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Churning Sand

By Samuel P. Brann

Camille padded down the sacred beach with her sand rake while her elder sister, Hayley, awaited her on the other side. Hayley stood, shoulder straight, her white dress aglow in the moonlight beneath the towering cliff face. The elder sister stood proudly, a picture of devotion. The dawn light pierced the horizon, sending rays of pink lancing against the moon's fading brilliance. This was the signal to begin the ritual.

Camille gripped her sand rake as if she'd be adrift without it. Unlike Hayley, Camille rarely paid attention to her mother's teaching of the ritual. The final rite of passage to become a Sister of the Divine was passed down orally from generation to generation. Camille choked back a sob at the idea of failing, of her kind vanishing, a dead culture wiped away by the slavers' invasion.

Camille glanced anxiously up at the treacherous path they had descended. The dark basalt outcroppings made jagged shadows with real edges. Many of them had torn at her dress. Above, the craggy line of rocks resembled leering men. Shaking her head, she set her rake and lightly dragged it over the sand.

The two sisters moved in wandering paths across the beach. Rhythm of their breathing was as important as the shapes their rakes made in the sand. The swoosh of the sand matched their breathing as they inhaled, in summoning, and exhaled, in casting the spirit in the grooves left by the rakes. The lines in the sand grew more intricate as they approached one another in curves and whorls. Soon, the small beach was nearly all marked. Next, they orbited one another, walking over their lines, breathing and circling one another in a meditative choreography. Dragging the rake behind them, they danced in an increasingly tightening circle around one another. Their eyes were tightly shut as they prayed fervently amid the whispering sand.

Finally, they paused, facing one another with eyes open. They were panting now, but the strenuous part was about to begin. Spinning their rakes upside down, they buried their rake's handle ends into the sand. Slowly, they began to stir the sand, churning the damper stuff beneath, in a clockwise motion. They continued this until the sun rose higher, their dresses damp against their backs, the sun a menacing burden on their shoulders.

Camille glanced at the water and noticed the sea was as calm as the mountain ponds. It was so surreal that she thought she might have fallen unconscious and was now dreaming. To add to the surrealness, the sand was revolving on its own between them.

Immediately, Camille dropped to her knees beside the miracle.

“Mother,” she beseeched. “Please, come back to us,” tears mixed with sweat gleaming on her red face.

The sand glowed as deep as hot coals. Camille's weary heart, suddenly invigorated, sang at the prospect of successfully completing this summoning. A sighing breeze blew across the little beach that moved neither sand nor sea. It cooled the sweat off their bodies for one moment.

“Elder Ronan thought you would be here,” a man’s voice cut in nearby. Startled, Hayley spun around to see a man in leathers and a wide brimmed, snowy white hat. He was walking across the sand, scuffing the patterns of their efforts.

The churning sand between the sisters ceased.

“No,” Camille screamed.

His bristly grin was ugly as shattered faith, and his voice was as guttural. “No gods are gonna save ye from Market Day,” he said.

Desperately, Camille shoveled the hole with her hands. She sobbed as the sand sifted through her fingers like time lost.

The slaver grabbed Hayley and yanked her upwards.

“Keep churning the sand,” Hayley shrieked.

What good would that do? Camille wondered bleakly. They would never hear their mother’s loving whisper now. They’d never again listen to the soft lilt of her patient storytelling.

The dusty man swung a backhanded fist and connected across Hayley’s face. The sound of impact was sickening, like a slab of meat hitting the floor.

Enraged, Camille picked up her sand rake and batted his legs. Startled, he loosened his grip on Hayley, who dropped to the ground. Camille stood before their divot in the sand, both hands wielding her rake. She was swinging it side to side with a feral snarl. “Come and get me, old man!”

The slaver chuckled and took his time regarding her. He looked pleased at his success in the hunt, denying the sisters their last chance to commune with their mother, to be full-fledged Sisters of the Divine.

Against her better judgement, Camille stuck her rake in the sand, stirring the earth as before. She abandoned herself to her faith, what little there was, and committed herself to the ritual.

He lurched towards her, probably feeling the pain from Camille's strike. Camille dodged his reach, and the slaver stepped directly into the indentation that had once been the epicenter of their summoning. His boot sank to his thigh and his vile grin turned to startlement. He tried to step out, but his other leg soon followed. "Clever little slaves," he muttered.

Camille churned in earnest now, praying to the Divine to protect her and her sister. She felt it then. The Divine's power emanating from the indentation, conducted by the whirling lines in the sand.

The slaver soon realized he was sinking and there was a glimmer of fear in his eyes. "Gimme the rake," he said as he sank up to his chest. "Pull me up." Then he was up to his head, and his terror was naked on his face. "I'll let ye go, I swear. I'll pretend I never saw ye," the slaver pleaded.

Hayley joined Camille in the churning. As the sand filled the slaver's mouth and eyes, the sisters stood still and watched him righteously. The cooling breeze that moved neither sand nor sea returned, brushing their hair and whispering promises of newfound purpose.