

Legacy

by

L. Lee Lowe

Skin bronzed and scarred, dark lenses, banded wild hair, one thumb—the only anomaly was his height. Contrary to legend, he was barely taller than Rhohan herself.

‘Have you brought the Tribute?’ His accent as light as the tonguings of a windchime, he eschewed the traditional greeting.

‘Yes, Legate.’ Rhohan’s maternal suraunt fumbled with a fold of the heavy ceremonial robe, her voice hesitant. Obsequious, Rhohan thought, and raised her chin.

He held out a hand, and Rhohan slipped the bound volume—the last of their hoard—from her tunic and passed it to him. She could see the eagerness in the taut curl of his fingers, the almost imperceptible forward movement of his upper body, however impassive his face remained. She must have allowed a smile to reach her lips, for he opened his hand so that the book fell to the ground at their feet, where it dug itself into the fine black sand like a shy puckcrab. If there had still been crabs.

‘Legate?’ Rhohan asked, suddenly afraid. There could be no return without his sanction, only the sea or exile. In the Hearth they still whispered about the girl scorned by an earlier Legate. It had happened when Rhohan was just old enough to join in the search for scraps of corroding metal, glittering glass, for the shells and coral which would purchase a threemonth’s ration of meal, for the precious little driftwood the sea gave back.

‘You dare to mock?’ he asked.

Aunt Bindy drew a sharp breath. ‘Forgive her, Legate. She means no disrespect. She’s young. Younger than customary.’

He shifted his attention to Bindy. ‘She bleeds?’

‘Not that young,’ Bindy assured him.

‘You’re certain?’ he asked. ‘You’ve seen for yourself?’

Rhohan’s cheeks pinked readily, something her siblings and cousins had delighted in exploiting since first schooling. Almost their only defence against her keen tongue and even keener intelligence. It was rumoured that the Court Mathematician was already taking an interest, but no matter how adept at numbers and theorems and proofs Rhohan became, she had never learned to control the rush of colour to her face.

And hardly ever, the rush of words into their stupefied, resentful, vengeful faces.

An early Communion, the aunties decreed.

‘The wind is brisk,’ the Legate said. ‘Pick up the book and come inside.’

Rhohan glanced at him in surprise, but he had turned towards the horizon and appeared to be studying the line of breakers, the lone seabird diving and diving for a canny fish. The wind whipped his hair free of its chased golden band, an unrepentant seaweed tangle which gleamed with the same phosphorescence as the sea itself. He must oil it, she thought, then swallowed at the impertinence. There was always the possibility that he could sense her thoughts. No one knew the full extent of his powers. Though she scoffed at the unending speculation—the boys as bad as the girls, never mind the aunties—something about him reminded her of the chambered mollusc shell encased in glass in the Great Hall, whose perfect logarithmic spiral never failed to fascinate her.

Wheezing, Aunt Bindy stooped towards the book, but the Legate stopped her with an impatient gesture.

‘Leave it, Auntie. The girl will do it.’

Rhohan picked up the volume, brushed it off, and gently blew away the last abrasive grains of sand. She was still holding it when he whistled two sharp staccato notes above the wind, exactly the way Aunt Tibby called the toddlers to order, or Aunt Una, the dogs. Rhohan extended the book towards the Legate, releasing her grip a fraction of a second before his hands could clasp it securely. Those strange hands, whose single thumb drew her like an

unsolved equation. Again the book landed in the sand. Rhohan's gaze was direct and guileless, despite her flaming cheeks.

Aunt Bindy made a clicking sound with her tongue. If the Legate hadn't been present, Rhohan would have been reprimanded for her clumsiness, her ears boxed.

'I sing of arms and a man: his fate had made him fugitive,' Rhohan quoted softly.

The bird swooped towards them with a raucous cry, as if it blamed them for its failed catch. For its hunger.

Where have all the fish gone? Rhohan asked herself. The old tales, worn smooth as seaglass in the retelling, were improbable. *Impossible*: Rhohan had been beaten often enough for saying so. Which had merely convinced her to discover the truth someday. She preferred numbers to the fool's glitter of polished colourless syllables.

'Where did you learn those words?' His voice, though low, was as harsh the bird's, startling her thoughts into flight.

'It's the first line of the poem.' With her toe she pointed towards the book still lying between them.

'You've read it?'

Aunt Bindy shook her head hopelessly, the lines bracketing her mouth now grey and mothly with failure. But the responsibility was hers, and she made one final effort to propitiate the Legate. He soon interrupted her babblings with a dismissive headshake.

'Enough, Auntie. You may go.'

Disbelieving, she continued to mumble a few disjointed excuses.

'The girl will return when we've finished,' he said, rather more sharply. Then a sound that might have been a laugh. 'Though with this one, it may be a while.'

He retrieved the book himself and strode across the black dunes to the cottage doorway, where he waited, expressionless, for Rhohan to join him.

They ate before the fire, bowls of thick salty porridge. Hot cider, deliciously spiced. Rhohan had never been uncomfortable with silence. It was difficult to escape the continual harryings of the Hearth, though in time she had found a forgotten alcove off the linen storage, a small tidal cave, the crypts. The Legate drank more than he ate, his thoughts hidden by the steam rising from his mug, thoughts drifting perhaps like her own. Occasionally she stole a glance at his hands, but if he noticed, he gave no sign. His scars seemed less prominent in the flickering mellow light.

When Rhohan's eyelids became heavy, the Legate removed the mug cupped in her hands and replaced it with the book she'd brought.

'Read,' he said.

She gazed into the flames, drowsily wondering if this were a test.

'Do you need a lantern?'

What difference could it make? He'd not send her back now. Without opening the cover, she began to recite from memory, her voice strengthening as she took courage from his stillness. He had a gift for stillness. She only faltered once, when he rose to add a log—a *whole log!*—to the fire.

'Go on,' he said. 'Or is that all you know?'

'I'm tired, but I remember it all. A lot of it's dull, though.'

'You don't like poetry?'

'Not particularly.'

He leaned against the rough-hewn and blackened stone mantel and crossed his arms.

'How long did it take you to memorise three hundred pages?'

'Three hundred and sixteen. Seven lines short of seventeen.'

He laughed. A genuine laugh this time.

'No wonder Bindy was so nervous.'

She shrugged, then swept the room with her eyes. A plain table piled with papers and books and writing utensils, bookshelves, a single pallet in the corner.

‘Where am I to sleep?’ she asked.

‘Haven’t your aunties explained?’

‘Yes.’

They stared at each other while the fire crackled softly, the wind warned of a coming squall.

‘How old are you?’ he finally asked.

‘Sixteen this Hallowtide.’

‘Your name?’

‘Rhohan. And yours?’

At first she thought he wouldn’t answer, that she’d gone too far.

‘Ivan.’

‘Ifan?’

He moved closer and crouched before her. Lifted her chin with a forefinger.

‘Hold your hand in front of my mouth. *Ivan*. There’s no puff of air.’

He repeated his name until she nodded. After several attempts she was able to articulate a reasonable approximation of the sound. Still he crouched before her. A long moment passed while her hand crept towards the thickened ridges of scar tissue along the left side of his face. They reminded her of the undulant lines terraced in the sand when the tide retreated.

Suddenly he snapped his head aside, and his mouth twisted. He rose and indicated a closed door near the pallet.

‘There’s a bath through here. Towels, nightclothes. Wash and go to bed. I’ll join you later, when I’ve finished some work.’

She began to collect their dishes, but he shook his head. 'I'll take care of it tonight. You're tired.'

He stood unmoving before the fire, perhaps unseeing, as she opened the door to the passage.

'Ivan.'

He turned, surprised to hear his name on her lips, though he'd just taught her. He's used to being alone, Rhohan thought. His eyes glittered in the firelight, and she realised he'd removed the lenses. Green flecked with gold, an unheard of colour. No wonder the aunties whispered about gods who walked the earth.

'Your scars don't repel me. They're beautiful.'

This time his laugh rasped like a file on stone.

'Please don't try to flatter me. It won't work.'

'I've been accused of many things, but flattery isn't one of them.' Her mouth lifted at the corner. 'Besides, I expect it would be easier to flatter a block of granite.'

A flash of memory. Marly, the stonemason, wielding a small hammer and sharp-pointed chisel to split a nodule, pitted and unprepossessing, which resembled a large misshapen tree potato. A tap, precisely—delicately—aimed. Then a long pause, while Marly studied the sample with her single eye, her fingertips, even her tongue. Another tap. 'Under force stone will crumble rather than proffer its secrets.'

Broken open, the rock revealed a cleavage of perfect prismatic crystals—a rich lustrous green replete with grains of gold and amber and bright yellow, twin veins of deeper green to black.

'Rare,' Marly said with a smile nearly as rare. 'Very rare. It will polish to high repute.'

'Aren't the bands a flaw?' Rhohan asked.

‘On the contrary. Perfection diminishes beauty. Masks it.’ Her laugh, coarse as the granite she usually chiselled. ‘And it quickly bores the eye, even if you’ve got a spare to close.’

Rhohan said nothing, though Marly was the only hearther who wouldn’t mind being contradicted by someone so much younger. By a child.

‘You and your equations,’ Marly said dryly. She passed Rhohan a small piece of the stone. ‘For your collection. So that someday you might just appreciate more than numbers.’

In a soft leather pouch Rhohan safeguarded the cloth-wrapped specimens she’d been given over the years. Marly had disdained to conceal her gaping eye socket; her scarred, callused hands could administer a stinging slap; and she had often been surly and ill-tempered, particularly in cold damp weather. But she’d never turned away a child with genuine curiosity. Rhohan missed her sorely.

At first Rhohan shifted restlessly under the coverings, her thoughts scurrying for shelter before the imminent storm. Would it hurt? Would he talk to her? Show her what to do? Would she like it? Would *he*? Every time she peered out at his profile, the fire had burned lower, but he remained bent over his writing, seemingly oblivious to her interest, her anxiety. To her altogether. In the end she began to repeat the prime numbers, testing herself against her previous record. Rain was beginning to gust against the thatch. Later she wouldn’t remember if she’d dreamed the numerals appearing as dancing green flames tipped with gold, or only imagined them.

When Rhohan next opened her eyes, the fire was no more than a faint orange glow in the darkness. She raised herself on an elbow. Once her eyes adjusted, she could make out a figure wrapped in a blanket or cloak and stretched out asleep before the hearth

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‘You snore,’ she told him as he nudged her shoulder at first light and handed her a mug of hot tea, tantalising her with the smell of fresh wild mint.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘And if I do? It’s impolite to say so on such short acquaintance.’

‘I’m not complaining.’

‘It sounds that way.’

‘Not at all. It makes me less nervous. Gods don’t snore, I wager.’

He snorted. ‘Is that what they’ve told you? That we’re gods?’

‘Well, I had my doubts when I saw you scratching for lice.’

‘I don’t have—’ He broke off, jammed his hands into his wide sleeves, and glared at her while she sipped demurely from her mug. After a moment he began to laugh. He had a wide range of laughs, she was discovering, each of them wonderfully expressive.

Rohan gathered the soft creamy woollen blanket, which looked like South Coast handiwork, around her shoulders and padded barefoot to the window, mug in hand. Opening it, she breathed in the cool air, smelled the sea.

‘It rained heavily at night,’ she said, ‘but the clouds have dispersed. Do you mind if I swim?’

‘Please yourself.’

‘Will you join me?’

‘I don’t swim.’

Something in his voice made her glance swiftly at his face. He had a way of masking his feelings that reminded her of the travelling players, and their thick pancake. The stark white colour threw their every smile, every tear into relief.

‘I could teach you,’ she said.

He merely shook his head.

He remained in the cottage while she went down to the shore and stripped, but when she emerged from the water, blood running fast, lips faintly blue, he was there with a large bathing towel, which he wrapped round her body. She turned to face him, laughing from



exhilaration until she realised how little two layers of cloth, one quite damp, disguised. They were close enough for her to feel his heat. He hadn't bothered with his lenses.

'Why didn't you come to bed last night?' she whispered.

After a long silence, he dropped his hands from her shoulders.

'You're not what I expected,' he said.

Later that morning he showed her a device that made her dizzy with possibility. A *computer*, he called it. She had difficulty following his explanation of the way in which it was built, but none at all in navigating the first game he demonstrated, an interesting variant of their own rhythmomachia. Once he saw how quickly she caught on, he opened a mathematics text in a foreign language, which ceased to frustrate her as soon as she discovered the introduction to linear algebra. Slowly she began to puzzle out the unfamiliar notation, the axioms that she recognised—and those that she didn't.

Dusk was falling when she looked up to find Ivan carrying a copper pot and two bowls from the kitchen. Her stomach grumbled as he set the pot before the fireplace and lifted the lid. Saliva spurted into her mouth: potatoes, black morels, seaweed, garlic.

'Come and eat,' he said.

She watched his hand as he ladled out the aromatic meal.

'How did your people come to lose the second thumb?' she asked.

'Wrong question.'

'I don't understand.'

'You need to ask how yours developed an additional one.'

'You mean—?'

'I mean that we are, genetically speaking, one species. The second thumb inevitably appears in our joint offspring.'

'Not always. There have been cases, rare cases.' She looked away. 'The child is always cleansed.'

‘Cleansed?’

She said nothing.

He put down his spoon. ‘Killed? A baby?’

She nodded reluctantly.

‘Barbarians,’ he said, rising so abruptly that his bowl overturned. He ignored the spill and stomped out of the cottage, not even stopping to snatch up a cloak.

Hours afterwards, she heard him crying out in a strange tongue. A nightmare, she realised, when she saw him thrashing about at the hearth. She went to him, knelt at his side.

‘Ivan.’

He rolled away from her hand, still muttering incomprehensibly. Shivering.

Rhohan lay down and drew him close, stroking his hair, stroking. Gradually he calmed, then opened his eyes and stared at her. This time he didn’t pull away when she ran her fingers along the scars. He’s not that much older than I am, she thought in surprise. Why haven’t I noticed before?

‘Will you teach me your language?’ she asked.

Thereafter he slept on the pallet, but the nightmares recurred. Sometimes he screamed, sometimes he fought her. Once she woke to his desperate, almost frenzied love-making, and lay still until he’d finished.

‘I’m sorry,’ he muttered into the damp hollow of her neck. ‘I’m so sorry,’ and she knew he was no longer apologising for his brutality. But he would never speak of his past, or his pain.

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‘Rhinoceros,’ Ivan said, pointing to a picture on the monitor.

‘Rhinosos—’ Rhohan stumbled over the difficult word.

He repeated it patiently until she could pronounce it. Then ‘giraffe.’ And ‘alligator.’

Rhohan grinned at the images. 'Are they for children? We do that too. Whoever drew them has a good imagination.'

'No. They're real. Or were.'

'What happened?'

He gazed at her quietly for a long while, and she understood that this was another forbidden topic. Then his mouth tilted, and she had a new laugh to add to her catalogue.

'Why not?' he said, more to himself than her. 'We've violated so many prohibitions already.'

He rose and fetched a book from his shelf. 'You've learned enough to be able to manage. Read it, and then we'll talk.'

He stood over her while she thumbed through the pages, stopping from time to time to whisper a sentence, sound out an unfamiliar word. She looked up when she heard the door lisp shut. He'd gone out—down to the sea again, probably. Recently he'd taken to walking along the shore for hours, returning grey and exhausted and often wet through. She closed the cover of the book and stared into space. After a few minutes she stood and donned the cloak he'd given her, the boots. The days were cooler, and though she still swam, she doubted that she'd be able to continue for much longer. She thought the snows might come early this year.

A mist was rolling in off the sea, and the wind was chill. Rhohan searched the sky for a bird, but there was only unremitting cloud, dull as tarnished silver. Ivan's footprints were clearly visible in the damp sand. This time she followed.

An hour later she found him in a small cove where the sand gave way to dark shingle. As soon as she rounded the headland, she paused to steady her breath. He was facing the sea, his hair blowing wild and free, and the legends came flooding back. For an instant she thought of retreating, but it was already too late. Much too late. He turned and caught sight of her, waited in his quiet compelling way until she reached him. He encircled her with his arms, kissed the top of her head, her eyes, her throat. Leaned against her so that she couldn't miss

the weariness in his slender frame. He'd lost weight recently, she suddenly noticed, like one of the Hearth's chained prisoners on gruel-and-water rations. How she'd hated those compulsory visits to the gaols. Whereas the taunts and sneers, the bold winks of the new detainees could be unsettling, it was the sunken blank eyes of the life inmates that followed her back to the schoolroom, to the sleeping quarters, to her dreams. And the men always worse than the women, something she'd never understood. For days afterwards her fantasies would be ridiculously heroic.

Holding Ivan's upper arms, she swayed backwards to look into his face. He wasn't wearing his lenses but the gold in his irises had lost its glint, and even the green had acquired the tinge of scum on a stagnant pool.

'Tell me what's wrong,' she said.

'They're out there.'

'Who?'

In answer he bent for the book she hadn't noticed at his feet. It fell open like dying black wings to expose a gutted text. He ripped out the next leaf, held it up before him. The book dropped to the ground. Both the surf and the wind slapped cruelly at her ears, almost drowning out his voice, but it was the epic she'd brought him.

'What thanks can wretched fugitives return,

Who, scatter'd thro' the world, in exile mourn?'

The page dangled loosely from his fingertips as he repeated the passage in his own language. The wind flapped the thin sheet back and forth while he stared into the fog, then snatched it away for him to lunge and catch under foot. With an inarticulate cry, he tore it in half, then in half again. And again, until the scraps were no larger than the shredded leaves the hearthers used for mulch. As she watched with eyes which were beginning to brim, he walked to the water's edge, raised his hand, and released his grief into the sea. She stumbled to his side.

'I want to stay with you,' she said.

'That, at least, is one bad choice I'm not permitted to make.' He fingered the scars on his face.

Throat aching with the effort to contain her feelings, Rhohan seated herself on the shingle, drew her cloak tight, and waited. She could smell the rawness of winter in the air. His fingers were white and cold and stiff by the time he'd finished, and she took them between her own, first rubbing and breathing on them, finally laying them under her clothing to give them some life.

That afternoon he seemed content to toil at his books and notes until he was too weary to eat more than a few mouthfuls of the food Rhohan had prepared. Afterwards she practised reading to him in his own language, a strange and rambling tale of wizards and monsters, then the inevitable poetry. Their love-making was brief. If there were nightmares, they were fleeting enough not to rouse her.

Next morning the first snowfall had them outside tumbling like children. Snowballs, face scrubs, even a snowman. She showed him how to make snow angels. Talked about skis, there were so many hidden reaches to explore. Once inside, they towelled themselves dry before the fire, drank scalding mugs of the hearthers' honey-sweetened bitter tea, and gave themselves the gift of a lazy, intimate afternoon.

'If it's a boy,' Rhohan said, 'he'll be called Ivan.'

His eyes reflected the burnish of the firelight again.

Just after dawn she was awakened by an unaccustomed silence. There was no need to search the cottage. Rhohan tore open the door and ran barefoot through the snow, following his fresh tracks to the cliff above the beach. He had already waded to his chest into the icy water. He stopped, and for a moment Rhohan thought he'd turn round to look at her. His hair was loose and rose like wings, like hope at the next gust of wind. She hugged her belly protectively, too benumbed for tears. Then he glided forward and disappeared from sight.

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Rhohan indeed named their son Ivan and taught him what she'd learned of his father's tongue. Dreamy and elusive in childhood, he detested the court ritual to which he was condemned by Rhohan's appointment as the youngest Court Mathematician to hold the lifelong title. When he could be found, it was usually with one of the bound journals in which he wrote incessantly. In time his poetry became renowned throughout the hearthrealm, and beyond. Poems like exquisitely faceted gemstones that even his mother came to appreciate. Poems that she knew, with an abiding grief, his father would have cherished.

Because of Rhohan's fierce struggle to save her son, no child born single-thumbed was ever cleansed from the Hearths again.