

Be It Ever So Humble

by Tanya Huff

"So, got any dirt on this place?" Magdelene asked the gold and black lizard who was sunning itself on a nearby rock. The lizard, looking more like a beautifully crafted piece of jewelry than a living creature, merely flicked its inner eyelid closed and pretended to be asleep. Children with rocks or nets it had to do something about. Young women in donkey carts who asked stupid questions could safely be ignored. Magdelene studied the little village nestled along the curve of its natural harbor and chewed reflectively on a strand of chestnut hair. It looked like a nice place, but, as much as she wanted to settle down, as tired as she was of constantly packing up and moving on, she knew better than to get her hopes up. In a dozen years of traveling, she'd learned that the most jewel-like villages, in the most bucolic settings, often had the quaintest customs. Customs like welcoming wandering wizards with an axe, or attempting to convince wandering wizards to stay by outfitting them with manacles and chains, or by suggesting the tarring and feathering of wandering wizards with no better reason than the small matter of a straying husband or two. For the most part, Magdelene had found these customs no more than a minor inconvenience, although, had she known the man was married, she would never have suggested they ...

She grinned at the memory. He'd proven a lot more flexible than she'd anticipated.

"Well, H'sak?" She spit out the hair and glanced back at the large mirror propped up behind the seat of the cart. "Shall we check it out?"

H'sak, trapped in the mirror, made no answer. Magdelene wasn't entirely certain the demon was aware of what went on outside his prison, but, traveling alone, she'd fallen into the habit of talking to him and figured, just in case he ever got out, it couldn't hurt if he had memories of pleasant, albeit one-sided, conversations. Not, she supposed, that a bit of chat would make up for her trapping him in the mirror in the first place. Stretching back, she pulled an old cloak down over the glass-no point in upsetting potential neighbors right off-then gathered up the reins and slapped them lightly on the donkey's rump. The donkey, who had worked out an understanding with the wizard early on, took another few mouthfuls of the coarse grass lining the track and slowly started down the hill to the village.

At the first house, Magdelene stopped the cart and sat quietly studying the scene. A few chickens scratched in the sandy dirt that served the village as a main street, and a black sow sprawled in the only visible bit of shade, her litter suckling noisily. A lullaby, softly sung, drifted through one of the open windows, and from the beach came the screams and laughter of children at play. Just the sort of lazy ambience she appreciated.

"Who are you?"

Languidly, for it was far too hot to be startled, Magdelene turned. A boy, nine or ten years old, naked except for a shell threaded on a frayed piece of gut, peered up at her from under a heavy shock of dusty black hair. Although he showed no signs of malnutrition or neglect, his left arm hung withered and

useless by his side.

"My name is Magdalene." She pushed her hair back off her face. "Who are you?"

"Juan." He edged a little closer. "You a trader?"

"No. I'm a wizard." Over the years, she'd discovered life worked out better if she didn't try to hide that. It made explanations so much easier when things started happening. And things always did. The boy looked her up and down and tossed his head. "Ha!" he scoffed. "Tell us another one. Wizards got gray hair and warts. You're not old enough to be a wizard."

"I'm twenty-seven," she told him a little indignantly. He was a fine one to talk about not old enough.... "Oh." Juan considered it and apparently decided twenty-seven was sufficiently ancient even without the gray hair and warts. "What about your clothes, then? Wizards wear robes and stuff. Everyone knows that." He had a point. Wizards did wear robes and stuff; usually of a dark, heavy, and imposing fabric; always hot, scratchy, and uncomfortable. Magdalene, who preferred to be comfortable, never bothered. "I'm the most powerful wizard in the world," she explained as a rivulet of sweat ran under her bright-blue breast-band, "so I wear what I want."

"Yeah, sure," he snorted. "Prove it."

"All right." She gathered up the multicolored folds of her skirt, jumped down off the cart, and held out her hand. "Give me your arm and I'll fix it."

"Oh no." He backed up a pace and turned, protecting the withered arm behind the rest of his body. "You ain't proving it on me. Find something else."

"Like what?" Juan thought about it a moment. "Could you send my sister someplace far away?" he asked hopefully. Magdalene thought about that in turn. It didn't seem worth antagonizing the village just to prove a point to one grubby child. "I could, but I don't think I should." The boy sighed. The kind of sigh that said he knew what the answer would be but thought there could be no harm in asking. They stood together in silence for a moment, Magdalene leaning against the back of her cart-perfectly content to do nothing-and Juan digging his toe into the sand. The donkey, who could smell water, decided enough was enough and started toward the center of the village. He was hot, he was thirsty, and he was going to do something about it.

As the cart jerked forward, Magdelene hit the ground with an unwizardlike thud. Closer proximity proved the sand was not as soft as it looked. "Lizard piss," she muttered a curse, rubbing at a stone-bruise. When she looked up, Juan had disappeared.

She shrugged philosophically and, following along behind the donkey, amused herself by pulling back an image of Juan as an adult. Long and lean and sleekly muscled, it was a future worth sticking around for. At some point between now and then, she appeared to have convinced him to let her fix his

arm. It looked like she'd be staying, at least for a while.

An impatient bray demanded her attention and she allowed the image to slip back to its own time; they'd arrived at the well.

When the trough was full and the donkey had bent his head to drink, Magdelene, pulled by the realization she was no longer alone, slowly turned. All around the edges of the square stood the children of the village, staring at her with wide dark eyes.

"Yes?" she asked.

The children merely continued to stare.

Demons, she decided, were easier to deal with. At least you always knew what demons wanted.

"Magdelene-lady!"

The children stared on as Magdelene gratefully noted Juan approaching with an adult in tow. The old man had been bent and twisted by the weight of his years, his fingers warped into shapes more like driftwood than flesh. His skin had been tanned by sun and wind and salt into creased leather, and any hair he'd had was long gone. He followed Juan with the rolling gait of a life spent at sea, and his jaws worked to the rhythm of his walking.

"Whatcha doing sitting around like a pile of fish guts?" he growled at the children as he stopped an arm's length from Magdelene and glared about. "Untie her beast, put him to pasture, and get that wagon in the shade."

The children hesitated.

"You are staying a bit?" he asked, his growl softening, his dark eyes meeting hers. Magdalene smiled her second-best smile-she couldn't be certain his heart would be up to her best-and said, "Yes." She wanted very much to stay for a bit. Maybe this time things would work out. The old man nodded and waved both twisted hands. "You heard her. Get!" They got, Juan with the rest, and Magdelene watched bemused as her donkey was led away and her cart was pulled carefully to rest under a stand of palm. "Boy says you told him you're a wizard."

"That's light."

"Don't have much need for a wizard here. Wizards make you soft and then the sea takes you. We prefer to do things for ourselves."

"So do I," Magdelene told him, leaning back against the damp stones. "Prefer to have people do things for themselves, that is." She grinned. She liked this old man and sensed in him a kindred spirit.

"To be honest, I like people to do things for me as well." He returned the grin and his eyes twinkled as he looked her up and down. "Ah, child," he cackled, "what I could do for you if I were only fifty years younger."

"Would you like to be?" she asked, rather hoping he would. He laughed, then he realized she was serious. "You could do that?"

"Yes." His gaze turned inward, and Magdelene could feel the strength of the memories he sifted. After a moment, he sighed and shook his head. "Foolish wishes, child. I've earned my age and I'll wear it with honor." Magdelene hid her disappointment. Personally, she couldn't see the honor in blurred eyesight, aching bones, and swollen, painful joints, but if that was his choice . . . There were sixteen buildings in the village, eight goats, eleven pigs, twenty-one chickens, and fourteen boats. No one had ever managed an accurate count of the cats. "Six families came here three generations ago," Carlos, the old man, explained as they stood on the beach watching boats made tiny by distance slide up and down the rolling waves. Through his eyes, Magdelene saw the harbor as it had been, sparkling untouched in the sun, never sailed, never fished, theirs. "I'm the last of the first. I've outlived two wives and most of my children as well."

"Do you mind?" Magdelene asked, knowing she was likely to see entire civilizations rise and fall in her lifetime and not entirely certain how she felt about it.

"Well..." He considered the question for a moment. "I'll live 'til I die. Nothing else I can do."

"You didn't answer my question."

He patted her cheek. "I know."

That night, in the crowded main room of the headman's house, Carlos presented Magdelene to the adults of the village. "... and she'd like to stay on a bit."

"A wizard," the headman ruminated. "That's something we don't see every day."

Magdelene missed much of the discussion that followed as she was busy trying to make eye contact with a very attractive young man standing by one of the deep windows. She gave up when she realized that he was trying to make eye contact with a very attractive young man standing by the door.

"... although frankly, we'd rather you were a trader."

"The traders are late this year?" Magdelene guessed, hoping she hadn't missed anything important.

"Aye. They've always come with the kayle."

Just in time, she remembered that kayle were fish.

"Surely you saw them on the road?" a young woman asked hopefully.

"No." Magdelene frowned as she thought back over the last few weeks of travel. "I didn't." The emptiness of the trail hadn't seemed strange to her at the time. It did now.

"I don't suppose you can conjure one?" asked a middle-aged woman dryly, tamping down her pipe.

The room rippled with laughter.

"I could," Magdelene admitted.

The room fell silent.

Magdelene cleared her throat. She might as well get it over with. "I'm the most powerful wizard in the world," she began. The middle-aged woman snorted. "Says who?"

"Well, uh ..."

"Doesn't matter. Would this conjured trader do us any good?"

"Probably not." A trader conjured suddenly into the village would be more likely to trade in strong hysterics than anything useful. "I thought as much." The woman expertly lit her pipe with a spill from the lamp. "What in Neto's breath are we wasting our time here for, that's what I want to know?"

"I thought you might like to know that a stranger, a wizard, has come to the village," Carlos told her tartly. She snorted again. "All right. Now we know." She pointed the stem of her pipe at Magdelene and demanded, "You planning on causing any trouble?"

"Of course not," Magdelene declared emphatically. She never planned on causing any trouble. "Will you keep your nose out of what doesn't concern you?" She had to think about that for a moment, wondering how broad a definition could be put on what didn't concern her. "I'll try."

"See that you do."

"So I can stay for a while?"

"For a while." Her head wreathed in smoke, the woman rose. "That's that, then," she said shortly, and left. The headman sighed and raised both hands in a gesture of defeat. You heard her. You can go." As people began to leave, Magdelene leaned over and whispered to Carlos, "Why does he let her get away with that?" Carlos snickered, his palm lying warm and dry on Magdelene's arm. "Force of habit," he said in his normal speaking voice. "She's his older sister, raised him after their mother drowned. Refused to be headwoman, said she didn't have the time, but she runs every meeting he calls." The headman smiled,

for Carlos's speech had risen clearly over the noise of the departing villagers. "Look at it this way, grandfather, the village gets two fish on one piece of bait. I do all the work and Yolanda does all the talking." He stood, stretched, and turned to Magdelene. "Have you got a bed, Wizard?"

Studying the muscles of his torso, still corded and firm for all his forty-odd years, Magdelene considered several replies. All of which she discarded after catching a speaking glance from the headman's wife.

"While the weather holds," she sighed, "I'm perfectly comfortable under my cart."

"And I am perfectly comfortable," she sighed again a half hour later, plumping up the pillows on her huge feather bed, "but I wouldn't mind some company." As if in answer to her request, the canvas flaps hanging from the sides of the cart parted and Juan poked in his head. "I was thinking," she muttered to whatever gods were listening, "of company a little older."

Juan blinked, shook his head, and gazed around curiously. "How'd you get all this stuff under here?" he demanded.

"I told you," Magdelene poured herself a glass of chilled grape juice, "I'm the most powerful wizard in the world." She dabbed at the spreading purple stain on the front of her tunic. "Can I fix your arm now?"

He didn't answer, just crawled forward and found himself in a large room that held-besides the bed-a wardrobe, an overstuffed armchair, and a huge book bound in red leather lying closed on a wooden stand. "Where's the wagon?"

Magdelene pointed at the ceiling, impressed by his attitude. She'd had one or two supposed adults fall gibbering to the carpet.

Juan looked up. Dark red runes had been scrawled across the rough boards of the ceiling. "What's that writing on there?"

"The spell that allows this room to exist."

"Oh." He had little or no interest in spells. "Got any more juice?"

She handed him a full glass and watched him putter about, poking his nose into everything. Setting his glass down on the book, he pulled open the wardrobe door.

"What's that?"

"It's a demon trapped in a mirror, what's it look like?" She'd hung the mirror on the door that afternoon, figuring H'sak was safer there than in the wagon. "How long's he been in there?"

"Twelve years."

"How long you gonna keep him in there?"

"Until I let him out." An answer that would have infuriated an adult, suited Juan fine. He took one last admiring look at H'sak, finished his juice, and handed Magdelene the empty glass. "I better get home."

"Juan." About to step through the canvas walls, he glanced back over his shoulder. "You still haven't told me if I can fix your arm." His gaze slid over to the demon and then back to the wizard. He shrugged. "Maybe later," he said, and left. Magdelene spent most of the next three days with Carlos. The children treated her like an exotic curiosity and she tried to live up to their expectations. The adults treated her with a wary suspicion and she tried not to live up to theirs. Carlos treated her like a friend. The oldest in the village by a good twenty years, his eyes sometimes twinkled and sparkled and looked no older than Juan's. Sometimes they burned with more mature fires and she longed to give him back his youth if only for a few hours behind the dunes. Sometimes they appeared deeper and blacker and wiser than the night sky. Sometimes they just looked old. Marveling, she realized that he remembered all the ages he had been and more, that they were with him still, making a home, not a prison, of his age. This was his strength, and Magdelene placed the lesson it taught her carefully away with her other precious things. She began to hope the village had a place for her. In the morning of the fourth day, they'd gathered about the well-the wizard and the few adults who remained ashore due to age or disability-when the high-pitched shriek of a child jerked all heads around.

"Riders!"

Screaming out the news of their discovery, Juan and three of the other children burst into the center of the village. The chickens panicked, screeched, and scattered. The adults tried to make sense out of the cacophony.

"One at a time!" The baker finally managed to make himself heard. "Juan, what happened?"

"Riders, uncle!" Juan told him, bouncing in his excitement. "Five of them. On horses. Coming here!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! We were going up the track to look for gooseberries ..." The other three children nodded vigorously in agreement. "... and we met them coming down."

"They aren't traders?"

Juan sighed in exaggerated exasperation. "Uncle, I seen traders before. And these aren't. . ." He noticed the baker was no longer looking at him, noticed no one was looking at him, so he let the last

word trail off and he turned.

They rode slowly, with a ponderous certainty more threatening than a wild charge. Voluminous robes in tans and browns hid all but their eyes and each wore a long, curved blade. They stopped, the line of horses reflecting the line of the well, and the rider in the center let the fabric drop from his face.

Nice, thought Magdelene, continuing to stroke the black and white cat sprawled across her lap. Good cheekbones, flashing eyes, full lips, and, she realized, shoulders dropping a little in disappointment, about as congenial as H'sak.

"We have come," said the rider, "for the kayle."

Carlos stepped forward, his hand on Juan's shoulder- both to support himself and to keep the boy from doing anything rash. "What do you have to trade?" he asked levelly.

"Your lives," replied the rider, and his hand dropped to the hilt of his sword.

Magdelene rolled her eyes. She'd never much cared for melodrama.

"If you take the kayle, we will have nothing when the traders come."

"The traders will not come. The warlord rules here."

"I don't recall being conquered," Carlos snapped, temper showing at last. The rider smiled, showing perfect teeth and no sense of humor. "You are being conquered now." The line of horses took a single step in intimidating unison. Juan's one hand curled into a fist. Magdelene stood, dumping the indignant cat to the ground. "Just one minute," she began. "SILENCE, WOMAN!" the rider thundered. "Stuff a sock in it." She brushed cat hair off her skirt. "You're not impressing anyone." For just an instant, acute puzzlement replaced the rider's belligerent expression. A people in the process of being terrorized simply did not behave in this fashion. With a perceivable effort, he regained his scowl and drew his sword. To either side, his men did the same. "Kill them all," he said. The horses leapt forward and vanished. The saddles and the riders hung in the air for one long second, then crashed to the ground, raising great clouds of dust and more panicked squawking from the chickens. "And as you want the kayle so badly," Magdelene said. Steel swords became silver fish making desperate attempts to get free of the grip on their tails. The children laughed and pointed. When they found they couldn't release the fish, the riders began to panic. "When you get back to your warlord," Magdelene told them smiling pleasantly, "you'll be able to let go. If I can make a suggestion, don't waste any time. Very shortly those fish are not going to be the best of traveling companions." Throwing garbage and clots of dirt, the children chased the riders from the village. Magdelene turned and saw four of the five adults regarding her with awe. Carlos merely looked thoughtful. "With luck, they'll convince their warlord that this village is more trouble than it's worth," Magdelene explained reassuringly, rubbing at the beads of sweat between her breasts. "Unless he has a wizard of his own, he'll only be beaten again if he comes back." She didn't add that even if he did have a wizard, he'd still be beaten-it sounded too much like bragging. Even though it was

true.

"And without luck?" Carlos prodded.

Magdalene sighed. "Without luck, I'll just have to convince him myself. But I hope he does the sensible thing."

Carlos snorted. "Men who style themselves 'The Warlord' seldom do the sensible thing."

"Men in general seldom do the sensible thing." Magdalene winked at the baker, who had, after all, only lost one leg at sea. "Fortunately, they have other uses."

Carlos cackled wildly. The baker blushed.

"... although you did say you'd keep out of what didn't concern you."

"My home concerns me."

Yolanda peered at Magdalene through a cloud of pipe smoke, "Home is it? I thought you were just staying for a while?"

"The village needs me."

"We neither need nor want you taking care of us," the older woman growled.

"Good. Because I wasn't planning to." Even through the smoke, she could see Yolanda's eyes narrow. The five empty saddles had been piled by the well when the fishing fleet returned. "I'll be like the seawall. Just another buffer against the storms." She spread her arms. "Without me, the persecutions your people left could well follow them."

"This warlord could send others," Carlos pointed out, pulling himself to his feet on the wizard's shoulder. "We have no way to defend ourselves."

"I can be your defenses," Magdalene insisted.

Yolanda's teeth ground against her pipe stem. "You could use your power to enslave us."

"I could ... but why would I bother?"

She sounded so sincerely puzzled that Carlos began to laugh. "She's right," he cackled. "The only thing she'd rather do than lie in the sun is ..." Just what exactly Magdalene would rather do than lie in the sun got lost in a violent coughing fit, but more than one stupid grin was hastily hidden. "I thought I'd build a house on the headland," Magdalene said firmly, shooting Carlos a look that almost set him off

again. "If no one has any objection."

"Humph." Yolanda's snort brought with it another cloud of smoke. Magdelene couldn't be sure, but she thought there was a smile behind it. "Well, if grandfather is so certain, I've no objection." The headman sighed. "Does anyone else wish to offer an objection?" he asked mildly. Yolanda glared at the assembled villagers, who wisely remained silent. "In that case," he inclined his head graciously, "you may build as you wish, Lady-wizard." Magdelene studied the designs she'd drawn on the bare rock of the headland, then checked them against the originals in the book. Although her hair and bright-yellow shift blew wildly about in the wind, the pages of the spellbook remained still and not one grain of fine white sand she'd used for the parameters of her house shifted. The moment Juan returned from the beach she'd be able to finish. She could have just lifted the last bit of sand she needed, but the boy had wanted to help. If she let him hang around, she figured she'd eventually do something he considered worthy and he'd let her fix his arm. She turned her face to the sun, eyes half closed in blissful anticipation of actually having a place of her own. No more traveling and no more adventures. Adventures were highly overrated as far as Magdelene was concerned, as they usually included uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, primitive or nonexistent toilet facilities, and someone-or someones-in direct and often violent opposition. "Magdelene!" Jolted out of her reverie, she squinted at the tiny figure scrambling up the steep path from the beach. It wasn't Juan, for the child had two healthy arms he ... no, she ... flailed about for balance. "The riders," the little girl panted as Magdelene reached down to pull her the last few feet. "They've come back." So the warlord hadn't taken the hint. "Don't worry about it," the wizard advised, holding a hankie to a nose obediently blown. "That's why I'm here."

"But they've got Juan!"

"What?!" Magdalene spun around and stared down at the village, the distant scene snapping suddenly into clarity at the touch of her will. Not the same riders, but the same type, their robes of tan and brown billowing in the wind. A full two dozen men faced the well this time, a red pennant snapping about over their heads as if trying to leap from the lance time. One horse stood a little forward and Juan had been thrown across the pommel of its saddle, his good arm twisted cruelly back.

She could see the villagers gathering-the kayle run had stopped and the seas had been too high to put out for a less certain catch. Carlos-the headman and Yolanda at his back-stepped out of the crowd and spoke. Magdelene could see his lips move, although the wind whipped away the words. Juan began to struggle and squirm.

The rider's grip shifted, and it didn't take a wizard's ears to hear the high-pitched scream that rose on the wind.

"Magdelene!" The little girl tugged on the wizard's shift. "You gotta do something!"

Juan went limp.

Magdelene's fingers closed on the child's shoulder, and the next instant the two of them stood by the

well. The child tore herself out of Magdelene's hold and dashed to her mother.

"Did you see, Mama? Did you see? We went poof!"

Alone now, between the villagers and the riders, Magdelene took a deep breath, clamped her teeth, and forced the wobbling world to steady. The last time she'd used the transit spell, she'd puked her guts out upon arrival. This time she couldn't give in to the nausea; retching at the warlord's feet might be unpleasant, but it could hardly be considered intimidating. When she regained her ability to focus, most of the riders still wore expressions of combined fear and disbelief.

Only the man who held Juan looked unaffected.

He smiled down at her. "You must be the wizard," he said.

She returned the smile with equal sincerity. "And you must be the warlord."

"I got your message. I'm here to give you my answer. And," his eyes narrowed, "I wouldn't suggest a repeat of the last incident, not while I have the boy." Magdelene wasn't particularly worried. She could send the warlord and his men back where they came from without disturbing a hair on Juan's head. The problem was, they'd only come back. If she played to the Warlord's ego, she might be able to negotiate a more permanent solution. "What do you want?"

"You." His smile broadened, the scar that split one side of his mouth twisting his face unevenly. Magdelene's brows reached for her hairline. "I beg your pardon?"

"I have decided I could use a wizard." He waved his free hand expansively. "You are to put yourself under my command." Pompous bloody twit. He actually sounded as if she should be thrilled with the opportunity. She folded her arms and glared up at him. "Why would I want to do that?" she demanded. "If you don't, I will kill the boy."

"And if I do?"

"I will spare both the boy and the village." Magdelene ..." Carlos's voice sounded strained, all the laughter gone from it. "It's all right, Carlos," Magdelene muttered out of the corner of her mouth. "I've got things under control." Or she would have shortly. A man who expected his mere presence to overwhelm all opposition could be dealt with. "While I appreciate your very generous offer," she told him, preparing to launch a special-effects extravaganza that would convince him to never tangle with her village again, "I'm afraid I shall have to decline." His smile never wavered. "Pity," he said. Throwing one arm about the boy's upper body, he grabbed the small head and twisted. The crack sounded very loud. Juan's body slid to the ground to lie in a crumpled heap, the head bent around at an impossible angle.

Magdelene's mouth worked but no sound emerged. She hadn't really believed he would do that.

Behind her, she heard a wail of grief from Juan's mother.

The warlord's men moved forward until they surrounded the villagers with a wall of steel.

"Now," said the warlord, still smiling, "what have you to say to my most generous offer?"

The smile slipped as Magdelene raised her head and met his eyes.

"Die," she told him.

He didn't have time to look surprised. His eyes rolled up, his mouth went slack, and he collapsed forward over the pommel. Startled by this new limp weight, the horse tossed its head and shied sideways, dumping the warlord's body to the sand beside the small heap of bones and flesh that had been Juan.

In silence that followed, the breathing of the surrounding horses sounded unnaturally loud. Their riders made no sound at all, each hoping desperately that the wizard would not now turn her attention to him.

The silence grew and stretched, broken only by the sobbing of Juan's mother. Pushing her hair back off her face with a trembling hand, Magdelene knelt by the boy's body. She straightened his tangled limbs and gently turned his head until it sat naturally once again.

"Lady-wizard . . ." It was the first time Carlos hadn't used her name. "... this isn't to say you haven't done what you felt you had to in removing this man from the world, but..."

He fell silent as Magdelene took Juan's cold little hand in hers and called his name.

The slight chest began to rise and fall. Juan hiccupped and opened his eyes.

"I wasn't here," he said, scratching his nose.

"That's right." Magdelene was a firm believer in telling children the truth. "You were dead."

"Oh." He thought about that for a moment. "It sure was boring."

She moved out of the way as his family rushed forward to claim him. He squirmed, looked disgusted, and tried to avoid the sloppiest displays of affection. "Mama, stop it."

"Lady-wizard?" Magdelene turned to face the villagers. They'd ask her to leave now. Or they'd deify her. Things wouldn't be the same. She stifled a near-hysterical giggle. People so often overreacted to the raising of the dead. "If you can bring back Juan," the headman told her quietly, "you must bring back the warlord and right the wrong you've done."

"Wrong?"

"We don't believe in the taking of life." He glanced down at the warlord's body and his lip curled. "As much as we may recognize the emotion that prompts it." Behind him, the villagers stared at her, no two expressions the same. She heaved a sigh of relief. If that was all they wanted, they were taking it rather well. Maybe she could still salvage the situation. "But what of that lot?" Magdelene shot a glance back over her shoulder at the warlord's men, who tried very hard to appear harmless and insignificant. "Cut the head off a snake and the snake dies. If I rejoin the head, then the snake lives and eats the heads of others and . . ." She frowned, lost in the metaphor, and sighed again. "Look, I don't think it's a good idea."

"If you want to make this your home," Yolanda told her bluntly, as unaffected by miracles as she was by most things, "you must respect our beliefs."

"But he deserved to die." A couple of the villagers nodded in agreement. Yolanda stood firm. "You have no more right to decide that about him than he did about Juan. If you wish us to respect you, you must respect us." Was it as easy as that? Magdelene wrapped her arms about herself and thought it over. "Does your warlord have a name?" she asked the riders at last. They looked at each other and then down at the body of their leader. "Anwar, Lady-wizard," ventured the young man who held the lance with the warlord's pennant. She smiled her thanks, and he began breathing again.

Squatting by the warlord's body, Magdelene took his hand in hers and called. She didn't bother to make him more comfortable first.

This time, she wouldn't underestimate him.

His eyes opened. He looked around, slowly untangled himself, and sat up. "Bleshnaggle?" he asked, grabbing for a blowing strand of Magdelene's hair.

She pulled it out of his hand and stood. The warlord pouted for a second, then discovered his boots. He gazed at them in fascination, babbling nonsense words and patting at the air with limp hands.

Everyone, the villagers and the riders, took a step forward.

"What happened?" Yolanda asked finally.

Magdelene watched the warlord trying to catch the billowing end of his own robe. "Death seems to have unsettled him a bit," she said.

"But Juan was fine."

The wizard shrugged. "Children are a lot more adaptable about..."

A dark-haired, pale-skinned young woman appeared suddenly beside the warlord, hands on hip and eyes flashing. "Would you make up your mind!" Her black robes hung straight to the sand, unaffected by the breeze. "What are we playing, musical souls? First I've got 'em, then I don't. You're not supposed to do that!" She spotted Juan worming his way to the front of the crowd. "Hi, kid."

Juan's mother grabbed his ear and yanked him behind her, cutting off his cheerful greeting. As far as she could see there was no one there, and her baby had been involved with quite enough strangeness for one afternoon.

"Death?" Magdelene hazarded.

Everyone, the riders and the villagers, took a step back. At this point, they were willing to take the wizard's word for it.

"Good guess," Death snapped. "Now, do you want to explain what's going on around here?"

"It's a long story."

"Look, lady," Death began, a little more calmly.

"Magdelene."

"Okay. Magdelene. Look, Magdelene, I haven't got time for a long story, I've got places to go, people to see. Let's make a deal-you can keep the kid, but tall, dark, and violent comes with me." She pointed a long, pale finger down at the warlord. Both her ebony brows rose as he pulled off a boot and began filling it with sand. "Now look what you've done!" she wailed, causing every living creature in earshot to break into a cold sweat. "You've broken him!"

"Sorry." Magdelene spread her hands. "No you're not." Death tapped one foot against the sand. "Okay. I'm sure we can work this out like sensible women. You can keep him, just give me one of them." She swept her gaze over the riders. One sensitive young man fainted, falling forward in the saddle, arms dangling limply down each side of his horse's neck. "Sorry," Magdelene said again, lifting her shoulders in a rueful shrug. "They're not mine to give. Why don't you just take one?" Three saddles were suddenly wet. "I don't work that way." Death shook her head. "I can't take someone if it isn't their time."

"Lady?" Both Death and the wizard turned. Carlos stepped forward, one twisted hand held out before him. Death's expression softened, and she smiled. She had a beautiful smile. "Don't I know you?" she asked softly. "You should," Carlos told her. "I've been expecting you for some time." Her voice became a caress. "Forgive me for taking so long." When she took his hand, he sighed and all the aches and pains of his age seemed to drop off him. He stood straight for a moment, his face serene, then he crumpled to the ground. All eyes were on the body of the old man. Only Magdelene saw the young one, tall and

strong, who still held Death's hand. Lips trembling, she gave him her best smile. He returned it. And was gone. Magdelene stood quietly, tears on her cheeks, while the villagers lovingly carried Carlos's body away. She stood quietly while the warlord's men managed to get their leader onto his horse, and she didn't move as they headed out of the village. She stood quietly until a small hand slipped into hers. "I've got the rest of the sand," Juan told her, a bulging pouch hung around his neck. "Can we go finish your house now?" She looked down and lightly touched his hair. "They want me to stay?" He shrugged, unsure who they were. "No one wants you to go." Hand in hand, they climbed the path to the headland. "Are you going to stay here forever," Juan asked. Magdelene met the anxious look in his black eyes and grinned. "How old are you, Juan?"

"Nine." The image of the young man she'd pulled from the future stood behind the child and winked. She shooed it back where it belonged. "I'll be around long enough." Juan nodded, satisfied. "So ... I took you back from Death today. Ready to let me fix your arm now?" He tossed his head. "I'm still thinkin' about it." The most powerful wizard in the world stared down at him in, astonishment, then started to laugh. "You," she declared, "are one hard kid to impress."

About Tanya Huff and "Be It Ever So Humble"

Tanya Huff says of herself that she dislikes telephones, store-bought muffins, and the concept of social drinking; she likes baseball, sleeping at least eight hours a night, and snow. She lives in Ontario, so it's probably a good thing she likes snow. I rejoice in the diversity of creation, having moved to California at least partly so I'd never have to see or feel snow again, having grown up with too much of it.

This story took first place in the Cauldron vote in issue 11, and we've been trying to get Tanya to write more stories about Magdelene ever since. She's still trying to come up with the perfect situation for her next Magdelene story, but in the meantime she's written us two other stories, so we can't complain too much.