

ISLE OF ILLUSION

by

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Metae chanted in time as, hand over hand, she hauled in her fishline. The small boat rocked with her steady pulls. This was her seventh catch of the day, and from the weight of it she suspected she had another fine-sized taape on her hook. She grinned as she envisioned her Uncle Taggart's sour expression when told of her success. He did not approve of her fishing the icy, winter seas along with the men. Just as he did not approve of much that she did.

"It is unfitting," he had snapped that very morning, "that a young woman, the heir to Komlin Keep, should dress like a commoner and place herself at risk on the open sea. When your Aunt Kelana drowned years ago, she caused chaos in the realm."

It wasn't Kelana who had caused the chaos, Metae thought. Aloud, she said, "I'm perfectly safe, Uncle. I've fished since I was a child. My father insisted I learn. *He* was not unwilling to go among the commoners."

Taggart's expression had grown hard then, and he turned away as he always did when she spoke of her father. Twenty years before, after their elder sister had disappeared into the sea, the twin brothers had fought over leadership of the isolated hold. Metae's father had won. But now he, too, was gone, and her uncle reigned as regent until Metae was old enough to take the leadership herself. Taggart was a

harsh and bitter man and Metae was not the only one eager for the next few months to pass.

Metae grinned. For all his complaints, Taggart had not stopped her from joining the fishing fleet, and now, sitting alone in the cold wind and spray, working hard with her hands, she knew she had the right of it. How better to prepare for leadership than to live in the way of her people?

The wind shifted suddenly, causing the boat to jerk from its rhythm. Quickly, Metae tossed the fishline to where she could hold it with her foot, and reached for the oars. She must turn into the wind. Her move came too late! An erratic wave lifted the tiny vessel high and Metae was forced to grab the gunwale with both hands to keep from being thrown overboard.

"Gunnora, protect me!" she cried as the wind whistled in her ears and the fury of the waves rose. Her foot slipped and the unprotected fishline tangled around her ankles as it started sliding back into the sea. Only her full weight kept it from pulling her overboard. The slate gray sky dissolved into inky green and Metae detected the foul smell of evil in the air. This was no ordinary storm. The stench, along with the surging sea, set her stomach to churning along with the waves.

Her heavy woolen jacket and leather breeches and boots were little protection against the unearthly cold. She flinched as ice, formed of the salt spray, struck at her like flying needles. More ice slicked the edges of the boat.

Am I to die here? she wondered. *Am I to drown in these frigid waters like my aunt before me?* She envisioned her body washing ashore with ice clogging her lungs; or, like her aunt's before her, disappearing forever into the cold Komlin sea.

Then Metae remembered that she was not alone on the sea. Others of the Komlin fishing fleet had been scattered across the waters as they followed the taape schools. It was not likely any of them had more warning than she of the

coming storm. All must have been caught unaware. The men would be fighting now for their very lives. Her own peril seemed less important in her concern for her people.

Uncle Taggart will be well pleased with this day's catch, she thought bitterly. Not only would her own death place the Keep firmly in his hands at last, but the most loyal of her followers would be removed from his concern as well.

A huge wave swept across the gunwale, tearing Metae from her hold and smashing her down onto the tangles of fishline. Another great wave washed over the boat and swept her and all else that was loose into the sea.

Metae tried to kick off her heavy boots and to disentangle herself from the line, but she was tossed so violently in the waves that she was unable to do either. She was pulled beneath the waves, swallowing icy brine. Then she was thrown again to the surface, caught in a rough, powerful current.

Exhaustion and the cold could not be denied long in the icy water, and though she struggled against it, Metae soon admitted that she was lost. She welcomed unconsciousness, for it hid the evil green clouds that blanketed the sky.

I'm hot!

Metae's first conscious thought convinced her that she had indeed drowned in the storm. Never had such moist and luscious heat as now touched her skin existed in the harsh lands bordering the northern sea. Never could it have. She lay unmoving, satisfied that in death she was at least, and at last, warm.

"You'll fry like a lanagoot's egg if you stay in the sun much longer."

The unexpected voice made Metae jump. A ripple of pain shimmered through her bruised and strained muscles.

"Mother of Min," she moaned ruefully, "I'm alive." She forced her eyes open. Then instantly squeezed them shut again to keep out the glare.

“Oooh! What is this place? I am blinded!” She tried to move again. “Oooow!”

“Tsssk! You even sound like a lanagoot.”

Metae coughed and forced back tears. She was terrified to look up and see who the owner of this strange voice was. The storm had been no natural one and who knew what monstrous things might have been brought to life by its passing.

“Get up, youngster—if youngster you be,” the voice said. “I’ll help you into the shade.” Metae felt hands tugging at her sore shoulders and she forced herself up onto her knees as much to avoid the pain as to follow the voice’s order. She waited for the dizziness to stop, then opened her eyes and tried to stand.

She promptly landed back in the sand with a painful thump. Her ankles were tied together! Frantically, Metae jerked away from the old woman who leaned over her, thinking it must have been she who had bound her legs.

“Humph,” said her wizened companion. “You come trussed ready for the spit. I thought that was just seaweed.” At Metae’s look of terror, the woman added, “Don’t worry, I’m not planning to eat you. I’m no witch for all that I live in this evil place.”

Metae looked again at her feet. It was only the fishline that held her, still tangled around her legs. She slumped back on the sand in relief and watched as the old woman pulled a sharp stone from her belt. With a few deft strokes, she cut Metae free. Metae was pleased to see that the woman cut the line carefully, conserving the longest pieces intact. Good fishline was a precious commodity.

“Who are you?” she asked as the woman tugged the remaining line in from the edge of the sea. It was twisted among large tangles of seaweed.

“By the Nine Words of Min!” the old woman cried, ignoring her question. “A taape! And it’s still fresh enough to eat. I never thought I’d live to taste another cold water

fish. Oh, this is a happy day indeed. Come on, girl, let's get this back to the fire before it starts to spoil." She clambered to her feet and scuttled off along the beach. "I could eat this raw and be satisfied," Metae heard her mutter as she moved away.

Metae struggled painfully to her knees and stared after her. Looking around, she saw that she was no longer anywhere near Komlin Keep. She was nowhere near the Eastern Continent unless her teachings had been all wrong or there had been some magical change in the climate.

Her homeland, located as it was to the far north of Quayth, was cold and gray through most of the year, especially so in winter. And while Komlin had little contact with the outside world, Metae's father had shared with her all the news brought by occasional Sulcar trading vessels and even rarer visitors from across the high mountains. She had never heard of a place like this.

It was hot and humid. Sweat ran down Metae's back and under her arms even after she shrugged off her jacket. Her damp breeches stuck fast to her legs, the salt-encrusted leather scratching against her skin. She sniffed for the presence of evil, but the wind carried only the sweet tang of the sea and the rich, heavy fragrance of lush vegetation.

The water was emerald green with streaks of blue more beautiful than any Metae had ever imagined, while landward stretched a line of verdant foliage. Moisture glistened in golden sunlight.

Where was the rocky shore of Komlin, the barren islets that fringed the harbor? Where, indeed, was anything beyond this bit of sunlit land? Metae could see nothing across the sea except the clear azure sky. She shivered in spite of the heat.

Stumbling after the old woman, she called, "Who are you? What place is this?"

The old woman looked back, studying her with squinted

eyes. "You should wash the salt off before it chafes," she said. Then her expression softened. "Come, we'll talk while you soak and the fish bakes."

She led Metae to a nearby pool of clear water and showed her leaves to crush into sudsy wads for washing. As Metae began rinsing away the sea brine, the woman gutted the taape and wrapped it in wide green leaves. She slid the package into the coals of the well-used fire pit.

"I am Kelana," she said after a time. "Ah, I see you know my name. You must be Komlin bred."

Metae nodded, mouth agape. She closed it abruptly at the acrid taste of the suds. "I know your name well, Aunt," she said after spitting away the suds. "My father was your brother Garrin, Holder of Komlin Keep."

"Garrin?" the old woman replied. Her face lit with sudden pleasure and Metae saw that she must once have been a beautiful woman, just as the stories told. "Garrin became Holder?" Then Kelana's expression changed. "You said 'was.'"

Metae dropped her gaze. "Father died five months ago. Uncle Taggart stands as regent until I am installed one month hence."

"Ahhhhh," sighed Kelana. She sank back onto the mossy bank and rubbed her forehead with her hand. "So, Taggart has won Komlin at last."

"No!" cried Metae. "That evil man will not rule Komlin. Not while I yet live!"

Kelana gave a bitter laugh. "So said I twenty years ago. But the very day I was to accept the crown, Taggart worked his treachery on me. I had gone to Grayson Heights alone that morning to mourn our father. As I walked atop the cliffs, a sudden gust of wind pushed me over the edge and I fell, not onto the rocks, but into a great sea storm that had not been existent moments before. A current dragged me through the frigid water like a helpless tangle of seaweed and later threw me up onto one of the barren outer isles."

"But how did you get here?" Metae asked, lifting her

hands to indicate the lush vegetation. "This is no barren Komlin land."

"Do not trust all that you see, child," Kelana said. "This is the very island I first set foot on."

Metae frowned, wondering not for the first time if the old woman could be trusted to speak the truth. She seemed sincere enough, and she did resemble her father in voice and look.

"I was near frozen by the time I was thrown onto the rocks," Kelana went on. "With the last of my strength, I called on Gunnora to aid me and to whatever unknown gods might rest in this place. In so calling, I must have disturbed the evil force that Taggart had employed to entrap me here.

"The sky suddenly blackened and the air grew even colder. Then, as if in answer, a blue flash streaked the sky and the cold receded somewhat. A mighty wind arose and I thought I would be blown back into the sea, but just as quickly, trees and heavy foliage sprouted and sheltered me from the icy blasts. Rain poured; it only made the vegetation grow, and grow. It was as if the forces of evil and good fought some battle of their own here, with my life as the winner's prize.

"The more harsh and dangerous the evil thrusts became, the more gentle and lush became the hospitality of the good, until at last the entire isle had changed to the way you see it now. I have but to reach out my hand for ripe fruits, toss a line into the coral sea for fish to feed my hunger." She glanced toward the fire pit where the fish was cooking, poked at the glowing coals. "Though none is so good as a Komlin-caught taape.

"The battle went on for days before the darkness finally retreated and the air turned eternally warm and moist," she said. "That was when I learned that my chance for escape was gone forever. As the power of good altered the land to make it livable for me, the strength of the evil poured into a wall of invisibility around the island. It

could not kill me, so it trapped me here instead. Had I lit a signal fire soon enough, it might have been seen from the mainland.”

Kelana sighed. “But I did not. And so for twenty years I have lived but a few miles from home with no one the wiser.”

She handed Metae a length of coarsely woven cloth.

“Does Taggart know that you . . . we live?” Metae asked as she wrapped the cloth around her. It seemed strange to leave her shoulders and arms bare to the sun, but the sensation was not at all unpleasant.

“I think not,” Kelana said. “He dared not kill either of us directly. We are too close kin. The backlash would have been too great for his limited powers. I think he expected each of us to die of exposure here where our bodies would never be found. He had no way of knowing the island had changed. No, I believe he thinks us both dead by now.”

Metae sniffed appreciatively as Kelana pulled the fish from the coals. She drew forth roasted tubers as well, brown and crackling with escaping steam. Gingerly, she handed one of the tubers to Metae.

“Taggart claims that in your grief, you jumped from Grayson Heights, that you sought your own death,” Metae said as she took a careful bite; it tasted like roasted nutmeats although the texture was not at all the same. She burned her tongue taking a second bite.

“Jumped, did I?” Kelana muttered. She divided the fish into equal portions and carefully licked the juice from her fingers. “Do you believe that?”

Metae snorted. “Taggart also claims that a woman cannot fish with the skill of a man.” She saluted her aunt with a fistful of steaming taape. “I rarely believe anything my uncle says.”

The days passed quickly on the island. Too quickly for Metae. She was desperate to escape before Taggart could take full control of Komlin. When she was not staring at

the sea, devising impossible plans to defeat the invisible wall, she talked with Kelana about all that had taken place since her disappearance. She described what she knew of the struggle for leadership between Garrin and Taggart—how Garrin had relied on the will and support of the people while Taggart employed strange and sometimes magical tactics acquired from the Sulcars and on secret forays into the mountains. The use of magic was not commonplace in Komlin, though all knew that at one time the entire district had been inhabited by Old Ones; the people resented Taggart's efforts to sway them with magic that was not rightfully his. They stood by Metae's father. In return he brought them many years of peace and prosperity.

"I had hoped to continue that peace when the lands lay under my hand," Metae said, growing discouraged. "Taggart wishes to expand Komlin's borders, and thus his own power, by force and treachery."

In return, Kelana told Metae about the island. They walked the reef together, fishing and searching for edible seafood as well as for colorful shells. These last Metae buried to kill and clean the animal from inside, then displayed on a shelf in Kelana's front-roofed hut. During the warm evenings, Kelana taught her how to coax the tiny hermit crabs from their secondhand shells by blowing on them and singing softly until the creatures crawled far enough out to be snatched in her fingers.

"Hermit crabs make the best bait," Kalana said. "But don't let your nice shells lay about, because these little thieves will come and steal the prettiest of them away. They exchange shells whenever they find an empty, roomier one available."

"Is there no way to leave this island?" Metae asked her aunt. "No way to break the spell that keeps us hidden?"

"Only by finding and destroying the evil force that holds the spell in place," Kelana said. "What little power I had, I

lost during that first fight between good and evil. I don't suppose you . . . ?"

Metae shook her head. "Taggart seems to be the only one of our kin able to call at will on magical forces."

"Which only proves that he's sold his soul to some foul thing," Kelana replied. "Our family's never been known to hold the power. The source of evil must be embodied in some living thing near here," she went on. "But it is impossible to search every plant and living creature on this island. My protector, whoever it might have been, did the job too well. I have searched every day for twenty years to no avail. No, child, there is no escape."

Metae was not willing to give up hope, however. She moved about the island each day, watching and listening always for some clue. The times she enjoyed most were when she was in the sea. She walked in the shallows, treading the treacherous coral in sandals which Kelana wove from dried vines, and swam in deeper water, often trailing a line for the ever-eager fish. Her wraps of pounded bark tended to dissolve in the seawater, but as they were alone on the island, she found it of little consequence.

One day, while swimming after a large blue fish, Metae found herself near a particularly ragged coral outgrowth. She shivered. The place was dangerous, many of its coral polyps poisonous enough to leave her ill for days if she should foolishly allow her bare skin to brush against them. Though she was fascinated by the fish, she turned away to seek others more safely accessible.

When she related the incident later, her aunt gave her a sharp look. Had she seen anything there but the fish and the coral? Kelana asked. An eel perhaps, hiding in one of the holes? Or some other dark creature of the sea?

"I looked no further than the coral," Metae replied. "The place made me feel unsafe, as if some evil dwelled—"

She stared at her aunt for a moment, not believing what

she had just said. Then she jumped to her feet and raced back toward the sea. Kelana followed. Splashing through the shallows, Metae hurried back to the place where the blue fish had disappeared.

She swam around the coral head, carefully avoiding the red sections which she knew to be most poisonous. Again she felt herself shivering as though the water were colder here. When she glanced back at Kalana, she saw that the older woman had stopped some distance away and was standing on a coral shelf. She was hugging herself as if the air and water were freezing.

"I can come no nearer," Kelana gasped when she caught Metae's eye. "It is too cold, the repulsion too great. The evil is near here. You must find it."

Metae nodded. "Good fortune," she heard her aunt call as she dove again to inspect the coral formation. She circled it. The area was not large. She came up for air.

"Go back," she called to her aunt, for she could see that Kelana was being assailed by whatever evil force lay here. She knew that the old woman did not have the strength to repel the attack for long.

But Kelana would not leave. "Its attention is focused on me now," she cried. "Find it before it realizes you are here."

Metae dove again.

There! She saw it! A pulsating green-black mass deep inside a pocket of red coral. There was no way to reach it without contacting the poison. She popped up for another breath.

Kelana's eyes were squeezed shut. She swayed in the water with the same rhythm as the creature below. "Gunnora protect us both," Metae muttered as she pulled a sharpened stone from her belt and dove again. Without hesitating, she reached into the hole.

The coral burned like fire against her skin, but she forced her arm farther through the jagged opening. Fighting every

instinct, she thrust her cutting stone into the slimy, quivering mass. To her horror, the stone struck something solid. It slipped from her hand. Suddenly the creature split down the center and retreated from where she had first touched it. It slid apart slowly, retreating like a layer of slime beneath the golden globe around which it had been wrapped.

Metae almost gasped as she recognized the golden shape. It was a shell! The most beautiful she had ever seen. *Of course, she thought, the shell embodies the good in this place. It and the evil creature inside are trapped together here in the sea.*

Her lungs felt as if they would burst, but Metae pushed her arm yet farther into the hole. She knew that if she rose now to get air, she would never be able to brave that fiery opening again. She only prayed for courage—and that the creature would have no poisonous stinger as did some shelled animals. She lifted the shell in trembling fingers.

Exciting the red coral passage was worse than entering had been. Waves of agony swept along her arm and a horror of cold grew ever nearer her fingertips. The creature was sliding back outside the shell, trying to reach her. She felt it at the same time trying to curl around the inside of her mind. She stopped it by brushing the bottom of the shell against the coral to force the creature back inside. When she was free at last, Metae could barely gather the strength to push herself back to the surface.

As soon as she had air in her lungs, Metae fumbled open the woven bag at her waist. She dropped in the shell and cinched the bag tight. Fighting both pain and fatigue, she made her way back to Kelana. Together they stumbled back across the reef, each trying to aid the other, each barely able to stand alone.

Ashore, Metae moved into the shade well above the high water line and immediately began scratching in the sand. She dug a hole three hands deep and opened the bag

above it to drop in the shell. The emerging creature slid rapidly back into the shell as it brushed against the dry sand. Metae used sticks to brace the shell so that it stood on one end with the largest of its openings down. Then she and Kelana covered it with sand.

Metae was ill for many days after burying the shell. The coral poison raged through her body, while the fury of the trapped and rotting evil raged through her mind. There were times in her delirium when she thought that it was her own body trapped inside the shell, slowly dying and rotting away, draining like foul black oil into the sand. It was only due to Kelana, who was barely able to function on her own behalf, that Metae survived.

When she woke at last, weak but lucid, Metae was startled to feel a chill in the air. "Have we lost, Aunt?" she cried out. "Did the creature escape?"

Kelana hurried to her side. "Thank the gods you have returned," she said. "No, the creature did not escape. Its death is causing the illusion to break down. The island is reverting to its natural state." She helped Metae lift her head. "Look, the wall around us is dissolving, you can see the shadow of the mainland there across the sea. In a few days more, we will be fully back in the real world and we can light a signal fire to alert those at the Keep."

Metae stared at the misty gray horizon for a moment, then looked down at her arm. The pain was not so great now, but ragged scars streaked across her once-fair skin. When she cried out at the sight, Kelana comforted her. "It is only the outside of your arm that looks bad," she said. "If you do not injure it again soon, you will regain the arm's full use." Metae wept as she drank the broth Kelana urged on her, then sank into a deep and troubled sleep. When she next awoke, Kelana greeted her with more warm broth and encouraging words. "The coral reef has disappeared," she said. "The sand is almost gone, the beach turned back to stones as it was before. The foliage has

returned to scrub plants and salt-resistant brush.”

“The signal fire?” Metae asked in a little more than a whisper. It was all she could manage. She rubbed her arm but did not look down at it.

“I’ve begun gathering driftwood,” her aunt said. “But the job goes slow. When you are well, you can help.” Metae looked more carefully at her aunt then. She was shocked to see how the woman had changed. Kelana appeared years older than she had before her struggle on the reef. Now she looked frail and fragile, her body too thin under the ragged woolen dress that she wore to keep off the growing cold. It was the dress she had been wearing when she washed up on the island.

“You must rest, aunt,” Metae said, struggling to rise. “I can prepare the fire.”

“You can’t even sit up, girl,” Kelana snapped. “Drink this, and let the gods finish this thing at their own speed. I’ll survive.”

It was many more days before Metae felt her full strength returning. She spent the time staring at the distant Komlin shoreline, watching it grow ever more visible across the sea. As soon as she could, she began making short trips along the beach to scavenge for driftwood. Dry fuel had never been abundant on the island of illusion, and what little remained of that earlier stuff dissolved in Metae’s hands as she carried it to the fire site. She was forced to go ever farther away to find wood from the real world.

“We will have only one chance,” Kelana said as they struggled with a jagged, salt-encrusted log. “This signal must be seen or we will die here in the cold. There will be neither wood nor time to build a second signal.” She shivered in the icy wind.

Metae struggled harder, gritting her teeth against the pain in her damaged arm as she pulled at the log. When Kelana noticed, she made her niece stop working for a

time, insisting that the fire could wait, Metae's arm must be saved.

When they were sure the evil creature had been completely scoured from the golden shell, by the ravages of disintegration and the predation of ants and other underground insects, the two women dug up the shell. Its color was brilliant, even in the paler, winter sun of Komlin. When Metae sniffed at it carefully, she could smell no hint of its earlier foul occupant. She rinsed it in the sea, then set it on a driftwood shelf inside their makeshift shelter.

Some days later, she noticed that the shell had been moved. Thinking her aunt had shifted it for her own reasons, she paid little attention. The weather was somewhat warmer that morning and she wished to search the far side of the isle for any remaining fuel.

The following day, the shell had been moved again. This time, Metae found it on the sand near the doorway. She picked it up and when she turned it over, gave a giggle of surprise. A tiny hermit crab had taken up residence in the great golden shell. It was unusual for a crab to choose a shell of this shape and size, but Metae applauded the creature's courage in choosing so fine a home.

She did not want to lose the shell, however, so she tried to tease the crab out. She spent the entire morning singing and blowing softly into the opening, but the crab stayed firmly coiled, locked inside the shell. Finally, Metae gave up in disgust and tossed the shell into a high-sided basket. It was too late to get to the other side of the island and back before dark, so she spent the afternoon helping her aunt rearrange the wood they already had.

"Perhaps we should light the fire with what we have," Kelana said that evening. "I distrust this warmer weather. If it heralds a storm, we may lose our only change to signal for help."

"Be patient a day longer, aunt," Metae replied. "There are several more large pieces of wood on the far side of the

isle. I will gather them tomorrow and we will light the signal the morning after."

The next day, the shell was gone again. Metae searched the shelter, then the entire clearing, calling on her aunt for help. It was past noon before they found the tiny crab slowly dragging its adopted home across the rocks and toward the sea. The two women laughed and brought the shell back. Kelana wove a stout basket of twigs, and after placing the shell inside, secured the basket's opening with a lid of twisted grasses. They placed other, more appropriate shells just outside the cage to tempt the crab into shifting domiciles in the night. The signal fire, they agreed, could wait one more day.

It was quite warm the following morning, and Metae was startled to see new growth along the edges of the rocky shoreline. She shrugged out of her heavy jacket, then cursed when she saw that the crab had escaped with the shell again. It had torn a hole through the tough grass lid. As she searched, she noticed that patches of sand had reappeared and that the water was exceptionally blue.

"Oh gods!" she whispered when she looked toward the mainland. Only the vaguest of outlines showed against the horizon. The island was reverting to illusion.

"The crab!" she cried. "Taggart's evil must have drained from the sea creature into the only living thing that could reclaim the shell. A hermit crab! Gunnora forgive me for being so stupid."

It was too late to light the fire. The illusion was back in place. Their signal would never be seen.

Metae called for Kelana and together they searched again for the golden shell. They kept close watch on the entrance to the sea, for that was where the crab had headed the day before. Late in the afternoon, when Metae had all but given up hope, Kelana spotted a flash of gold at the edge of the water. She raced to the spot then screamed and threw herself back.

"I cannot touch it!" she cried as she lay in the sand.

Metae fought a wall of revulsion and fear to reach the shell; it was like walking through congealing pitch. Unable to reach the shell with her hands, she lifted a stick and swung it, knocking the shell back from the water's edge. She swung her stick again and again, forcing the evil crab to retreat inside the shell as it tumbled up across the rocks and sand. With each strike, fire raced through the damaged muscles of her arm.

Metae maneuvered the shell until it lay atop a flat area of stone. Then she lifted a large rock in her pain-benumbed hands.

"No!" cried Kelana from behind her. "Do not crush the shell! The powers of good are embodied in it and all will be lost if it is destroyed. We would be left unprotected and the evil free to take us for its own!"

Metae stared at her aunt in horror, then back at the shell. Already, the crab was pulling its burden back toward the sea. Metae picked up the stick and whacked the shell again, keeping it trapped in the cleared space around the fire pit.

"What can we do?" she asked, shuddering under the onslaught of real and illusory pain.

"There is nothing we can do," Kelana said. "We cannot kill the evil by burying the crab, for unlike the sea creature, it can simply crawl away, taking the shell with it. It will never come out on its own and we cannot crush the shell." She sank down beside Metae, wiping away tears. "We can only set it free and hope that enough of the real world still exists here on the island to allow our signal fire to be seen in the morning." It was clear from her voice that she held no real hope for rescue.

"No!" Metae replied. "That would leave Taggart free to use this foul thing again and again. We must kill it. This time for good." She whacked the shell back into the center of the clearing, then tossed the stick to her aunt and ran toward the small fire pit.

“What are you doing?” Kelana cried as Metae returned with a burning brand. “You can’t light the fire now! The smoke will never be seen in the night and the fire will be burned to coals by morning!”

“Better that we should live out our lives on this unnatural island than that we should set this creature free,” Metae said as she thrust the brand into the base of the driftwood pile. The dry wood caught quickly and burned as the moisture-laden wood of illusion never had. Flames crackled high and lit the evening sky.

No amount of prodding with sticks and smooth stones could get the shell into the fire or keep it there. Metae shuddered as she realized that she would have to touch it again. Shielding her face with her left arm, and ignoring her aunt’s cry of warning, Metae reached out with her right hand to snatch up the shell. Instantly, she felt the mantle of darkness curling again around her mind. Forcing it away, she thrust her arm into the flames.

It was the tunnel of red coral all over again. She screamed, wavered, would have withdrawn her arm but for her terror of the black smear riding at the edge of her vision. She caught an image of herself, one-armed, useless, unable to pull a fishline into a rocking boat. She could not continue. Abruptly, cool hands touched her face, protecting it from the heat. A thin, frail shape pressed between her body and the fire. *Ah, Kelana, Metae thought, once again you bring me back from the darkness.* She held the shell steady in the flames.

Finally, when it seemed that nothing existed in all the world except the searing pain in her arm, Metae felt the crab let go. In her mind she felt it loosen and uncoil from the inner chambers of the shell and drop at last into the burning coals. Slowly, she opened her eyes and withdrew her hand. The empty shell remained clenched in her charred and bloody fist.

Metae and Kelana watched as the crab burned. They

were both numb now to the heat and the crab's piteous attempts to reach them. It shriveled slowly and turned to black ash, then iridescent slime. The fire had been built on solid rock so the oily residue could not escape back into the earth. It bubbled and hissed, and finally puffed into black, foul-smelling smoke.

The smoke thickened, rising in billowing clouds all out of proportion to the size of the animal that had served as their source. It swirled and expanded and formed into a great green-black column rising high into the sky. Across the light of the first evening stars, Metae could see it spreading like a thick blanket across the sky. They watched it until they could see no more.

Daylight came without warning to Metae and her aunt. They awoke huddled together in a cold wind, stiff from passing the night on unyielding stone. The fire had burnt to embers and the only trace of smoke was a thin smudge of dirty green high in the slate-gray sky. It disappeared even as Metae turned her gaze upon it.

"Hoy! Metae, is that you? Hoy, there!"

The voice brought Metae fully awake and she twisted to look back at the beach. There were men there, and boats. A whole fleet of boats, bobbing side by side in the rough winter seas. She tried to wave, but was too exhausted to lift her hand from the ground.

"Auntie," she whispered, "look. It's the fishing fleet. They have found us."

Kelana blinked her eyes and sat up slowly. She tried to pull her ancient winter cape around her shoulders but it shredded into a scattering of scorched rags. She patted at the burnt ends of her hair.

Metae smiled at her vanity and a few moments later took great pride in introducing their rescuers to the rightful Komlin heir. The older men recognized Kelana immediately for they had known her well before her disappearance. They came forward quickly to offer her aid.

"Humph," Kelana grumbled goodheartedly. "It's about time you got here." She refused their offers of loyalty, insisting their allegiance should remain with her niece.

"I'm too old for politics," she said. "I've been away too long. All I want now is a warm room with a cold wind blowing outside and an endless supply of taape." The men laughed and gave her their solumn promises.

"What news of Taggart?" Metae asked, sorry to be bringing a look of concern back to her aunt's face, but knowing the responsibility for the realm was now hers and Taggart must be dealt with.

The men shifted their feet and glanced sideways at one another.

"Regent Taggart is dead, mistress," one of them said at last. He glanced again at his companions. "It happened just last night. As the crown was being placed upon his head, Taggart suddenly screamed and pulled away. He lifted his hands and we saw that his fingers were burning. We tried to douse the flames, truly we tried to help the man, but the fire crept unquenchable along his limbs leaving nothing but black ash. The ash fluttered bit by bit to the stone floor of the hall. His feet burned at the same time, and his legs." The man stopped to take a deep breath.

"After the fire had consumed him entirely, the ash slowly changed to liquid. It was as foul smelling and full of evil as the man himself had been." He hesitated, knowing he had spoken out of turn, but Metae motioned for him to continue. "That foul oil remained for a time on the stone floor, then finally puffed into a cloud of smoke. We followed it outside and saw that it drifted this way. At dawn, this island appeared where no island had been before. We realized then that more than Taggart's evil magic was afoot and came to investigate."

"Evil always seeks its own in the end," Kelana said. "Taggart's failed scheme carried a high price." She glanced down at Metae's ravaged arm. She still held the shell

clenched in her fist. Abruptly, a look of joy lit Kelana's gaunt features.

Following her aunt's stare, Metae saw that the skin nearest the shell had taken on a pink tone; it was shining and healthy with new growth. She looked up at her aunt in triumph. She understood now, that with the shell's help, her arm would grow back whole. The scars from the coral and those from the fire would remain with her forever, but the muscles and strength would return. She would be able to use the arm again to put taape on Kelana's table. Metae laughed aloud at that thought. The shell continued its care of Kelana as well as herself.

The shell itself was dull and faded. Its once-smooth surface was lined with tiny cracks, its golden sheen reduced to chalky gray. But it was whole and strong. Metae brought it with her to the boats.

"Why don't you leave that old thing behind?" one of the men said when she carried it aboard. "All the wealth and jewels of Komlin Keep are waiting for you at home."

Metae smiled. "The most beautiful jewels are not always the most precious," she replied. She balanced the shell on her scarred palm and held it up to catch the winter sunlight.

* * *

Afterword

Witch World has provided the setting for many strong and colorful characters and some wondrously dark and malevolent creatures. So, when I decided to write this story, I began with the idea of creating a protagonist who must face the very darkest of Witch World evil. Metae, however, turned

out to be just as stubborn with me as she was with her uncle. First, she insisted on keeping her Micronesian name, which made it almost mandatory that I place her in a tropical setting. Witch World is not known for its abundance of tropical reefs.

Metae then refused to accept any magical skills and was thus forced to combat the evil with only her natural, human abilities. Even so, she didn't let me make things easy for her. I thought the story was finished after she found the shell on the reef and buried it to destroy the evil. It was her idea to dig it up again, and we were both surprised when the hermit crab appeared. That made it necessary for us to . . . Well, you know the rest. As a character, Metae was unlike any other I had met in Witch World, but thanks to her insistence, I think she fits right in.

—CAROL SEVERANCE