

DECISIONS! DECISIONS!

Betsy McCall

A man walked, lost in thought, along a sandy, lonely beach. His name was Peter. He had brown hair and brown eyes. Plainish, even his wife didn't consider him handsome. Still, no one thought he was ugly.

Barefoot, he let the hot sands run between his toes, wallowing pathetically -- to his mind -- in nostalgia. Today he had no patients, no cases, no computer searches to do and plenty of time on his hands. He told himself he was hating every minute of it.

A wave rose higher than its fellows, splashing his feet and soaking the legs of his beige cotton Dockers. Peter swore aloud, cursing anything that came to his mind, but his attention was suddenly drawn to a shining piece of glass the wave had uncovered in its wake. Strangely, curiosity gripped him and he bent to inspect it.

Peter was stunned to discover there was writing on it, weird archaic writing that would not yield to analysis. He held it closer, trying to read the faint markings, only some small part of him aware that he held the shard of glass too tightly.

A drop of blood fell, only half-noticed, to the amber sands. . . .

Suddenly, there was no more beach, only the dark oblivion of nothing.

Peter awoke to a midnight sky. A slender crescent moon hung fragilely near the horizon, swallowed by an ocean of stars. On the edge of his vision, he could see torch flames, and hear the chanting of a dozen voices. Only when he moved did he realize that he was bound, hand and foot, to a great stone altar.

A figure approached him from the periphery, clad in long, ragged robes. She paused beside him, gazing almost with compassion, she spoke, "You have awakened, dear Peter. Soon, soon."

He stared at her, not comprehending the meaning of her words. He wanted to scream, "Wait! What are you talking about? Where am I? How did I get here?" but a gag sealed his lips.

She did not respond to his desperate efforts, and she did not look back.

A man's voice rose then, above the chanting that surrounded him. The man spoke boldly in a tongue Peter had never heard. The man spoke and then paused, giving a woman's voice a chance to respond. Then he spoke again. And she. And he. On and on. Finally, they spoke their words in unison, voices rising eerily on the wind, twined together as if in a lovers' embrace.

Peter struggled in his bonds, eyes staring wide in terror as four hooded figures approached him, each with knives raised. He screamed through his gag when they took hold each of a limb and plunged their knives downward.

No knives penetrated his flesh. Only the ragged cloth bonds were cut by glittering blades. Then they pulled the gag from his face and led him before the high altar.

Peter stared in horror at those he could see, eyes darting feverishly from one robed figure to the next. "What are you going to do to me?" he sobbed, no longer possessing the strength to fight back.

The woman he had seen before stepped forward, speaking to him in his own language. "We have gathered here tonight, all of us, to witness a sacrifice."

Peter recoiled in horror at her words, but a large, hooded man returned him to his knees. "You have come to see me die?" he whispered.

The woman sighed. "We do not wish to see anyone die, but we have no choice. The ruler of our land had told us that if we can find a man who will take his life to save ours, then we may live, alone, in peace. If we cannot find such a man from outside our own people, then on each new moon, three of our men must die. And should all of our people die, then he will chose others in our place, forever."

She paused. "I can see that you do not understand. He gave us only four chances to ask this. We have tried already three others. You are our last hope. The new moon is tomorrow. Soon, our people will begin dying. Those that look on here, are witnesses sent by the ruler to see that we follow his prescriptions."

She held before him a cup. It held a seemingly innocuous half cup of wine. "This is poisoned wine," she assured him, "and it would be this that would take your life. We are not executioners, Peter. The prescriptions require that you do this of your own free will."

The hooded man behind him forced Peter's hands around the cup that held his death. Then he let go of them, and the woman was forced away by another faceless man.

"It must be your choice, but this is not a game or a joke, this death is real. Please save my people, and drink this cup of death."

All those present backed away from him, leaving him to kneel on the altar steps. This can't be happening, he told himself. This is some kind of dream. Impossible. This is too unreal!

But if its not. . . What about my wife? My daughters? If I die, they have no money, no income, no support. They need me. My job? What would the hospital do?

I can't die! He stared deep into the cup. Death! Death! He screamed the single, final word at him, assailing all his senses with terror. He began to shake.

"Please save us," the woman pleaded with him.

This is a dream! A dream! He watched the blood from his bleeding hand drip to the stone stairs.

"No!" He flung the cup away from himself in horror at what it contained. The cup shattered, like little bits of glass on the altar steps before him.

* * *

Peter found himself on his own beach again, lying in wet sand near the rising tide. He sat up and stared at his surroundings, stars glowed above him. Normalcy had returned much later in the day.

He got to his feet, seeing, by the dim glow of evening twilight, the blood that soaked his hand and had begun to stain his white polo shirt. He saw the glass, then, lying nearby. He kicked at it with his shoe, laughing nervously. Assuring himself that it was all just some kind of weird nightmare, head off toward home.

He walked slowly, the blood he had lost beginning to make him dizzy. Nearly halfway home he heard the sounds of horses hooves. He turned toward the onrushing sound, expecting to scold some straying lovers.

There were no teenager romantics on these horses' backs, but armed warriors out of some hellish fantasy. They laughed mockingly as they approached him. Peter ran from that place, but stumbled in his dizziness, falling numbly to the sands. One of the riders dismounted and pounced on him, binding him and strapping him to the man's own saddle.

"Found another one," he laughed. "We'll be rewarded well for this catch!"

The men snickered cruelly, beating Peter when he began to protest.

"No!" he screamed futilely. "It's a dream! A stupid dream!"

Already he could hear the chanting begin in the distance, And above him, the stars glowed in loneliness, on this, a moonless night.

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