

## **Gethsemane**

by Stephanie Cranford

The windows of the old abbey were rimed with frost—the real kind, from cold winter air and moisture. When viewed side by side with the webs and leavings of the snow spiders, the invaders, the difference was obvious. Real frost had a purity to it that belied the contaminated water, but the snow spider webs had a sickly yellow tinge. It was faint, but Minh could see it. Practice, she supposed. She rang the doorbell to the abbey and, when she didn't hear any sound inside, knocked on the door as well.

The abbey wasn't old, not even by Minnesotan standards, maybe a hundred years or so. Its age might have explained the giant swooping front of the building with an extension that went well past the roof, a giant hole in the middle possibly representing something or maybe just keeping the building from falling over. It was large, though, and to her knowledge there was only one inhabitant, so she wasn't surprised when it took a while for Britta to answer.

“Stand back,” came the expected metallic voice, and Minh took a step backwards to avoid the ammonia-and-fire blast that cleaned all the errant snow spiders from the door. She went into the vestibule, suffered another blast of chemicals, and left her haz-mat suit in the decontamination tank. After a thorough self-inspection, she put on the offered clothing (soft knits, easy to remove and replace), tucked a vial in her pocket, and hit the button for entry.

Britta was waiting for her, black robes almost shimmering in the dark hall—easier to see snow spiders against them. Her hair was also black, curling past her shoulders; other than the color, it was nothing like Minh’s, which was cropped to a quarter inch long because of the traveling she did. Minh exhaled, her breath fogging white, no yellow, and Britta nodded and gestured for her to come in.

The office, which used to belong to an abbot some forty or fifty years ago, was much warmer than the entryway; a portable heater ensured that they were comfortable without hats and gloves. “It’s nice,” Minh remarked; Britta had added a tapestry on the back wall, one depicting scenes of green grass and blue skies. Minh couldn’t remember green grass, and she’d never seen skies those particular shades of blue: she knew only the cold bright azure of winter sun and the gray-white of snowfall.

“Thank you,” Britta said solemnly. “You are here for the same reason you always come, I presume?”

“Yes,” Minh said. No point in lying. “Dr. Young asks about your health, and we care about you as a person, but.” She spread her hands, chapped and cracked from the dry air and constant chemical exposure. “We can’t win without you.”

“It’s not *me* you want,” Britta said, and turned to face the wall. “It has never been me.”

“It *is* you,” Minh said. They’d had this conversation twice a year, like clockwork, for ten years now, and it was easy to fall into the pattern. “It is you in the purest sense, and it means the difference between winning and losing.”

“Losing what?”

“Everything.”

“We have already lost so much, and now you want me to give up the only thing I have left.”

“To save us all,” Minh said. Her heart sank, although she had never really expected to get an answer that wasn't “no.” She had to try, though, because it was the only thing she could do.

“How do you even know it will work?” Britta asked. “You want me to sacrifice—everything. My life, probably yours, the sanctity of this place...” She gestured around her. “We're holding out. There has been no significant change, no drop in population, in five years. You don't need me.”

“Dr. Young is dying,” Minh said. It was her only trump card and she hated to throw it so early in the game, but maybe she could get home before dark if she played it now.

“Oh,” Britta said, obviously surprised. She hadn't known, apparently. “And no one else can—?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

A pause, long and cold, and Britta stood, robes making a soft *shh* noise. “Come with me,” she said.

Minh gave a short nod and stood to follow her.

Britta took her through dark halls, the lights unreplaceable and long dead; they passed more tapestries, all Britta's from long hours of solitude. One hallway held remnants of the abbey's past, portraits of the former abbots and pictures of popes of a religion all but a few had, if not disdained, then at least lost the taste for, following the invasion and subsequent massacre.

Minh knew where Britta was leading her, even though Britta's route seemed carefully calculated to invite sympathy rather than to travel efficiently. When they arrived at the chapel, Britta stood by the closed doors for a long moment, mouthing words silently.

The chapel doors were not sealed, and a puff of cold air came between them, crossing Minh's face. It wasn't as cold as outside, but clearly the chapel was unheated. Minh wondered how often Britta spent time in there. Daily? Multiple times a day? She wouldn't put it past her. The chill would likely make Britta feel like an ascetic and Minh could see how that would appeal.

Not to her, though. Minh liked being warm, even though she experienced it so infrequently.

"This chapel," Britta said, and paused again.

Minh waited.

"This chapel," Britta said, her voice a little stronger this time, "has stood for so many years." They knew how long, sort of; scientists argued on the exact calculation of the transition from YBI—years before the invasion—to YA, years after, but Minh allowed Britta her poetic license. "The men it represented, the men who worshiped here, the men who studied here, and the men who took vows here—they—" Britta's voice broke. "Well," she said a few moments later. "I suppose it's better that they're dead at this point. They can't know what I'm about to do here."

"Can't they?" Minh asked. "I'd think they'd understand a little something about sacrifice and martyrdom."

"Is that what you think?" Britta asked, a little sharply.

"That's what you keep saying," Minh said. "Giving up everything, the ultimate sacrifice?"

"That's *me*," Britta said. "But the brothers here, they ran a retreat. There used to be gardens everywhere. It was a place for renewal and healing and transformation, not—sacrifice."

"And?"

"And I will not desecrate it," Britta said.

"Is that what you think it is? Desecration?" Minh gestured to the crucifix over the altar, but had no words to add.

"Yes," Britta said. "It's not the same."

"Not desecration or sacrifice but transfiguration, perhaps?"

"Why would what I do be—I'm not *him*," Britta said. "Dr. Young isn't John the Baptist. You aren't—"

"Who exactly am I in this scenario?" Minh asked, momentarily amused. "I think I'm outside the story, or the tree he shouted to in the wilderness."

"Gabriel," Britta said, but pressed her lips shut and shook her head at Minh's inquiring look. "I'm not the savior. The sacrifice of a woman is—I'm the Virgin Mary here, mother of the savior."

"Not literally," Minh felt compelled to point out, and expected and received a dirty look for her words. "You—I can't control what anyone thinks of what you may or may not do here, but I can spread the word."

"You'll be John the Evangelist?" Britta asked, one eyebrow quirked.

"If you like." There was an image of the purported sainted Gospel author just to the right, and Minh spared the old bearded white man a glance. "Don't think I can grow a beard like that, though."

“My family was only nominally Christian, you know,” Britta said conversationally.

“And mine had the choice to convert or die a hundred and twenty-five years ago,” Minh said. “It doesn’t mean they didn’t find strength in the words of love and forgiveness, and doesn’t mean you haven’t here.”

“True enough,” Britta said.

“Is that it?” Minh asked. “Can you forgive yourself?”

“For what?” Britta asked sharply, and the last vowel echoed.

“For being human?” Minh said.

“I’m *not*.”

“Aren’t you?”

“I don’t know,” Britta allowed. “Was he?”

“Depends on your denomination,” Minh said, only half joking, “but overall, yes. The point of this isn’t a debate on the essential nature of humanity so much as whether you, Britta, are okay with being human, and having fears, and making mistakes.”

“This is a mistake I can’t afford to make,” Britta said bitterly.

“Is it a mistake?”

“What part?”

“That was my next question,” Minh said.

“It was a mistake to let you in here,” Britta said with a dry chuckle, devoid of mirth.

“I don’t think it was,” Minh said. “I don’t want to be trapped out there, if nothing else. But what is the mistake? Not wanting to—”

“Die,” Britta said.

“Or live.”

“You want to do it?”

“I would,” Minh said, “but I can’t. You know that.” Her DNA was normal; she didn’t have the one tiny transposition that would allow Britta to save them all. Dr. Young had been trying to duplicate it—or at least discover it naturally in the tiny, scattered population that remained—but he couldn’t, and his upcoming death cut the time too short. No one of his particular strain of brilliance had stepped forward to take over his role, and while he had been documenting everything he could, the few humans left weren’t a wide enough applicant pool for him to find the successor he needed.

“I do,” Britta said. She started pacing, her black robes flaring out around her ankles.

“So in a few months, we won’t be able to keep them at bay, and then—”

“I know what will happen,” Britta said, cutting Minh off with a slashing gesture. “Do you forget? I was there.”

“No, I haven’t forgotten,” Minh said pointedly, and Britta sighed and resumed her pacing.

“Are you afraid of the pain?” Minh asked. “I have access to drugs that could help that.”

“You mean you brought them,” Britta said. “Are you supposed to bring me back, or just kill me here?”

“Neither,” Minh said, although she wasn’t sure about that. No one had ever said so, but “by any means necessary” was implied.

“It would be smart,” Britta said. “It doesn’t really require a willing participant.”

“Technically, no, but it makes a better story.”

“There will be no stories to tell if we all die.”

“Is that what you want?” Minh asked. “Me to take you by force, drug you, shove it down your throat? Because I won’t. It’s still your choice.”

“Still the illusion of my choice.”

“Illusions are powerful,” Minh said. “They’re the difference between right and wrong, often. And here, if I force you, and I live, I will have to live with what I did, so the options are allow you the illusion of a choice or absolutely ensure my own death.”

“That’s a bit dramatic,” Britta said mildly.

“This from a woman who holed herself up in an abbey an hour outside of town.”

“I had my reasons,” Britta said, but chuckled. “It’s fair. We are both overwrought. Tea?”

Minh shook her head. “If your no is firm, I should leave,” she said. “We’re still hoping for a miracle, and it takes all hands on deck.”

“Ah,” Britta said. She took a deep breath and immediately started coughing; Minh wasn’t sure why until she saw blood on Britta’s hand when she pulled it away.

“You’re dying,” Minh said, and Britta nodded. “When? Did you get—”

“No,” Britta said. “It’s, as far as I can tell, something like pneumonia or tuberculosis. Something we could cure, if we had the right drugs.”

Minh saw anew the pallor of Britta’s skin, which she’d attributed to the weather, and the red spots in her cheeks, which she’d attributed to high emotion or religious fervor. “Oh,” she said. “So—”

“So it’s not a firm no.”

“Will it still work?—Of course it will,” Minh said before Britta could answer. “DNA is DNA, bacterial invader or no.”



“Correct,” Britta said.

“So if you’re dying, and time is short because Dr. Young is dying, what’s your hesitation?”

“I’d hoped for even a little more time,” Britta said. “I’d hoped for a miracle; I’d hoped to avoid pain. I’d hoped for a little more certainty.”

“You can’t have that last,” Minh said. “It’s not within my power. It’s not within Dr. Young’s power, or anyone else alive.”

“I know,” Britta said.

“I can’t give you a miracle, but I can give you more time.” Minh dug into the pocket of her tunic and found the sealed vial containing one eight-legged—that was, genetically modified; the extra leg was only a marker—snow spider, a bright green dot on its back. “I can leave this with you and you can keep it until whenever you feel the end should be.”

“No,” Britta said, leaving her hands in her sleeves by her side; Minh’s hand holding the vial dropped. “If I am going to do this, I want someone to see what I did.”

“For history?”

“No, for me.”

“Oh.”

The women stared at each other until Britta had to look away for a coughing fit; Minh instinctively stepped back. She did not need tuberculosis, even if it wasn’t entirely certain that she would survive Britta’s transformation.

Britta noticed, and gave a dry chuckle. “I do not blame you,” she said. “How could I?”

Minh held out one hand and tipped her palm up in acknowledgment. “Well?”

“At sunset,” Britta said. “It is not long from now.”

It was, as far as they could tell these things anymore, late spring; they were so far north that sunset might happen an hour before true dark. If Britta said at sunset, though, they would wait until sunset. “How long?” Minh asked.

“Not long,” Britta repeated. “Come with me.” She led Minh back to her office, where they had started, pausing once for a coughing fit.

“Do you have cough drops or anything?” Minh asked.

“It’s a little late for those,” Britta said.

Minh didn’t see the point of foregoing palliative treatment, but it wasn’t her throat being ripped, so she said nothing.

“Wait here,” Britta said, and Minh sat in one of the chairs in the office, facing the tapestry again, as Britta left.

Minh studied the spring scenes in the tapestry again and found a small rabbit in three of them. In the first it was hiding in the grass; in the second it frolicked with a second rabbit. In the third it was surrounded by other rabbits, and in the fourth, it was missing—not entirely, for there was a bird of prey of some sort in the corner with something indistinctly reddish-brown in its claws. Birth, life, reproduction, death: it was not subtle. Reproduction was a pipe dream these days, but Britta would change that. She would die, but die by reproducing. The rabbit, Minh was sure, would approve.

Britta returned some time later; she’d changed from all black into all red, a bodysuit with a robe over top. It was also not subtle, and Minh said as much.

“The time for subtlety fled some decades ago,” Britta said. “Come.”

Minh followed her back to the chapel, where they both knelt in silent prayer, Minh awkwardly and Britta with the ease of long practice but an edge of stiffness that betrayed her failing body. Minh's prayer was largely to an unformed will of the universe: *Please let this work*. She did not know the contents of Britta's prayer, and she never would.

"Now," Britta said as she stood, "leave."

"Leave?"

"Yes. Just outside the door. You may survive this."

Frankly, Minh didn't care at that point if she did or not but if Britta asked her to go, she would go. "All right."

"Oh, one last thing," Britta said, as Minh's hand was on the door. "Before you go back to the Cities, take the series of journals above my bed. You'll find them."

"Your journals?" Minh asked.

"Yes, mine."

"Don't worry," Minh said. "No one will forget you. Your death will mean something."

"I want my *life* to mean something," Britta said, and Minh blinked.

"Oh."

"Oh, indeed." Britta stepped forward and kissed Minh on the forehead. "Go."

"I will."

Minh stepped out of the chapel and closed the door, turning to face Britta. She watched as Britta took a deep breath, opened the vial, and swallowed the contents, the genetically-engineered snow spider. Her body started to glow from the core outward, until her hands and feet and hair were on fire, burning red and orange in the gray gloom.

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And as Minh turned to go get the journals, echoing in her head was a line from a liturgy she hadn't heard in years: *She is risen indeed.*