

Two Moons: The Courthouse

By Cameron O'Brien



Annie looked tired, worn out. One eye hung from a socket. It had been that way for weeks now. She had dirt on her face and arms. She always had some dirt on her. Deor's Mum and Dad kept the house pretty clean, but there was always dirt blowing in from outside, or being dragged in from the garden. Plus, Deor played with Annie outside a lot too. She couldn't help get her dirty. Annie was her favourite doll.

Deor didn't really feel like playing with Annie right now, though. The front door was open; it had been that way since Mum left earlier in the day. She hadn't come back yet. Sage and Dad were in the garden. Sam and Alexi were together in the other room. No one would notice if Deor left.

Leaving Annie where she lay on the floor, Deor stood up and crept through the room to the front door, then slipped out into the street. She'd just go and check where Mum was, what she was doing, then come straight home. No one would notice she'd gone.

‘Protests,’ Mum had said earlier in the day. That morning, at breakfast. ‘Against the occupation.’

Deor guessed she meant protests about the patrollers, the occupation by Merope. Deor couldn’t remember the time before the occupation. She was only very small when the invasion happened. Little more than a baby. She was eight now. The patrollers running her town, Apin, was all she knew. She never really paid the patrollers any attention; she was used to them. She instinctively avoided them though. She and Sam walked to school every school day and home again afterwards. They always saw the patrollers, but never looked at them. Mostly they stood in the square, where the adults were, the merchants selling things.

Today, though, more noise came from the square. Nerves rose in her as she approached it. They flitted up inside her like the butterflies she saw in her yard in spring. Several patrollers with guns yelled at protesters. Deor couldn’t make out what they were saying. Some of them had guns pointed at people standing in front of the courthouse. Two of her townsfolk had been arrested. They sat against the column in the middle of the square, their hands shackled behind their backs. *Was that for protesting?* Deor wondered.

Part of her wanted to turn around, to go home. She sensed something. The birthmark on her shoulder felt warmer than normal. Sometimes that happened, and when it did, it generally meant danger. She kept it covered though, as always.

She wanted to see her mum, talk to her, ask her when she was coming home. This protesting gave her a bad feeling, not just the butterflies, but something worse. Now, as the patrollers yelled at the people, she saw them differently. They were a danger; they scared her.

But she had to find Mum. She walked slowly into the square. *I’ll just find her and ask how long until she comes home.*

The two people who’d been arrested looked up at her as she walked across the square. One of them was her best friend Arunet’s father. ‘Hey,’ he whispered. ‘Honey, you shouldn’t

be ...’

‘Unlock these chains, now!’ screamed a patroller, drowning out the rest of Arunet’s father’s sentence. The patroller stood on the stoop of the courthouse, pointing his rifle at five people chained to the courthouse door. They had it closed off and blocked by their chained bodies. The chains looped around each of them, connecting them, while also running through the large steel handles of the courthouse door. The courthouse was the patroller’s headquarters. It hadn’t served as a court in years. With it blocked off by the protesters, they couldn’t use it.

‘We are protesting your unlawful presence in our town, and in our country!’ said one of the men in the group. ‘The Meropan occupation is unlawful and unjust, and it’s our right to protest it!’

The veins on the neck of the patroller at the front pulsed. His face was red. Deor had never seen anyone look so angry. She didn’t want to get too close to him. He was a very big man. She looked from him to the man who had spoken. As she did, the man spat at the patroller; it hit him in the face.

The patroller instinctively wiped the spit off his face, then raised his rifle and pointed it at the man who had spat on him, the veins pulsating even more now. The patroller quickly aimed his rifle, then shot the man in the head.

The sound of the gunshot echoed throughout the square. Everything else went silent. The chatter from the people on the other side of the square that provided the daily background hum to life in Apin stopped. No birds made any sounds, no insects. The gunshot sound bounced off the stone buildings and walls, echoing beyond the end of the man’s life. The smoke from the patroller’s rifle slowly wafted upwards as the man slumped forwards, dead instantly.

‘Oh no ...’ Deor said involuntarily. She had an instinctive reaction to run, to bolt away

from the patrollers and go back home, but she couldn't move. She felt as though she were rooted to the ground and couldn't move away. Paralyzed as fear flooded her senses.

The woman standing next to the man who'd been shot turned as Deor spoke. Their eyes locked—it was her mother ...

'Deor,' her mother mouthed, alarm streaking across her face.

The patrollers all raised their rifles and pointed them at the four remaining protesters. Without hesitation they fired, bullet after bullet thundering into the bodies of the protesters, now trapped by their own chains. Deor's mother rocked back as she was shot. The four protesters twisted and contorted under the hail of bullets, but still tied to the door of the courthouse, they did not fall down.

The firing stopped, and silence descended on the square again. The smoke from the guns slowly wafted away on the southerly breeze. The bodies of the five protesters hung within the chains, twisted and bent, but chained still to the door, still blocking it off, but now only with their dead bodies. The white courthouse door was splattered with red that dripped down the courthouse steps.

'Clear the square!' called the patroller at the front, walking away from the courthouse. 'Everyone back to their homes! Anyone out here in five minutes will be arrested!'

Deor stared at her mother, tangled somewhere in the mess that still stood chained to the door. No thoughts went through her mind. She felt far away from herself, unable to move or think.

Suddenly, she was picked up from behind.

'What are you doing out here?' she heard her father say. 'Deor ... it's too dangerous.' Her father, Cyrus, glanced back at the protesters as he carried Deor quickly away from the courthouse. He wiped his hair away from his eyes and his head dropped. He uttered a long, but soft, cry.

‘Everyone out!’ the patroller yelled again.

Cyrus turned away from the square and carried Deor back towards their home.

‘Mum ...’ Deor said, finally feeling she could speak.

‘We can’t stay,’ Cyrus said. ‘It’s too dangerous. We have to go, Dee, come on, I have to get you home.’

Cyrus walked quickly away from the square, carrying Deor. She looked back towards the courthouse. A patroller with an axe was cutting the chains off the door. He struck at them three, four times, then they snapped. All five bodies of the protesters fell to the ground in a heap.

Deor closed her eyes, and felt rage begin to swell within her. This was a different feeling, one she had never felt before. Anger, hatred and rage all mixed together within her. They washed in like the tide, pushing up inside her until she felt it all through her body, an uncontrollable rage against the patrollers in the square. She saw now why they protested, what these people were, what they really were. And they would pay. She swore that, one day, she would make them pay ...

The Courthouse is a short story set ten years before The Eternal Tide.

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