

BLOOD GRAINS SPEAK THROUGH MEMORIES



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“Blood Grains Speak Through Memories” is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Reviews of “Blood Grains Speak Through Memories”

Five stars. “Hugo Award worthy.”

— Rocket Stack Rank

Recommended. “March is science fantasy month at Beneath Ceaseless Skies, which I always like. There’s something about mixing SF and fantasy that to my mind brings forth ideas wilder and more colorful than either genre provides alone. The best, which is to say, weirdest example comes from Jason Sanford (not surprisingly). ‘Blood Grains Speak Through Memories’ is set in a far future in which the environment is preserved by ‘anchors’, humans enhanced by ‘grains’ on their land. It’s cool and strange stuff, almost gothic at times, thought-provoking and honest.”

— Rich Horton, *Locus*, May 2016

“It is unlike any story I have ever read and I give it my highest possible recommendation.”

— Eric Kimminau, Tangent Online

“Sanford skillfully sets up an intricate, weird, and uniquely imagined world where land-anchors are set against day-fellows (don’t ask, just read), and where memory, family, protecting the land, and finding a place to call home are complex and potentially dangerous things. It’s a story that made me want to read more about the world it conjures.”

— Maria Haskins

“A fine story and one well worth its fairly substantial weight. Indeed!”

— Charles Payseur, Quick Sip Reviews

“With its creative setting and deep emotional stakes, this story was my favorite of the month.”

— Tethyan Books

“Jason Sanford has created a unique and compelling world in this novelette ... The characters have complex motivations that are equal to the unusual setting, making this intricate SF tale a delight to unpack.”

— Tadiana Jones, Fantasy Literature

Dedicated to Scott H. Andrews, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. This story would not exist without his encouragement and support.

Blood Grains Speak Through Memories

Morning's song of light and warmth glowed on the horizon as the land's anchor, Frere-Jones Roeder, stepped from her front door. The red-burn dots of fairies swirled in the river mists flowing over her recently plowed sunflower fields. Cows mooed in the barn, eager to be milked. Chickens flapped their wings as they stirred from roosts on her home's sod-grass roof.

Even though the chilled spring day promised nothing but beauty, the grains in Frere-Jones's body shivered to her sadness as she looked at the nearby dirt road. The day-fellows along the road were packing their caravan. Evidently her promises of safety weren't enough for them to chance staying even a few more hours.

Frere-Jones tapped the message pad by the door, pinging her fellow anchors on other lands so they knew the caravan was departing. She then picked up her gift sack and hurried outside to say goodbye.

As Frere-Jones closed the door, a red fairy wearing her dead lifemate's face fluttered before her eyes. A flash of memory jumped into her from the fairy's grain-created body. One of Haoquin's memories, from a time right after they'd wed. They'd argued over something silly—like newlyweds always did—and Haoquin had grown irritated at Frere-Jones's intransigence.

But that was all the fairy shared. The taste of Haoquin's memory didn't show Frere-Jones and Haoquin making up. The memory didn't show the two of them ending the day by walking hand-in-hand along her land's forest trails.

Frere-Jones slapped the fairy away, not caring if the land and its damned grains were irritated at her sadness. She liked the day-fellows. She'd choose them any day over the grains.

The fairy spun into an angry buzzing and flew over the sunflower fields to join the others.

Frere-Jones walked up to the caravan's wagons to find the day-fellows detaching their power systems from her farm's solar and wind grid. The caravan leader nodded to Frere-Jones as he harnessed a team of four horses to the lead wagon.

"We appreciate you letting us plug in," the man said. "Our solar collectors weaken something awful when it's overcast."

"Anytime," Frere-Jones said. "Pass the word to other caravans that I'm happy to help. Power or water or food, I'll always share."

Pleasantries done, Frere-Jones hurried down the line of wagons.

The first five wagons she passed were large multi-generational affairs with massive ceramic wheels standing as tall as she. Pasted-on red ribbons outlined the wagons' scars from old battles. Day-fellows believed any battle they survived was a battle worth honoring.

Adults and teenagers and kids smiled at Frere-Jones as she passed, everyone hurrying to harness horses and stow baggage and deploy their solar arrays.

Frere-Jones waved at the Kameron twins, who were only seven years old and packing up their family's honey and craft goods. Frere-Jones reached into her pocket and handed the twins tiny firefly pebbles. When thrown, the pebbles would burst into mechanical fireflies which flew in streaks of rainbow colors for a few seconds. The girls giggled—firefly pebbles were a great prank. Kids loved to toss them when adults were sitting around campfires at night, releasing bursts of fireflies to startle everyone.

Frere-Jones hugged the twins and walked on, finally stopping before the caravan's very last wagon.

The wagon stood small, barely containing the single family inside, built not of ceramic but of a reinforced lattice of ancient metal armor. Instead of bright ribbons to honor old battles, a faded maroon paint flaked and peeled from the walls. Large impact craters shown on one side of the wagon. Long scratches surrounded the back door from superhard claws assaulting the wagon's armored shutters.

An ugly, ugly wagon. Still, it had bent under its last attack instead of breaking. The caravan's leader had told Frere-Jones that this family's previous caravan had been attacked a few months ago. All that caravan's ceramic wagons shattered, but this wagon survived.

Frere-Jones fed her final sugar cubes to the wagon's horses, a strong pair who nickered in pleasure as the grains within their bodies pulsed in sync to her own. Horses adapted so perfectly to each land's grains as they fed on grasses and hay. That flexibility was why horses usually survived attacks even when their caravan did not.

"Morning, Master-Anchor Frere-Jones," a teenage girl, Alexnya, said as she curtsied, holding the sides of her leather vest out like a fancy dress. Most kids in the caravan wore flowing cotton clothes, but Alexnya preferred leather shirts and vests and pants.

"Master-Anchor Frere-Jones, you honor us with your presence," Alexnya's mother, Jun, said in an overly formal manner. Her husband, Takeshi, stood behind her, holding back their younger daughter and son as if Frere-Jones was someone to fear.

They're skittish from that attack, Frere-Jones thought. A fresh scar ran the left side of Jun's thin face while Takeshi still wore a healing pad around his neck. Their two young kids, Miya and Tufte, seemed almost in tears at being near an anchor. When Frere-Jones smiled at them, both kids bolted to hide in the wagon.

Only Alexnya stood unafraid, staring into Frere-Jones's eyes as if confident this land's anchor wouldn't dare harm her.

"I've brought your family gifts," Frere-Jones said.

"Why?" Jun asked, suspicious.

Frere-Jones paused, unused to explaining. "I give gifts to all families who camp on my land."

“A land which you protect,” Jun said, scratching the scar on her face. As if to remind Frere-Jones what the anchors who’d attacked their last caravan had done.

Frere-Jones nodded sadly. “I am my land’s anchor,” she said. “I wish it wasn’t so. If I could leave I would... my son...”

Frere-Jones turned to walk back to her farm to milk the cows. Work distracted her from memories. But Alexnya jumped forward and grabbed her hand.

“I’ve heard of your son,” Alexnya said. “He’s a day-fellow now, isn’t he?”

Frere-Jones grinned. “He is indeed. Travels the eastern roads in a caravan with his own lifemate and kids. I see him once every four years when the land permits his caravan to return.” Frere-Jones held the gift bag out to Alexnya. “Please take this. I admit it’s a selfish gift. I want day-fellows to watch out for my son and his family. Lend a hand when needed.”

“Day-fellows protect our own,” Jun stated in a flat voice. “No need to bribe us to do what we already do.”

Alexnya, despite her mother’s words, took the canvas gift bag and opened it, pulling out a large spool of thread and several short knives.

“The thread is reinforced with nano-armor,” Frere-Jones said, “the strongest you can find. You can weave it into the kids’ clothes. The short knives were made by a day-fellow biosmith and are supposedly unbreakable...”

Frere-Jones paused, not knowing what else to say. She thought it silly that day-fellows were prohibited from possessing more modern weapons than swords and knives to protect themselves, even if she knew why the grains demanded this.

“Thank you, Frere-Jones,” Alexnya said as she curtsied again. “My family appreciates your gifts, which will come in handy on the road.”

Unsure what else to say, Frere-Jones bowed back before walking away, refusing to dwell on the fact that she was the reason this day-fellow caravan was fleeing her land.



That night Frere-Jones lit the glow-stones in the fireplace and sat down on her favorite sofa. The stones’ flickering flames licked the weariness from her body. A few more weeks and the chilled nights would vanish as spring fully erupted across her land.

Frere-Jones didn’t embrace spring as she once had. Throughout the valley her fellow anchors celebrated the growing season with dances, feasts, and lush night-time visits to the forest with their lifemates and friends.

Frere-Jones no longer joined such festivities. Through the grains she tasted the land’s excitement—the mating urge of the animals, the budding of the trees, the growth of the new-planted seeds in her fields. She felt the cows in the fields nuzzling each other’s necks and instinctively touched her own neck in response. She sensed several does hiding in the nearby forests and

touched her stomach as the fawns in their wombs kicked. She even felt the grass growing on her home's sod-roof and walls, the roots reaching slowly down as water flowed by capillary action into the fresh-green blades.

The grains allowed Frere-Jones, as this land's anchor, to feel everything growing and living and dying for two leagues around her. She even dimly felt the anchors on nearby lands—Jeroboam and his family ate dinner in their anchordom while Chakatie hunted deer in a forest glen on her land. Chakatie was probably gearing up for one of her family's bloody ritualized feasts to welcome spring.

Frere-Jones sipped her warm mulled wine before glancing at her home's message pad. Was it too soon to call her son again? She'd tried messaging Colton a few hours ago, but the connection failed. She was used to this—day-fellow caravans did slip in and out of the communication grid—but that didn't make it any less painful. At least he was speaking to her again.

Frere-Jones downed the rest of her drink. As she heated a new mug of wine over the stove she took care to ignore the fairies dancing outside her kitchen window. Usually the fairies responded to the land's needs and rules, but these fairies appeared to have been created by the grains merely to annoy her. The grains were well aware that Frere-Jones hated her part in the order and maintenance of this land.

Two fairies with her parents' faces glared in the window. Other fairies stared with the faces of even more distant ancestors. Several fairies mouthed Frere-Jones's name, as if reminding her of an anchor's duty, while others spoke in bursts of memories copied by the grains from her ancestors' lives.

Fuck duty, she thought as she swallowed half a mug of wine. *Fuck you for what you did to Haoquin.*

Thankfully her lifemate's face wasn't among those worn by these fairies. While the grains had no problem creating fairies with Haoquin's face, they knew not to push Frere-Jones when she was drunk.

As Frere-Jones left the kitchen she paused before the home altar. In the stone pedestal's basin stood three carved stone figurines—herself, her son, and Haoquin. The hand-sized statues rested on the red-glowing sand filling the basin.

In the flickering light of the glow stones the figures seemed to twitch as if alive, shadow faces accusing Frere-Jones of unknown misdeeds. Frere-Jones touched Haoquin's face—felt his sharp cheekbones and mischievous smirk—causing the basin's red sands to rise up, the individual grains climbing the statues until her family glowed a faint speckled red over the darker sands below.

The red grains burned her fingers where she touched Haoquin, connecting her to what remained of her lifemate. She felt his bones in the family graveyard on the edge of the forest. Felt the insects and microbes which had fed on his remains and absorbed his grains before dying and fertilizing the ground and the trees and the other plants throughout the land, where the grains had then been eaten by deer and cows and rabbits. If Frere-Jones closed her eyes she could almost feel Haoquin's grains pulsing throughout the land. Could almost

imagine him returning to her and hugging her tired body.

Except he couldn't. He was gone. Only the echo of him lived on in the microscopic grains which had occupied his body and were now dispersed again to her land.

And her son was even farther beyond the grains' reach, forced to forsake both the grains and her land when he turned day-fellow.

Frere-Jones sat down hard on the tile floor and cried, cradling her empty wine mug.

She was lying on the floor, passed out from the wine, when a banging woke her.

"Frere-Jones, you must help us!" a woman's voice called. She recognized the voice—Jun, from the day-fellow family which left that morning.

Frere-Jones's hands shook, curling like claws. The grains in her body screamed against the day-fellows for staying on her land.

No, she ordered, commanding the grains to stand down. *It's too soon. There are a few more days before they wear out this land's welcome.*

The grains rattled irritably in her body like pebbles in an empty water gourd. While they should obey her, to be safe Frere-Jones stepped across the den and lifted several ceramic tiles from the floor. She pulled Haoquin's handmade laser pistol from the hiding spot and slid it behind her back, held by her belt. She was now ready to shoot herself in the head if need be.

Satisfied that she was ready, Frere-Jones opened the door. Jun and Takeshi stood there supporting Alexnya, who leaned on them as if drunk but stared with eyes far too awake and aware. Alexnya shook and spasmed, her muscles clenching as she moaned a low, painful hiss, unable to fully scream.

Frere-Jones looked behind the family. She reached out to the grains in the land's animals and plants and soils. She didn't feel any other anchors on her land. If any of them found the day-fellows here ...

"Bring her inside," she told Jun. "Takeshi, hide your wagon and horses in the barn."

"Not until later," Takeshi said, wanting to stay with his daughter.

Jun snapped at him. "Don't be a fool, Tak. We can't be seen. Not after everyone knows our caravan left."

Frere-Jones took Alexnya in her arms, the grains powering up her strength so the teenage girl seemed to weigh no more than a baby. Takeshi hurried back to the wagon, where the family's two youngest kids stared in fright from the open door.

Frere-Jones carried Alexnya to Colton's old room and placed her on the bed. Alexnya continued to spasm, her muscles clenching and shivering under her drained-pale skin.

"Please," Alexnya whimpered. "Please..."

As Jun held her daughter's hand, Frere-Jones leaned closer to the girl. The grains jumped madly in Frere-Jones's blood, erupting her fangs like razors ready to rip into these day-fellows' throats. Frere-Jones breathed deep to calm herself and gagged on Alexnya's sweaty scent. It carried the faintest glimmer of grains inside Alexnya's body.

"She's infected," Frere-Jones said in shock. "With grains. My grains."

Jun nodded, an angry look on her face as if Frere-Jones had personally caused this abomination. “The further we travelled from your land, the more pain she experienced. She didn’t stop screaming until we left the caravan and began making our way back here.”

Frere-Jones growled softly. “This is unheard of,” she said. “Grains shouldn’t infect day-fellows.”

“Day-fellow lore says it happens on rare occasions. Our lore also says each land’s anchor has medicine to cure an infection.”

Frere-Jones understood. She ran to the kitchen and grabbed her emergency bag. Inside was a glass vial half-full of powder glowing a faint red.

She hadn’t used the powder since Colton became a day-fellow. The powder’s nearly dim glow meant it had weakened severely over the years. Chakatie had taken most of her remaining medicine after Colton left, worried about Frere-Jones killing herself with an overdose. Now all that was left was a half-vial of nearly worthless medicine.

But she had nothing else to give. She held the vial over her altar—letting it sync again with the coding from her land’s grains—then mixed the powder in a mug of water and hurried back to Alexnya.

“Drink this,” she said, holding the mug to Alexnya’s lips. The girl gasped and turned her head as if being near the liquid hurt her.

“Why is it hurting her?” Jun asked, blocking Alexnya’s mouth with her hand so Frere-Jones couldn’t try again. “I thought the medicine helped.”

“It does, but the grains always resist at first,” Frere-Jones said. “When I gave it to my own son years ago he... went through some initial pain. We usually only give small doses to new anchors at puberty to calm the explosive growth of the grains in their bodies. But if we give Alexnya a full dose for the next few days, it should kill the grains.”

Jun frowned. “How much pain?”

“I... don’t know. But if we don’t do something soon there will be too many grains in her body to remove.”

Frere-Jones didn’t need to tell Jun what would happen if Alexnya became anchored to this land. The anchors from the lands surrounding Frere-Jones’s wouldn’t take kindly to a day-fellow girl becoming one of them.

“We shouldn’t have come here,” Jun said, standing up. “Maybe if we take Alexnya away from here before the grains establish themselves...”

“Taking her from the land will definitely kill her—the grains have already anchored. We need to remove them from her body. There’s no other way.”

“I’ll drink it,” Alexnya whispered in a weak voice. She glared at Frere-Jones in fury. Frere-Jones prayed the grains weren’t already sharing the land’s stored memories with this day-fellow girl. Showing Alexnya what Frere-Jones had done. Revealing secrets known by no one else except her son and Chakatie.

Despite her hesitation, Jun nodded agreement. She held her daughter’s spasming body as Frere-Jones poured the liquid through the girl’s lips. Alexnya swallowed half the medicine before screaming. Splashes and dribbles on her leather shirt and pants glowed bright red as she thrashed in the bed for a

moment before passing out.

Frere-Jones and Jun tucked Alexnya under the covers and stepped into the den. Takeshi stood by the fireplace holding their youngest son and daughter.

“Will she make it?” Jun asked.

“I don’t know,” Frere-Jones said. “She’ll need another dose before the medicine wears off or she’ll be as bad as ever. And that was all I had in the house.”

Frere-Jones glanced at the altar, where the red sands squirmed in a frenzied rush, climbing over the figurines as if outraged they couldn’t eat stone. She noticed Jun staring at her back and realized the woman had seen the laser pistol she carried.

Frere-Jones handed the pistol to Jun. “Use this if needed,” she said. “Make sure none of you touch the grains in the altar—if you do, every anchor for a hundred leagues will know there’s a day-fellow family here.”

Jun nodded as Frere-Jones pulled on her leather running duster. “When will you be back?”

“I don’t know,” Frere-Jones said. “I have to find more medicine. I’ll... think of something.”

With that Frere-Jones ordered the grains to power up her legs and, for the first time in years, she ran across her land. She ran faster than any horse, faster than any deer, until even the fairies which flew after her could barely keep up.



At the land’s boundary Frere-Jones paused.

She stood by Sandy Creek, the cold waters bubbling under the overhanging oaks and willows. Fairies flew red tracers over the creek, flying as far across as they dared without crossing into the bordering land. On the other bank a handful of blue fairies hovered in the air, staring back at Frere-Jones and the red fairies.

Usually boundaries between lands were more subtle, the grains that were tied to one anchor mixing a bit with the next land’s grains in the normal back and forth of life. But with Sandy Creek as a natural land divide—combined with Frere-Jones’s isolation from the other anchors—the boundary between her and Chakatie’s lands had grown abrupt, stark.

One of Chakatie’s blue fairies stared intensely at her. Chakatie knew she was coming. Frere-Jones wished there was a caravan nearby to trade for the medicine. Day-fellow pharmacists were very discreet.

Still, of all the nearby anchors Chakatie was the only one who might still give her medicine. Chakatie was also technically family, even if her son Haoquin was now dead. And she had a large extended family. Meaning a number of kids. Meaning stocks of medicine on hand to ensure the grains didn’t overwhelm and kill those kids when they transitioned to becoming anchors.

Still, no matter how much Frere-Jones had once loved Chakatie she wouldn’t go in unprepared. She was, after all, her land’s anchor. She stripped off her

clothes and stepped into the cold creek, rubbing mud and water over her skin and hair to remove the day-fellow scent. She activated the grains inside her, increasing her muscle size and bone density. Finally, for good measure, she grabbed a red fairy buzzing next to her and smashed it between her now-giant hands. She smeared the fairy's glowing red grains in two lines down both sides of her face and body.

Battle lines. As befitted an anchor going into another's land in the heart of the night.

Satisfied, she walked naked onto Chakatie's anchordom.



Frere-Jones hated memories. She hated how the grains spoke to her in brief snatches of memories copied from Haoquin and her parents and grandparents and on back to the land's very first anchor.

But despite this distaste at memories, they still swarmed her. As Frere-Jones crossed the dark forest of trees and brambles on Chakatie's land, she wondered why the grains were showing her these memories. The grains never revealed memories randomly.

In particular, why show her Haoquin's memories, which the grains had so rarely shared up to now? Memories from the day she met him. Memories from their selecting ceremony.

Frere-Jones tried to stop them, but the memories slipped into her as if they'd always existed within her.

Frere-Jones's parents had died when the grains determined it was time for their child to take over. Like most anchors they'd gone happily. First they drank medicine to dull the grains' power to rebuild their bodies. Then they slit each other's throat in the land's graveyard, holding hands as they bled out and their grain-copied memories flowed into the land they'd protected.

At first Frere-Jones had accepted her role in protecting the land. She safeguarded the land from those who might harm it and carefully managed the ecosystem's plants and animals so the land was in continual balance.

But a few years after becoming anchor a small day-fellow caravan defiled her land by cutting down trees. Frere-Jones eagerly allowed the grains to seize control of her body. She called other anchors to her side and led an attack on the caravan. Memories of the pains her land had suffered before the grains had arrived flowed through her—images of clear-cut forests and poisoned soil and all the other evils of the ancient world. In her mind she became a noble warrior preventing humans from creating ecological hell just as her family had done for a hundred generations.

Only after the caravan was wiped out did she learn that a day-fellow child, gifted with a new hatchet and told to gather dead branches for a fire, had instead cut down a single pine sapling.

Outraged at what she'd done, Frere-Jones attacked the other anchors who'd helped savage the caravan. The anchors fought back, slashing at her with claw

and fang until a respected older anchor, Chakatie, arrived, her three-yard-tall body powered to a mass of muscle and bone and claw.

Chakatie's land neighbored Frere-Jones's land, but Chakatie hadn't aided in the attack on the caravan. Now this powerful woman had stepped among the fighting anchors, a mere glance all that was needed to stop the other anchors from attacking each other. A few even powered down their bodies.

Chakatie had paused before the remains of the caravan and breathed deeply. As the other anchors watched nervously, Chakatie leaned over and tapped the tiny child-size hatchet and examined the cut sapling. She sniffed each day-fellow body.

With a roar, Chakatie told everyone but this land's anchor to leave. The others fled.

Once everyone was gone Chakatie bent over the dead bodies and cried.

After Chakatie finished, she stood and wiped her tears. Frere-Jones forced herself to stand still, willing to take whatever punishment Chakatie might give for this evil deed. But the older woman didn't attack. Instead, she stepped forward until her hot breath licked Frere-Jones's face and her fangs clicked beside her ear like knives stripping flesh from bone.

"The grains speak only in memories," Chakatie said. "But memories only speak to the grains' programmed goals. A good anchor never lets memory overwhelm what is right and what is wrong."

With that Chakatie walked away, leaving Frere-Jones to bury the caravan's dead.

Ashamed, Frere-Jones had locked herself in her home and refused to listen to the grains' excuses. The grains tried to please her with swirls of memories from her parents and others. Memories of people apologizing and explaining and rationalizing what she'd done.

But she no longer cared. She was this land's anchor and she'd decide what was right. Not the grains.

A few years later the grains gave her an ultimatum: marry another anchor to help manage this land, or the other anchors would kill Frere-Jones and select a new anchor to take her place.

The selecting ceremony took place on the summer solstice. Hundreds of her fellow anchors came to her home, setting up feasting tents along the dirt road and in fallow fields. Frere-Jones walked from tent to tent, meeting young anchors who spoke eagerly of duty and helping protect her land. She listened politely. Nodded to words like "ecological balance" and "heritage." Then she walked to the next tent to hear more of the same.

Frere-Jones grew more and more depressed as she went from tent to tent. If she didn't choose a mate before the end of the day all the celebrating anchors would rip her to pieces and chose a new anchor to protect her land. She wondered if day-fellows felt this fear around anchors. The fear of knowing people who were so warm and friendly one moment might be your death in the next.

Frere-Jones was preparing for her death when she spotted a ragged tent beside her barn. The tent was almost an afterthought, a few poles stuck in the ground holding up several old and torn cotton blankets.

Frere-Jones stepped inside to see Chakatie sitting beside a young man.

“Join us in a drink?” Chakatie asked, holding a jug of what smelled like moonshine. Chakatie’s body when powered down was tiny, barely reaching Frere-Jones’s shoulder.

“Do I look like I need a drink?” Frere-Jones asked.

“Any young woman about to be slaughtered for defying the grains needs a drink,” Chakatie said.

Frere-Jones sat down hard on the ground and drank a big swallow of moonshine. “Maybe I deserve to be killed,” she thought, remembering what she’d done to that day-fellow caravan.

“Maybe,” the young man sitting next to Chakatie said. “Or maybe you deserve a chance to change things.”

Chakatie introduced the man as her son Haoquin. He leaned over and shook Frere-Jones’s hand.

“How can I change anything?” Frere-Jones asked. “The grains will force me to do what they want or they’ll order the other anchors to kill me.”

Instead of answering, Haoquin leaned over so he could see outside the tiny tent. He was a skinny man and wore a giant wool coat even in summer, as if easily chilled. Or that’s what Frere-Jones thought until he opened the coat and pulled out a small laser pistol.

Frere-Jones froze at the sight of the forbidden technology, but Chakatie merely laughed. Haoquin aimed the pistol at a nearby tent—the Jeroboam family tent, among the loudest and most rambunctious groups at the selection ceremony. Haoquin pulled the trigger, and a slight buzzing like angry bees filled the tent. He shoved the pistol back in his coat as the roof of the Jeroboam tent burst into flames.

Drunken anchors, including Jeroboam himself, fled from the tent, tearing holes in the fabric walls in their panic. Other anchors howled with laughter while Jeroboam and his lifemate and kids demanded to know who had insulted their family and land with this prank.

Haoquin grinned as he patted his coat covering the hidden pistol. “A little something I made,” he said. “I’m hoping it’ll come in handy when I eventually spit at the grains’ memories.”

Frere-Jones felt a flash of memory—her parents warning her as a kid to behave. To be a good girl. She shook off the grains’ warning as she stared into Haoquin’s mischievous eyes.

Maybe Haoquin was right. Maybe there was a way to change things.



Frere-Jones leaned against a large oak tree, her powered body shaking as red and blue fairies buzzed around her. The grains had never shared such a deep stretch of Haoquin’s memories with her. The memories had been so intense and long they’d merged with her own memories of that day into something more. Almost as if Haoquin was alive once again inside her.

Frere-Jones wiped at her glowing eyes with the back of her clawed right hand. Why had the grains shared such a memory with her? What were they saying?

She pushed the memories from her thoughts as she ran on through the forest.

Frere-Jones found Chakatie in an isolated forest glen. Countless fairies rose into the dark skies from the tiny field of grass, stirring up a whirlwind of blue grains in their wake. Naked anchors jumped and howled among the blue light, their bodies powered up far beyond Frere-Jones's own. Massive claws dug into tree trunks and soil. Bloody lips and razor fangs kissed and nipped each other. Throats howled to the stars and the night clouds above.

And throughout this orgy of light and scent swirled the memories of this land's previous anchors. Memories of laughing and crying and killing and dying and a thousand other moments of life, all preserved by the blue grains which coursed through these trees and animals and enhanced people.

Frere-Jones stepped through the frenzied dance, daring anyone to attack her. The red lines on her face burned bright, causing the dancers to leap from her like she might scorch them. As the anchors noticed her the dance died down. They muttered and growled, shocked by Frere-Jones's interruption.

In the middle of the glen sat two granite boulders. On the lower boulder lay a dead stag, its guts ripped out like party streamers of red meat. On the higher rock sat Chakatie, her body and muscles enlarged to the full extent of the grains' powers, her clawed fingers digging into the dead stag beneath her. She sat naked except for a bloody stag-head and antlers draped over her head, the fresh blood dribbling down her shoulders and muscular chest.

"Welcome, my daughter!" Chakatie boomed as she jumped down and hugged Frere-Jones. "Welcome indeed. Have you come to join our festivities?"

Frere-Jones stared at the silent anchors around her. Several of them twitched their claws and fangs. But none dared attack her, remembering that she'd once been married to their blood.

"I won't join in," she said, the grains deepening her voice so she sounded more intimidating. "But I need speak with you. It's urgent."

Chakatie waved her family and relatives away.

"I need medicine," Frere-Jones said. "Five doses."

Chakatie glared at Frere-Jones, her happiness at seeing her vanishing as fast as a gutted deer bleeding out. "I will not have you killing yourself. If you're seeking a painful death for what you did to my grandson, there are far better ways than overdosing on medicine."

Chakatie raised one bloody claw as if offering to slash Frere-Jones to pieces.

Frere-Jones glared back at her mother-in-law. "It's not for me. My land infected a new anchor."

Chakatie lowered her claws and stared at Frere-Jones in puzzlement before a grin slowly emerged around her fangs. "I guess that's... good news. Who is it?"

"I'd prefer to see if she survives before naming her," Frere-Jones said, bluffing. Chakatie's blood-and-musk scent was stomach-gagging strong in her nostrils.

“Of course.” Chakatie powered down her body slightly. “I apologize for saying that about Colton. If my land had betrayed me like yours did with Haoquin, I may have done as you.”

This was the closest Chakatie had ever come to saying she agreed with Colton becoming a day-fellow. Frere-Jones thanked her.

“Don’t thank me yet. The senior anchors have been saying you’ve lost your ability to protect your land. A few even suggest we... select a new anchor.”

Frere-Jones snarled. “And I’m sure you didn’t have someone in mind? Perhaps one of your other sons or daughters?”

Chakatie tensed at the insult before smirking with a knowing nod. “You know I want nothing but love and happiness for you. But if the other anchors become intent on killing you, I’d prefer my own benefit.”

Frere-Jones sighed at her mother-in-law’s logic. There was a reason no one ever challenged Chakatie. She was likely the mightiest anchor in this part of the world.

Chakatie waved for her oldest son, Malachi, who trotted over. “Run home and bring six vials of medicine to Frere-Jones.” She nodded to Frere-Jones. “One extra in case it’s needed.”

Frere-Jones thanked Chakatie and turned to go, but Chakatie dared to place one of her giant clawed hands on her shoulder.

“Two warnings,” Chakatie whispered. “First, don’t be lying about what the medicine is for. If you try overdosing on it, I’ll make sure the grains keep you alive long enough for me to kill you.”

Frere-Jones nodded. “And?”

“The grains on your land have become increasingly agitated since Haoquin died. I fear they’re building to something which will harm you.”

“If they do, wouldn’t that be your fault? After all, you introduced me to Haoquin.”

Even as Frere-Jones said this she regretted the words. If she’d never met Haoquin her life would have been far poorer, assuming she’d even lived past her selecting ceremony. But Chakatie had avoided Frere-Jones ever since Colton became a day-fellow. Frere-Jones still loved Chakatie but also wanted to rip the woman apart for abandoning her, a feeling influenced no doubt by her grain-powered body’s fury.

Chakatie nodded sadly. “I think every day about the paths of Haoquin’s life. Still, what else can we do? We are ingrained in the land...” she said, beginning the most sacred oath of anchors.

“...and the grains are our land,” Frere-Jones finished.

Yet afterwards as Frere-Jones ran back to her land she wanted to claw her own tongue out for uttering such a lie. If it was within her power, she’d destroy every grain in both her land and body.

Not that such dreams mattered in the real world. And if Chakatie and the other anchors learned she was sheltering a day-fellow family, her dreams—and Haoquin’s—would never have a chance to come true.



“Don’t trust my mother,” Haoquin had said one morning a few weeks after they were married. He’d been bedridden that day as the grains from his old land deactivated and Frere-Jones’s grains established themselves. She’d given him several doses of medicine, which helped, and stayed by his side the entire time.

Since they couldn’t do much else, they lay in bed and talked. Frere-Jones had forgotten the joys of hearing someone talking to her in words instead of memories.

“I like your mom,” Frere-Jones said. “I mean, she did bring us together.”

“Oh, I like her. Hell, I love her. She’s the one who taught me to be wary of the grains. But she’s also not afraid to work the grains and the other anchors to her own advantage. Never forget that.”

Frere-Jones snuggled closer to Haoquin, who hugged her back. She remembered how Chakatie had been disgusted by Frere-Jones killing the day-fellows. Which had pushed Frere-Jones into a new attitude toward the grains. Which had eventually resulted in her marrying Haoquin.

No, she thought, pushing those memories from her mind. She refused to believe her life was merely a plaything of either Chakatie or the grains.

“You okay?” Haoquin asked.

“Just thinking about memories.” Frere-Jones ran her fingers across Haoquin’s bare stomach, causing him to shiver. “Like the memory of my fingers on you. The touch of my skin on yours. Someday all that will remain of these moments are the copies of our memories stored in the grains’ matrix.”

“I can live with that, Fre,” Haoquin said, calling her by that nickname for the first time. “Can you?”

Instead of answering Frere-Jones kissed him, her lips touching lips before fading into memory.



Frere-Jones gasped as she paused outside her house with the vials of medicine in her pocket.

She could hear Alexnya screaming inside. The last dose of medicine must be wearing off.

But why were the grains still showing her all these memories from Haoquin? They’d never done that before. In fact, the grains had taken care to lock away most of Haoquin’s memories for fear that they’d influence Frere-Jones in the wrong ways. So why were the grains now sharing them?

Frere-Jones shrugged off the question and opened the door to her house. She had to focus on saving the day-fellow girl.

Remember that, she thought. Remember what’s important.



After the next dose of medicine, Alexnya slept in fits for the day, waking every few hours to drink more. But when Frere-Jones stepped into the bedroom with a new dose the following evening, she found Alexnya sitting up in bed reading an old-fashioned paper book with her mother. Alexnya looked far better, no longer shaking or in pain. Frere-Jones tasted only the barest touch of the grains still inside the girl's body.

"Hello Fre," Alexnya said.

Frere-Jones nearly dropped the mug of medicine. The only one who'd ever called her Fre had been Haoquin.

"Alexnya, be polite," Jun snapped. "Call her Master-Anchor Frere-Jones."

"But she likes being called Fre..."

Frere-Jones sat on the bed beside Alexnya. "It's not her fault. The grains communicate using snippets of memories from previous anchors. 'Fre' is what my lifemate used to call me."

Jun paled but didn't say anything. Alexnya frowned. "I'm sorry, Fre... Master-Anchor Frere-Jones," the girl said. "I just want you to love me again. You used to love me."

Frere-Jones ignored the girl's obvious confusion at having her memories mix with the memories stored within the grains' matrix. She handed Alexnya the mug of medicine. "Drink this," she said.

The girl swallowed half the medicine. "The grains are angry," Alexnya whispered as she wiped the red glow from her lips. "The grains don't like you removing them from my body. They don't like my family overstaying our welcome."

"They won't hurt your family without my approval."

Alexnya didn't appear convinced. "They're also angry at you," she said as she yawned. "Why are they angry at you?"

"Let me worry about my land's grains. You need to sleep."

Alexnya nodded and closed her eyes. Jun and Frere-Jones shut the door and walked over to the dinner table, where Jun stared at the remaining dregs of medicine in the mug.

"She's taken enough medicine," Frere-Jones said. "By tomorrow her connection to the land will be weak enough to leave. She'll have to continue taking the medicine for another few days to remove the remaining grains, but you can give it to her on the road."

Jun glanced with relief at the den, where Takeshi lay sleeping on a sofa with Miya and Tufte.

"What memories are the grains showing Alexnya?" she asked.

"Does it matter?" Frere-Jones asked with a growl. "Any memories she's experienced are hers now."

As Frere-Jones said this she shook with anger at the thought of Alexnya experiencing even a taste of Haoquin's life. She didn't care about the stored memories of her parents and ancestors, but Haoquin... those memories were special. Damn the grains. Damn these day-fellows for intruding on the most intimate parts of her life.

Frere-Jones's right hand spasmed as claws grew from her fingertips. She

dug into the wooden table, imagining the need to go into her son's bedroom and rip Alexnya to pieces.

"Master-Anchor Frere-Jones!" Jun shouted in a loud voice. Frere-Jones snapped back to herself and looked up to see Jun aiming the laser pistol at her head. She took a deep breath and forced her body to reabsorb the claws.

The grains were pushing her, like they had as a young anchor when she'd attacked that day-fellow caravan.

"I will sleep outside tonight," Frere-Jones said as she stood. "Bar the door. And windows. Don't let me in." She grinned at Jun, who kept the pistol aimed at her. "If I do break in, make sure you end me before I do anything we'd all regret."

Jun chuckled once but kept the pistol aimed at Frere-Jones until she walked outside and the door slammed shut.



Frere-Jones didn't sleep that night, instead patrolling the land to ensure no one came near her house. This also kept her further away from the day-fellows. Despite the distance the grains inside her shrieked at her land being defiled by the day-fellow presence. And Alexnya was right—the grains were also furious at Frere-Jones. They knew what she'd done to her son. The grains knew she hated them and that she would destroy every trace of their existence if it was within her power.

But despite this anger the grains also continue to share Haoquin's memories with her. She saw the birth of their son through Haoquin's eyes. Saw Haoquin and Colton playing chase in the fields. Saw the three of them going for picnics in the deep woods.

All memories from Haoquin's life.

"What the hell are you telling me?" Frere-Jones yelled. But the grains didn't respond.

When Jun unbolted the sod-house's door in the morning, Frere-Jones was meditating under the oak tree in the front yard. Her body was coated in red smears from the countless fairies she'd killed during the night as she ripped apart every one of the red-glowing, grain-infused monstrosities she encountered.

Several chickens pecked at the fairies' remaining grains in the dirt around her.

Jun stepped toward Frere-Jones with the laser pistol in her right hand.

"You okay?" Jun asked.

"Must be. You're still alive."

Jun shivered. Frere-Jones licked her lips before biting her tongue to silence the grains. They were easier to control during the daytime, but the longer the day-fellows stayed on the land the more demanding they would become.

"Are you safe to be around?"

"I can maintain control until you leave," Frere-Jones said. "We'll give Alexnya another dose of medicine after breakfast. That should be enough to enable your family to leave. You can travel well beyond this land before night falls."

“Tak is cooking breakfast,” Jun said, gesturing to the sod-house. “Will you join us?”

Frere-Jones snorted at being invited into her own house but nodded and followed Jun in. She was pleased to see Alexnya looking even better than yesterday and sitting at the dinner table eating oatmeal.

“I missed you, Fre,” Alexnya said. Frere-Jones suppressed her irritation at the nickname and sat down in the chair next to her family altar.

The stone altar bubbled and snapped, the red sands swarming angrily over the statues of her family. Miya and Tufte stared at the flowing sands as if mesmerized until Takeshi tapped the table beside them so they returned to eating their oatmeal.

“We have to keep an eye on them constantly so they don’t touch the altar,” Takeshi said. “Did your son try to play with it all the time?”

“Yes,” Frere-Jones snapped. “But he was the child of an anchor—touching the altar wouldn’t bring death on his family.”

Jun and Takeshi stared in shock at Frere-Jones, and Jun’s hand edged toward the laser pistol before Frere-Jones sighed. “I apologize. The grains are pushing me even now. It’s... hard, being around you with them screaming in my mind.”

“That’s the price of protecting our sacred land,” Alexnya said.

Frere-Jones tapped the vials of glowing medicine on the table before her. She knew Alexnya wasn’t trying to deliberately provoke her. She remembered how confused she’d felt when she’d come of age and the grains had activated within her, and how a similar confusion almost overwhelmed Haoquin when he’d married into her anchordom. The sooner Alexnya and her family returned to the road the better.

“It must have been difficult when your son became a day-fellow,” Jun said, trying to change the subject. “You’re fortunate one of our caravans was nearby to take him in before...” Jun paused.

“You can say it,” Frere-Jones muttered. “The grains would have forced me to kill my son if he’d stayed more than a few days after becoming a day-fellow. But luck had nothing to do with it. I timed Colton’s change so a caravan was here for him.”

Jun and Takeshi stared at Frere-Jones, who shrugged. She knew she shouldn’t tell such truths to people outside her family, but she no longer cared. The grains pounded inside her at the admitted heresy. She wanted to slam her head into the table to silence them.

“Haoquin died when Colton was only twelve,” Frere-Jones whispered. “My lifemate had grown up on another land. When he married into my anchordom and accepted my grains, the grains from that other land deactivated. But my grains eventually tired of the... unsettling thoughts Haoquin expressed. His ideas for changing the world. So they reactivated his original grains, causing him to need to live on two separate lands to stay healthy. His body almost tore itself apart. There was nothing I could do.”

Frere-Jones reached out and rubbed Haoquin’s statue on the altar. The

grains felt her hate and slid away from her touch. “Haoquin dreamed of a world without grains. He knew that was merely a pipe dream—we both knew it—but the grains decided even a dream without their existence was too much to tolerate.”

Frere-Jones flicked at the red grains in the altar’s basin, wishing she could throw them all away where they’d never harm another person.

“The grains calculated they didn’t need Haoquin anymore since we’d already created a son,” Frere-Jones continued. “But I refused to let them have Colton too. I waited until a caravan was on my land then gave Colton a massive overdose of the medicine, almost more than his body could handle. He turned day-fellow and had to leave.

“The anchor system is evil. To decide that a select few can live in one place while everyone else is forced to continually move from land to land... death for any unlinked human who stays too long on a land or pollutes or harms that land... to force me to enact the grains’ arbitrary needs and desires... that’s nothing but evil.”

“But the grains saved the planet,” Alexnya said. “I can see some of the old anchors’ memories. How the land was nearly destroyed and overrun with people. I can taste the chemicals and hormones and technology. Trees cut down. People dying of blight. There were so many people. Too many for the land to support. Destroying everything they touched...”

Alexnya gasped and pushed away from the table, her chair falling backward as she tumbled across the ceramic tiles. She jumped up and ran for the bathroom, where she slammed the door shut.

Frere-Jones sighed as she stared into the shocked faces of the girl’s family. “She’ll be better once you’re on the road,” Frere-Jones said. “Keep giving her the medicine twice a day and the grains will soon be completely gone.”

“But the memories...” Jun began.

“So she’ll know why anchors protect their lands. Why those without grains are forced to continually move around.”

Takeshi hugged Miya and Tufte, who had jumped into his lap because of the tension in the room. “It’s different to be on the receiving end,” Takeshi said. “Do you know why our last caravan was destroyed? We were leaving a land a hundred leagues from here when the caravan master’s wagon broke an axle. Normally not a problem—most caravans leave early in case of issues like this. But it turned out our caravan master also was smuggling forbidden chemicals and hormones. When the axle broke it stabbed into one of his smuggling tanks and contaminated the land for ten yards on either side of the road.

“We tried cleaning the land. Our caravan master even took responsibility and offered his death for everyone else’s lives. But the grains didn’t care. You could feel their anger. The ground was almost shaking, the trees and plants whipping madly as if blown by an unknown wind. Then the anchors came—dozens of them, from lands all across the region. They attacked us all night before the grains finally allowed them to calm down. Our wagon was the only one they didn’t break into and massacre everyone.”

Frere-Jones nodded. If her land became even a slightly bit contaminated the grains would force her to do the same. She picked up the remaining vials of medicine. She held the vials over the altar to encode them with her grain's programming before handing them to Takashi.

"Have her drink another dose then take the remaining vials with you," she told him. "Jun and I will prepare your wagon. You'll leave by noon."



Frere-Jones had spent decades watching day-fellow caravans, but she'd never prepared one of their wagons for travel. Harnessing the horses and securing the wagon's cargo stirred memories of both her own life and those of the anchors who preceded her. How all of them had watched passing day-fellow caravans across thousands of years.

As a child she'd desperately wished she could travel like a day-fellow. See other lands beyond her own.

"Take the northern road through the forest," Frere-Jones told Jun when the wagon and horses were ready. "That's the safest route to avoid irritating the anchors on neighboring lands. Go north and you'll be several lands away before dark."

Jun nodded a silent thanks.

They were still waiting a half-hour later, with Frere-Jones growing increasingly irritated from the grains' demands. "Come on Takashi," she yelled.

"I'll go get him," Jun said, hurrying to the house.

When the family didn't emerge a few minutes later, Frere-Jones cursed and smashed a powered hand into the side of the barn, breaking the inch-thick boards. She stomped into her own house—her house, on her land!—to discover glowing red medicine flowing among broken glass vials on her tile floor. Jun and Takashi stood beside the dinner table pleading with Alexnya but wouldn't go near their daughter.

"Land's shit!" Frere-Jones bellowed. Alexnya stood beside the stone altar, her hands immersed in the flowing red grains.

"She won't let go of the altar," Takashi said. "Should we yank her away?"

"No! Don't touch the grains!" Frere-Jones accessed the grains inside her body, connecting through them with the grains in the altar and across her land. She prayed that Alexnya touching the altar hadn't alerted any nearby anchors. She tasted the forests and plants and animals on her land, felt the nearby anchors going about their duties and work.

But no alarm. There had been no alarm raised. Which was impossible. That could only mean...

Frere-Jones screamed as she jumped forward and grabbed Alexnya. She threw the girl across the room, only at the last moment aiming for the sofa so she wouldn't be hurt. Alexnya smashed into the cushions as Jun and Takashi grabbed their youngest kids and ran for the door, Jun again aimed the pistol at Frere-Jones.

Frere-Jones raised her hands as she bent over, panting and trying to stay in control. “Don’t shoot,” she yelled. “Kill me and your daughter will be stuck here.”

“What do you mean?” Jun asked.

“Your daughter should have set off the grains’ alarms, especially after taking that much medicine. But she didn’t. Why didn’t you, Alexnya?”

Alexnya stood up from the sofa, her eyes sparking red light, a growl escaping her snarling lips. For a moment Frere-Jones remembered herself at that age when the grains had first activated in her body. “The grains don’t like you,” Alexnya whispered. “They changed the altar’s coding so the medicine wouldn’t remove all of the grains from my body. They promised that if I didn’t tell you they’d let my family stay.”

“You can’t trust the grains,” Frere-Jones said. “No day-fellow is ever allowed to stay on a land for more than a few days. That won’t change no matter what the grains promise.”

Frere-Jones started to say more, but fell silent as she tasted an unsettling tinge in the grains. She felt Alexnya’s frustration at travelling from place to place, never settling down long enough to have a home. Frere-Jones also saw the attack which destroyed Alexnya’s last caravan. As the anchors shrieked and smashed on the outside of her family’s wagon, Alexnya swore she’d never go through this again. That one day she’d find a place to call home.

The grains, Frere-Jones realized, had found a willing partner in this young girl.

“I’m sorry,” Alexnya whispered, looking at her parents. “I want to live somewhere. I want a home. The grains said we could all stay.”

“The other anchors won’t let you be one of us,” Frere-Jones stated. “And even if they did, the grains will never let your family stay.”

“They promised.”

“They lied. The grains only want a new anchor to take my place. They’re incapable of caring for your family. They are programmed to protect this land, not to protect unlinked day-fellows without a grain in their bodies.”

Frere-Jones glanced again at the altar. She was missing something. If the grains hadn’t told her they’d changed the altar’s programming to negate the effects of Alexnya’s medicine, what else weren’t they telling her?

She heard a slight rapping on the kitchen window. Dozens of fairies buzzed outside the glass, their tiny hands tap tapping against the panes like angry snowflakes blowing on the wind.

Framed in the glass, surrounded by the fairies, was a red-tinted face.

Malachi, Chakatie’s oldest son.

Frere-Jones ran for the front door, but by the time she opened it Malachi was already running away, nearly gone from sight. She reached out to the grains, trying to power up her body so she could catch the boy, but the grains resisted her, not giving her anywhere near enough to catch him.

Instead, the grains rebutted her in flicks of angry memories. They had a new anchor. They didn’t have to obey her any more.

A few weeks after their son had been born, Frere-Jones had woken to find Haoquin standing by the altar, rocking Colton back and forth in his arms in the grains' red-haze light.

"You okay?" she asked sleepily.

"I was thinking about all the previous anchors who raised their kids in this house," Haoquin said. "I bet many of them stood in this very spot and let the grains' glow soothe their babies to sleep."

Frere smiled. "You could ask the grains to share those memories. Sometimes they'll do that, if you ask nicely."

Haoquin snorted. "When I first became an anchor, that's what scared me the most—that the grains spoke to us using memories. I mean, after I'm dead is that what they'll do with my memory of this moment? Use everything I'm experiencing now—love, exhaustion, tenderness, caring—to tell some future anchor that this is how you calm a crying baby? Is that all my memories are good for?"

Frere-Jones hugged her lifemate. "Your memories mean more to me than that. Perhaps they'll mean more to any future anchor who experiences them."

"Maybe," Haoquin said as he and Frere-Jones stared down at their son. "Maybe."

But neither one of them had sounded convinced.

The anchors came for Frere-Jones and the day-fellow family at midnight.

Frere-Jones had finally been able to power up her body after Alexnya ordered the grains to do so. The girl had still been torn, wanting to believe the grains would protect her family, but in the end her parents convinced her the grains would never protect day-fellows. "Have the grains shown you a memory," Jun had said, "any memory across the land's thousands of years where they protected a single day-fellow? If they do that, you can believe them. If not..."

When the grains hadn't been able show such a memory, Alexnya broke down and cried. She ordered the grains to obey Frere-Jones.

Yet Frere-Jones knew, even with her body completely powered up she couldn't fight so many other anchors. She messaged them, saying the day-fellows would leave. The only response was laughter. She said she'd allow another anchor to be selected, if only the day-fellows were allowed to leave safely.

Again, more laughter.

Now, at midnight, the anchors were coming. They ran through the river mists. They ran across her new-plowed sunflower fields, their massive bodies and claws destroying the furrows and scattering soil and seed to the winds.

They came from the road, giant feet pounding on the dirt packed by centuries of wagons. They came from the forests, knocking down trees and scattering deer and coyotes before them.

Frere-Jones sat on the sod roof of her home, the laser pistol in her hands. The grains showed her Haoquin's memory of building the illegal weapon with parts acquired from day-fellow smugglers. How proud he'd been. His mother had said the grains wouldn't like the pistol, but Haoquin merely laughed and said if he ever was forced to use the laser the displeasure of the grains would be the least of their worries.

As usual, Haoquin had been correct. Maybe that was why the grains had killed him.

"Here they come," Frere-Jones yelled down the air vent into the house. Jun and Takeshi and Alexnya were inside, Jun holding the knives Frere-Jones had gifted them, in case a final defense was needed.

Frere-Jones looked around her. She knew she should give the anchors a warning. She'd known these people all her life. They'd worked together. Had bonds stretching back a hundred generations.

Her land's red fairies buzzed around her, the faces of her ancestors silently pleading with her not to do this. As long as she remained anchor the grains couldn't warn the other anchors. But the grains were outraged at what she planned. A fairy with Haoquin's face flew in front of her eyes, the tiny red body shaking side to side in a silent scream of "No!"

But she knew what the real Haoquin would want. On his last day, as he lay in their bed while the competing grains destroyed each other and his body, he'd told her not to be angry. "Life here was worth it," he'd whispered in her ear as she leaned over him. "Too short, yes. But knowing you made it worthwhile."

Why had the grains waited so long to share his memories with her? If they'd done so years before, maybe she wouldn't have been so angry. Maybe she wouldn't have forced her son into exile from the only land and family he'd known.

Frere-Jones tapped the cord connecting the pistol to her farm's power grid. She aimed at the anchors running toward her. She hated the grains. Hated every memory they spoke.

Burn them all.

The laser lit the land green, the light dazzling through the river mists. The first row of anchors in the sunflower fields flashed and burned, bodies screaming and stenching like spoiled meat over bad flames. Howls of outrage rose from the remaining anchors, who split up to make less obvious targets, but they all still burned bright in Frere-Jones's enhanced vision. She shot two next to the barn, where she heard the day-fellows' horses whinnying in fright. She shot three others on the dirt road. She split one massive anchor in two right before the oak tree in front of her house, the laser also severing the tree's trunk.

She shot every anchor who came near her home. And when the remaining anchors broke ranks and fled, she detached the laser from her power grid and

chased after them, using the remaining charge to sear every one of them into char for the coyotes and wolves to feast on.

“Share this memory with the land’s future anchors,” she told the red fairies as they stared at her in shock. “Share this memory with the whole damn world.”



“The laser is potential,” Haoquin had told Frere-Jones the night they were married. They lay in bed after making love awkwardly, then excitedly. Afterward, Frere-Jones couldn’t help looking at the pistol on the bedside table.

“Potential for what?” she asked.

“To upset the grains. To force them to experience something they’ve never before considered.”

“So you’d burn the land?”

“That would merely set off the grains’ anger. No, I’d burn any anchor who tried to harm you or me.”

“Then you’d have even more anchors attacking.” Frere-Jones had heard stories of day-fellows who’d tried defending themselves with lasers. Eventually the anchors overwhelmed them through sheer numbers.

“Yes, we can’t defeat the anchors. There are too many of them, tied to millions of lands around the world. But what if we could use the threat of killing so many anchors to make the grains change?”

“We can’t change the grains’ programming,” Frere-Jones whispered. “That’s beyond us.”

“But what if we could change the memories they spoke with?”

“What good would that do?”

“If this land only spoke through certain memories—say yours and mine—the grains would be forced to say very different things than if they spoke through the memories of anchors who’d supported their damn work. Over time, it might change everything.”

Frere-Jones smiled at that possibility. “So you’d really kill, or threaten to kill, hundreds of anchors merely to force the grains to delete the memories they’ve stored over the centuries?”

Haoquin sighed. “You’re right. I couldn’t do that. I guess it’s a bad idea.”

Frere-Jones had kissed Haoquin, glad he wasn’t someone who would do such evil in a silly, misguided attempt to change the world.



An hour before morning’s song of light and warmth, Chakatie arrived. Frere-Jones sat on the sod roof of her home, the laser pistol in her lap, the smoldering corpses of the other anchors glowing in her land’s fields and forests.

She scented Chakatie ten minutes before her mother-in-law walked up to the house. Chakatie had deliberately come from upwind so Frere-Jones

would catch the scent. She wasn't surprised by Chakatie's arrival. After killing the anchors Frere-Jones realized she hadn't seen or scented any member of Chakatie's family during the attack.

Chakatie looked nothing like the powerful being she'd been the other night in the forest. She was powered down and tiny, and wore a neatly pressed three-piece suit and bowler hat. Instead of claws her hands were manicured and folded over themselves at her waist, as if to show she meant no harm.

Frere-Jones snorted and patted the grass on the roof. "You're welcome to join me, but that suit doesn't look like it's made for sitting on a sod roof."

"It's not." Chakatie jumped up to the other side of the roof. She grinned nervously as Frere-Jones shifted the pistol slightly so it pointed at Chakatie's chest. "My children made me wear this. Said it'd show you I meant no harm since no one in their right mind would fight while wearing such fancy clothes." Chakatie laughed softly. "I think they're worried about you killing me."

Frere-Jones wanted to laugh, which was likely Chakatie's other intent in wearing the suit. Perhaps to catch her off-guard. "And did Malachi also suggest you wear it? Perhaps after he spied on me?"

Chakatie spat. "Malachi did that on his own. I sincerely apologize. To spy on another anchor... any punishment you wish against him will be given."

Frere-Jones didn't believe her mother-in-law but accepted the lie as Chakatie's round-about means of apology. "And my punishment for killing dozens of anchors?"

"Ah, that is the question, isn't it?"

Chakatie sat down on the roof, running her fingers through the grass. "Is the girl in the house?" she asked. "The day-fellow anchor?"

"Yes. The grains lied to her. Said her family would be able to stay if she became the new anchor."

"That's why it's difficult for someone who grew up without the grains to become an anchor. You and I, we know the grains' memories don't always tell us the truth. We sort the memories the grains show us. Sift the wheat from the chaff. Your day-fellow girl doesn't know this."

"She will after today. I doubt she'll ever again trust the grains after witnessing this massacre."

"Then she might end up making a good anchor."

Chakatie stretched out on the sod roof, laying on her back as she looked across the sunflower fields. "No anchor with any sense loves the grains. But most anchors also have the sense not to challenge them directly."

"Too late for that. Now what?"

"The grains demand vengeance. You've upset their programmed order."

"How about I simply burn you first?" Frere-Jones said.

"Your choice. My family would, of course, attack. And can you sense the other anchors on their way here from distant lands? The more you kill the more who will come."

Frere-Jones sighed and pointed the laser pistol at the grass. "Funny how your family didn't join in the attack."

“Nothing funny about it. I raised my son, after all. He told me all about his little plans when he was younger. I knew he’d never carry out such evil. That’s why I let him build the laser pistol—it satisfied him, and I knew he’d never use it. But you... I suppose I should have seen this coming.”

Frere-Jones shrugged.

“You know, the grains wanted me to kill Haoquin when he was young, because of his dangerous ideas,” Chakatie said. “But I refused to do it. Despite what you may believe, we anchors can still ignore some of the grains’ programmed demands.”

Frere-Jones knew Chakatie was playing her. Her mother-in-law had probably known exactly what she was doing when she gave Frere-Jones the medicine for Alexnya. With so many anchors killed, Chakatie’s children would be able to go to those lands and become master-anchors in their own right.

“I can still kill a lot more anchors, including you, before I’m taken down,” Frere-Jones said. “What do you propose to avoid that?”

“Right now you have leverage with the grains,” Chakatie said. “They don’t want you to kill hundreds of new anchors when they arrive here. So offer them a bargain. Let the day-fellow girl become this land’s new anchor. The remaining anchors in the area—meaning my family—won’t oppose her.”

Frere-Jones looked at her hands. The pistol could easily cut Chakatie in two, but she really didn’t want to kill her mother-in-law. “What do I get out of that?”

“Haoquin had some interesting ideas about the grains’ use of memories. This might be your only chance to see if what he said could come true.”



The day Haoquin died, Frere-Jones and Colton had stood side by side in the cemetery as Chakatie and the other anchors shoveled dirt onto her lifemate’s body.

Frere-Jones could still feel the grains in Haoquin’s body. Worse, she could feel them already working to isolate many of Haoquin’s memories. The grains didn’t want his heretical beliefs contaminating the land, so they were locking those memories away. They would never share those memories with anyone, most of all her.

Frere-Jones hugged her son tight. She knew the grains would do the same to her memories when she died. But if she had her way, they’d not be able to use her son. She’d free him one way or another.

And then, maybe, she’d see if Haoquin’s plan could work. The plan he’d been too kindly to actually put into action.



They stood in the cemetery where Haoquin and the other anchors of this land were buried. Alexnya and her family stood on one side of the graves while Chakatie stood on the other. The rest of Chakatie’s family patrolled the

boundaries of Frere-Jones's land, keeping away the other anchors until this ceremony was completed.

Frere-Jones reached out to her land's grains, the laser pistol still in her right hand. The grains shivered and shook, resonating in shock at both what Frere-Jones had done and the dead anchors she'd killed.

Frere-Jones, detaching herself from the grains, walked over to Alexnya and her family. "Good luck to you," she told Alexnya. "You can trust Chakatie's advice. I suggest you listen to her."

Alexnya looked overwhelmed, as if just realizing the life she'd stumbled into. Her family could stay only a few more days before they'd have to travel on. But aside from suggesting Alexnya trust Chakatie, there was no other advice Frere-Jones could give. Alexnya would have to sort through the lands' memories on her own and determine which, if any, could be trusted.

Frere-Jones laughed to herself, knowing whose memories Alexnya would soon be experiencing.

"How can you say our daughter should trust that... woman?" Jun asked, outrage almost pouring out of her lips as she glared at Chakatie. "From what you've told me, she caused all this."

"Chakatie didn't trap your daughter," Frere-Jones said. "If anyone did, it was me, by being so stubborn that the grains sought out a new anchor."

"But she took advantage of all this. She played everyone. She..."

"Must I really listen to this right before I die?" Frere-Jones asked.

Jun fell silent. She bowed slightly in a mix of respect and mocking.

After speaking with Chakatie, and asking her mother-in-law to pass a final message to Colton, Frere-Jones reached out to hold Alexnya's hand. Together they accessed the grains.

"Do as we've agreed," Frere-Jones told the grains. "Chakatie will ensure I hold up my end."

"Do it," Alexnya ordered, added her voice as the land's new anchor.

The grains screamed but, unable to see any other option, they complied. Across the land they deleted the memories of every anchor who'd lived before Frere-Jones. The memories flared and shrieked, as if begging Frere-Jones and Alexnya to save them. But then they were gone.

Except for Haoquin's. Frere-Jones dropped the laser pistol and fell to her knees as Haoquin's memories flooded into her. All the memories the grains had copied from his life. All of him.

So many memories. Memories of everything Haoquin had felt and seen and thought and experienced worked their way into Frere-Jones's being. Her mind could barely contain all of him.

As Frere-Jones shook and spasmed on the cold ground, she looked across the new-spring grass. She could taste the grass. Could feel it growing and reaching for the sun.

Haoquin was within her. They now shared one life.

"I missed you Fre," Haoquin whispered. Or maybe Frere-Jones said it to herself. Either way, she smiled.

“Life here was worth it,” they whispered to each other. “Too short, yes. But knowing you made it worthwhile.”

Frere-Jones and Haoquin saw Chakatie walk up to their body and pick up the laser pistol. Chakatie wiped at her eyes as she nodded, then she shot them in the head.



Alexnya stands silently over Frere-Jones’s burned body. The grains are still convulsing, still in chaos, but Frere-Jones’s death has calmed them.

Chakatie holds the laser pistol in both hands. Alexnya feels Chakatie’s grains powering up her body. A moment later powerful claws rip apart the pistol.

Chakatie throws the broken technology to the ground in disgust. “Your mother is right, you know,” she says. “I did manipulate all this. I knew Frere-Jones and my son would cause sparks. But I didn’t know all this would happen. I swear on the grains I didn’t know.”

Alexnya isn’t sure if she can trust Chakatie. Frere-Jones said to trust the anchor, but how can she truly know?

Yet Alexnya also understands that once her parents are forced to resume their travels, Chakatie and her family will be the only one for hundreds of leagues around who might support her.

Alexnya wants to scream at this situation. To curse at not knowing what to do. But before she does, she feels a gentle caress in her mind. She tastes memories—memories from Frere-Jones and Haoquin. She sees all the good things Chakatie has done. How Chakatie once cried over a family like hers.

“I think I’ll trust you,” Alexnya finally says. “Did you really... cry over a day-fellow family once?”

Chakatie nods, then waves for Alexnya’s parents to follow her to the sod-house to prepare an evening meal for everyone.

Alexnya stays behind and digs the grave for Frere-Jones’s body, the grains powering up her body so the shovel digs faster and deeper than she ever could have done before. She places Frere-Jones in the hole and covers her with fresh soil.

As Alexnya stands over the grave, she feels the grains churning in Frere-Jones body. Feels the grains already beginning to spread the memories of Frere-Jones and Haoquin across the land.

“Thank you, Fre,” Alexnya says, bowing to the grave. She then runs to the sod-house to spend time with her family before they’re forced to flee.

END

About the Author

Jason Sanford is an award-winning author and an active member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. Jason has published more than a dozen of his short stories in the British SF magazine *Interzone*, which once devoted a special issue to his fiction. His fiction has also been published in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Apex Magazine*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Year's Best SF*, and other magazines and anthologies.

Jason is a Nebula Award finalist, three-time winner of the Interzone Readers' Poll, and a recipient of a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship. His stories have also been named to multiple Locus Recommended Reading Lists along with being translated into a number of languages including Chinese, Spanish, French, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Italian, and Czech.

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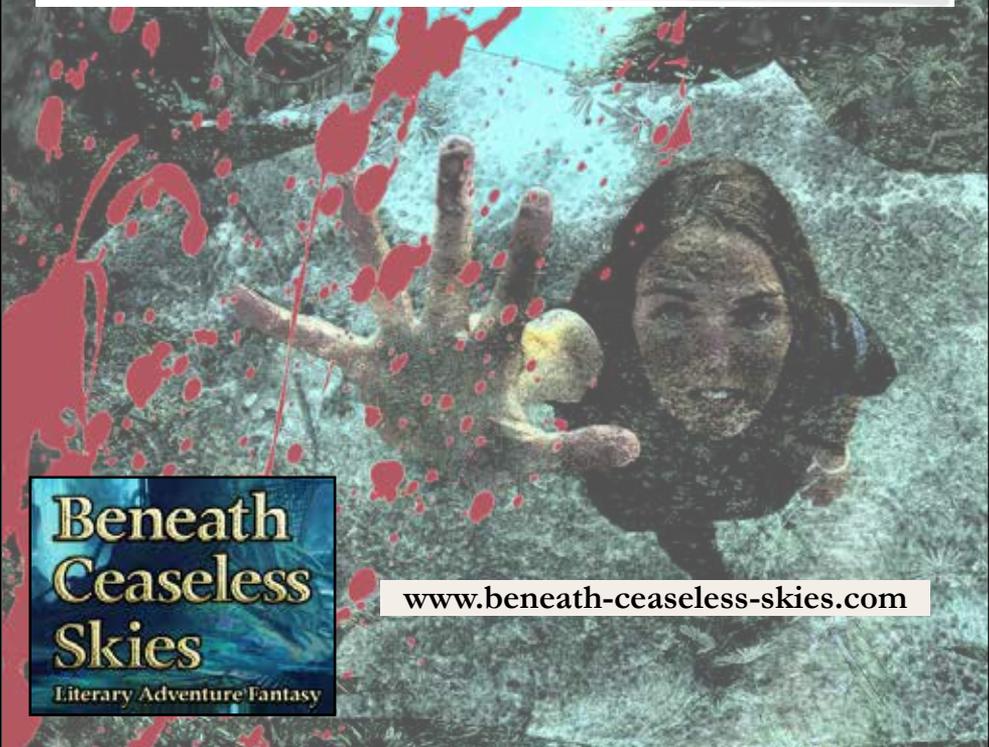
Originally published in the March 2016 special science-fantasy issue of *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, “Blood Grains Speak Through Memories” is a powerful novelette from Nebula Award nominated author Jason Sanford. In the distant future nanotechnology “grains” are fully intermeshed with the planet’s ecology, enabling enhanced humans to protect the lands they live on while forcing other humans to live nomadic lives. An enhanced human named Frere-Jones doubts her role in what she believes is a tyrannical system, yet sees no way to change her fate. But when a nomadic girl becomes infected with the grains, Frere-Jones is forced to finally confront her ultimate role in life.

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— Rich Horton, *Locus Magazine*, May 2016

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