast, so beautiful, and yet so terrifying.

Her eyes, growing steadily more accustomed to the dim light, fell upon the sloping walls of the chamber. Every inch was encrusted with thousands of dark green sacs. In each of these pods she could see the embryonic figure of a Medean.

Babies, she said to herself. Thousands of babies . . .

The cavern was a vast womb.

She looked down and found that the entire floor was a mass of writhing, swaying vines. A number of these powerful limbs held her suspended about six feet above the floor. Where they gripped her, she felt a pulsing sensation within them. They were alive . . .

She is awake

The words sounded in her head, a thousand voices speaking at once, and although she understood the sentiment, she also knew that they were speaking an alien language. The vines which held her somehow acted as a conduit of understanding, a translator.

She felt a disturbance in the water behind her.

Turn to me

The mighty vines turned her carefully 180-degrees in the water. A large organic construction lay directly ahead, with walls made up of many slender vines. They began to part, and inside, Anya saw a huge chair -- a throne -- that had been carved out of the rock. In the throne sat the forbidding form of a Medean, one that looked different from all the rest.

Anya's heart burned with recognition.

This was the one, the creature that took her boy.

The queen.

Surrounding the throne, floating deftly in the murky waters, were dozens

of adult Medeans, their cruel white eyes glinting in the dark like candles.

How could she have been so stupid to come down here, unarmed, into this lion's den? Perhaps Jared had been right to try and make her see sense. But, she wondered, if they were going to simply kill her, wouldn't they have done so already?

The queen rose from her chair, gliding effortlessly through the water towards her. Helpless, Anya could only watch as she loomed up in front of her and stopped. They studied each other. Anya's eyes wandered over the queen's magnificent torso. Every inch of her seemed to be covered in seed pods, a detail she had missed on that night long ago. And upon her head, that bizarre crown, like tree roots rising from its skull.

And then those eyes, that cold malevolence. She could never forget them. But hadn't she also seen compassion there on that black night?

The Medean queen spoke inside her head: "One with the Medeans are you. As one with the planet am I."

Anya shivered, knowing that she was somehow joined to these creatures. "Why have you come here?" the queen asked.

Anya focused her mind on sending her words through thought. To her surprise, it happened with very little effort at all. "To find my son," Anya said. "Don't you remember me? You took my boy away."

"*Boy?* What is *boy?*"

In a surge of understanding, Anya knew that the Medeans were entirely female. *Boy* was meaningless to them.

"Baby," she corrected. "Child."

The queen nodded. "Offspring. Yes. I remember this."

"Is he . . ." Anya's mind-voice faltered as she found herself overcome with emotion. "Is he alive?"

The queen gave her a curious side-long glance. "The child is here," it said quizzically.

"But is he alive?" Anya insisted.

The queen simply stared at her. Then: "The child is one with us now. Can you not feel it?"

Repressing her emotions, Anya forced herself to concentrate, to send her thoughts out into the vast collective conscience of the Medeans.

Her eyes roamed over the vast chamber, passing the endless tiers of protective sacs lining the cavern walls, and all at once she felt their collective subconscious. There was much peace there, a gentle undisturbed slumbering,

and then a sharp dagger of pain in her mind. These infant Medeans had suffered greatly in recent times. She sensed a poison that had invaded their systems, had killed many of their siblings and damaged even more of those still sleeping here. Unable to ignore this pain, unable to continue searching for her son, Anya turned back to the queen.

“What has happened to your own children?” she asked. “They have suffered . . .”

The queen’s eyes narrowed. “You do not know?”

Anya stared back impotently.

“In those few days after you descended from the skies, your people killed a great many offspring.”

Anya shook her head in disbelief. “But how?”

“The filth that you poured down into our lakes corrupted the precious waters around us.” The queen waved her majestic fingers. “The gases you created with your machines polluted our sky. Even your breath is poison. You inhale our good air and turn it into black toxins when you exhale. We saw that you cared little for our survival, for our children. The only way we could protect our young was to stop the poison at its source.”

“That’s why you attacked us?”

The queen nodded. There was no remorse there, and in some crazy way, Anya understood why. This creature -- this queen -- had simply set out to protect her young from a malevolent force. The disease of humans.

Anya said, “But if your goal was to wipe us out, why did you take my child?”

Suddenly, with one mighty kick, the queen arced away from Anya and soared up into the vast open cavern. She approached the bank of sacs on the wall about halfway up, and Anya saw her pluck one of the infants from its resting place. She descended back to Anya with incredible speed and grace.

There, cradled in her arms, was Malachi.

Anya’s body trembled. Malachi, her beautiful boy! All she wanted to do was snatch him up in her own arms, to pull his tiny body to her breast, but the vines held her fast. She studied Malachi’s sleeping form, noticing how his skin had turned a pale green. He didn’t appear to be breathing, either. No bubbles of air escaped from his tiny mouth. For all she knew he could have been dead, but she felt a sudden surge of her own maternal bond, filtering through the Medeans’ consciousness.

“Please, give me back my child,” Anya said. “We will leave.”

“You cannot take your child from this place. He is one with us now, he breathes as we breathe. If you take him to the surface he may die.”

“But why would you do this? Why did you bring him here?”

“For the same reason that I let you live. A test.”

“Test?” Anya said. “What test?”

Just then, a shadow passed over them. A brief flicker in the shaft of light which speared down into this well of darkness. She looked up. The tiny yellow canister tumbled slowly through the water above them, gliding gracefully down towards the bank of protective sacs. The queen saw it, too, but if there was anything she could have done to stop it, it was too late.

The canister exploded in an ellipse of white light. The shock wave ripped into the wall, bursting dozens of the protective sacs, and spilling their ruined contents out into the surrounding water. A dagger of pain sliced through Anya’s brain as the queen convulsed, throwing her arms wide and sending Malachi sailing out into the open water. The army of adult Medeans gathered around their queen and, as one, they soared up towards to the damaged sacs. In the midst of their maternal fears, they had forgotten about Anya. She watched as Malachi dropped slowly to the cavern floor, the vines reaching out and taking him gently into their embrace.

In the agony and confusion, Anya felt the invading vine slacken its grip on the inside of her throat. Realising this could be her only chance to free herself, she seized the tentacle with both hands and yanked it with all her might. To her amazement and total relief, it came free, although not without pain. She felt a sharp tearing sensation deep within her lungs, and as the end of the vine exited her mouth, a puff of pink swirled from her mouth.

She had a sudden surge of panic, as she realised that without the breathing vine, she might drown. Her lungs felt filled with oxygen right now, but she had no idea how long it would last. She had to be quick.

She dropped down towards the bed of vines, and reached in to pull Malachi free. But as she had guessed, their hold was too powerful. She pulled Jared’s short-bladed knife from her waistband and began to slash at the snake-like limbs. Milky liquid spilled out into the water, clouding her vision for a moment. Blindly, she reached in and slid her hands around Malachi’s tiny body. When she pulled him to her, she still found resistance. As the milky cloud dissipated, she saw that one of the vine-like tubes had slipped into his throat. Without hesitation, she slashed at it, cutting it cleanly about six inches from Malachi’s lips. It shrivelled and fell away. The boy stirred

then, and his eyes opened, wild and frightened in the gathering gloom.

His eyes were green.

Hiding her dismay, Anya tried to focus her mind on getting them out. She looked up and saw that the exit above was blocked off. The queen and her soldiers were gathered around the damaged sacs. Even though she had been separated from the vine -- and the psychic connection to the Medeans -- she still felt their maternal pain. She secretly thanked Jared for his intervention, but the pain of losing a child was not lost on her. The queen thrust an arm towards the surface, and as one, the adult Medeans headed for the opening at the top of their vast hall.

Anya spotted a narrow tunnel entrance near the bottom of the cavern wall. If she was correct in her assumptions, that tunnel would lead to the secondary lake above. Clutching her baby to her breast, Anya swam towards it with all her remaining strength.

When she broke the surface, Anya's lungs were burning. She gasped at the air greedily, and with each breath she felt a spear of pain in her chest.

After scrambling to the water's edge, she was relieved to find she was at the lip of the smaller pool. A jagged wall of rock separated her from the larger pool, the one she had entered, and where she could now see Jared standing at the water's edge. He was holding a second depth charge in his hand. A pack of adult Medeans suddenly broke the surface of the lake only feet away from him, crawling from the water like giant crabs. Jared began backing up, holding the canister above his head in a warding-off gesture. He backed up to a small hill which rose out of the earth like a miniature pyramid, and hastily scrambled to the top. The Medeans quickly encircled the bottom of the hill, and Anya realised that he had nowhere left to go.

Anya was trying to figure out how she could let Jared know she was free when Malachi did the job for her. As his lungs filled with oxygen for the first time in weeks, he let out a piercing cry. Anya saw the air working on him, the green tint in his skin beginning to fade. It would be a little while before he was totally re-accustomed to breathing normal air, but for now, he seemed to be coping better than the Medean queen had led her to believe.

Jared heard his son's cry and turned to see Anya stumbling from the smaller pool. Unfortunately, the Medeans heard it too. Several of them turned and glowered at her. Three of them broke away from the pack, heading directly for her. Anya suddenly realised how defenceless they were.

The Medeans would tear them apart.

Jared stood up. "Hey!" he cried. He picked up a handful of stones and threw them at the retreating Medeans. They stopped, looked back at him.

Now that he had their complete attention, he looked at Anya, a grim smile darkening his handsome features. She knew what he was going to do, even before he raised the depth charge above his head.

Anya wanted to cry out, to tell him to stop, but she could see the look on his face. There was no alternative. Out of death, comes life. Wasn't that what he once told her? If she was going to escape with her son -- *their* son -- he would have to give up his own life. He nodded to her, a gesture which spoke volumes across that dusty alien landscape, and then he pulled the pin.

The explosion was thin and unspectacular, ripping through the army of Medeans as if they were water-filled scarecrows, tearing them into strands of grey-green matter. The thick mucus-like water that made up so much of their bodies decorated the terrain surrounding the hill. When the clouds of smoke dissipated, there was no trace of Jared.

"Oh, Jared," she whispered.

All around her, the vital liquids of the massacred Medeans bubbled and hissed as they were absorbed back into the soil.

Anya looked into the middle distance, her eye distracted by a flash of light in the azure sky. Just above the horizon, she saw a ship circling, coming into land.

"Look, Malachi. The rescue ship!"

She couldn't be certain, but the craft seemed to alter its course slightly, swooping around in her direction. Perhaps they had seen the flash of the explosion. Perhaps. She felt a laugh bubble up within her. If she started walking now, she would be at the pickup point in less than an hour. She would make it, she told herself. She would not let Jared's sacrifice be in vain.

She was about to start walking when she sensed a ripple in the pool behind her. She turned and found the Medean queen standing waist-deep in the water. In her arms she was holding the remains of one of her slaughtered children. She let out an anguished cry which echoed across the open plain.

Then the great matriarch stared at her malevolently. She appeared to be communicating a single thought to her.

In that moment, Anya understood everything. The reason she'd taken Malachi alive. The reason she'd spared Anya's life . . .

It was a test. In her perverted way, the queen had wanted to see if Anya

would come after her child. And, against all odds, Anya had passed the test. Maternal instinct, it seemed, was the only thing which humans and Medeans had in common.

Slowly, the queen began to retreat back into the silver waters, her eyes fixed on Anya until her face, and then the ornate crown, slipped from view.

In the empty silence, Anya pressed Malachi's cheek against her own, savouring the sensation of skin on skin, a pleasure she had been deprived of for so long. Moments later, she felt the bitter sting of tears in her eyes. There was no need to fight them back any more. Her mission was over.

Anya turned away from the glistening lake, her little boy pressed tight against her, and began the long walk to the rescue point. And as she walked, her tears fell, leaving a momentary trail in the dusty soil, before being absorbed into the planet.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Moan lives on the south coast of England with his wife and four children. His stories have appeared in numerous print and online publications, most recently in the final issue of *Whispers of Wickedness*, *Murky Depths*, *Jupiter SE*, *Arkham Tales* and the Permuted Press anthology *Best New Tales of the Apocalypse*. His novella, *The Hotel Galileo*, is due to be published by Wolfsinger Press, Summer 2009.

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