

## **Crimson and Turquoise**

*By Alexander Saxton*

Once, there were twin sisters, from a poor family in Arachosia. They were average in all respects: neither tall nor short, neither stupid nor brilliant, neither ugly nor beautiful. Because they were poor and had no special talents, when their father died, they knew they faced a difficult life.

After they had brought his body to the Tower of Silence, a *Druj*, a spirit of deception, flew down to them in the form of a vulture. As it descended, its ruffling feathers transformed into silks of sable and red. It landed in the form of a queen: tall, beautiful, and wise.

"My children," she said. "Why do you weep?"

And one girl said, "Because our father has died," but the other girl said nothing.

And the *Druj* said, "My girls, you must come with me, and I will take care of you. I will build you a palace in the desert; I will bring you honeyed figs, silks to wear, and lissome suitors. You will *have* everything. But if you remain, your life will be hardship and toil, and you will have nothing.

And the sister who had spoken was about to agree, when the silent sister finally gave voice.

"And what do you ask in return?" She said.

The *Druj* shook her head at the question, as though saddened by a small, suspicious mind.

"My child," she said. "Who made you so mistrustful? I ask almost nothing in return. A small inconvenience, and quickly mended."

The first sister said, "That doesn't sound so bad,"

But the silent sister said, "Say what you mean."

The *Druj* sighed, and, making eye-contact with the first sister, rolled her eyes, as if it was the two of them together against her twin. The first sister giggled.

"Well," said the *Druj*. "Let me answer your question with another question. Do you like my eyes?"

She fluttered her eyelids, and indeed, beneath long lashes, her eyes were flawless gemstones of Persian Turquoise, as blue as the sky before dawn.

"Wouldn't you love to have eyes like these?"

And the sisters, whose eyes were a common and unremarkable shade of brown, both had to agree.

"Then it's good news all around," said the *Druj*. "Because in order to come with me, all I ask is that you accept a pair of beautiful new eyes, to go with your beautiful new life."

"You want to take our eyes?" Said the silent sister.

"No, stupid," said the first sister. "Weren't you listening? She wants to give us *new* ones."

"What a clever girl," said the *Druj*.

The first sister beamed.

"I say no," said the silent sister. "I say never."

A cold look passed over the face of the *Druj*, but it was quickly replaced by a mask of sorrow.

"I'm disappointed to hear that," she said. But she turned to the first sister with a brightening glance.

"What about *you*, darling?" She said.

"Don't do it," said the silent sister.

"Don't tell me what to do," said the first sister. Then, turning to the *Druj*, she said. "I accept."

Overjoyed, the *Druj* spread her arms and embraced the first sibling, aiming a revolting grin at the second. When the embrace ended, the first sister emerged smiling from that silken bosom, though her cheeks gleamed with crimson tears.

Her old eyes were gone. Her new ones shone, blue and beautiful, like the sky before dawn.

The second sister fell backwards with a hand across her mouth, too late to do or say anything.

Like a dancer, the *Druj* whirled on its heel, transforming back into a magnificent vulture. Seizing the first girl in her talons, it took to the air, and as it did, the girl's rags transformed into blossoming silks of turquoise and red.

A great wind arose, and the silent twin stood, sheltering her eyes from the dust, as her sister was borne away.

It was the last they would see of each other in many years.

After that, life became hard for the silent sister. She went hungry, sleeping on the bare, cold rocks at the desert's edge. She was hunted by wild animals, and tempted by evil spirits in the dark of night. When she fled to the city for shelter and food, she was utterly poor, and treated like an animal.

Yet she persevered. Knowing true hardship, she was careful with money. But unblinded by greed, she was never cheap. In time, she made a small place for herself in the world, and built a family, and a community. She fed those who could not feed themselves, and did her best for the cause of Truth.

Decades passed, and the time came when she knew she had made a good life, but knew also that she had left one thing unfinished. Leaving her loved ones behind, but promising to return, she set out into the desert to find her twin.

But in all this time, the first sister had lived a very different life.

As she first soared over the desert, under the vulture's wings, the new, turquoise eyes felt cool and fresh in her head, and it did not occur to her to ask the *Druj* what had become of her real eyes. From the dun, dry distance, she caught a far-off gleam, and as the vulture descended again, a golden palace began lifting itself from the sands.

Radiant domes and pillars of turquoise soared above the wastes. Streamers of crimson silk bellied like sails on the desert wind. Gardens unfurled: gardens running with water, wine, and cold, quenching milk, between date-palms, and dripping terraces of honey-comb. The *Druj* set her down at the end of an avenue paved with black quartz, and behold: a golden chariot drawn by night-black horses awaited her pleasure, and the groom was a lithe young man, his skin supple with oil.

"My Queen," he said, when the first sister landed, and kissed her slippered foot with an open mouth.

"See," said the *Druj*, as the chariot bore them down beneath the shade of palms and pillars. "Everything is as I said it would be. If your sister had just been more open-minded: she could have shared in this!" Then the *Druj* smiled her wicked smile, and bent low beside the girl's ear.

"But between you and me, I'm glad it was only you. *You* were always the smart one, the lovely one, the one who deserved this."

At this, the first sister smiled, and her chest swelled, and her back became proud.

"If she had only the wisdom to listen to *me*," she said. "This could have been hers as well!"

But then she matched the spirit's wicked grin with one of her own, and said, "But between you and me, I'm glad things worked out this way. *I* was always the smart one, and to be honest, the pretty one. Really, my sister deserved none of this."

And at that, the *Druj* smiled wider, and the girl did not notice how her teeth were sharp, like vulture's beaks.

"What a *perceptive* girl," said the *Druj*.

For years, the first sister dwelt in the palace, where her every desire was indulged. She had pomegranates, nectars and sugared wine. She had slave boys for her pleasure, and satin robes that never stained, and a body that would not age nor fatten, no matter how she gorged herself upon sweet things. From time to time, the *Druj* would bring her villains from the desert, so she could exercise her power and righteousness: having them beheaded by golden axes, or flogged by silken strops.

If the *Druj* ever gathered up the bodies of the dead and flew them to her den in the palace roof, the first sister paid no heed.

From time to time, the *Druj* would come and pay her compliments, and stroke her hair, and say how beloved she was. At such times, the first sister would always notice some lovely thing about the *Druj* that she had not observed before.

"Was your hand always articulated so, from flawless turquoise?" She would say. Or else, "Was your ear ever thus, cast of perfect gold? Was your breast always carved from smooth ivory, tapering to a garnet tip, and were your shapely calf and foot shaped of lapis lazuli before?"

And every time she asked such a question, the *Druj* would say, "Why, of course! Would *you* like to have such hands, or ears, or such a jewelled breast, or such a cool, curved calf?"

And every time, of course, the first sister would say, "Of course," and in her generosity, the *Druj* would make it so.

More years passed like this. The new limbs were heavy, so the first sister had her grooms bear her from place to place on a palanquin. From time to time, the *Druj* would say to her, "Oh, aren't you tired of this groom," or "Did you see how that slave-boy looked at you," and the first sister would say, "Away with him," and the *Druj* would bear them up to the palace roof.

In time, the woman had too few grooms to bear her, and so she spent her days on a golden throne, and had all things brought to her: a life blissful and unchanging, until one day, a figure darkened from the billow of desert sands.

For months, the silent sister had traversed the waste. She had not found *any* evidence of her sister, no matter where she went, no matter which nomads she asked at which caravansary. But eventually, she arrived at a place where she found *no* evidence: a desolation where nothing lived at all, and there was no-one to ask but some disjointed bones bleaching in the sand.

She decided that this, then, must be the right place.

And so she set out into the dunes.

After days of hard travel, the desert shimmered in the distance, and from the white erg, she saw rising domes and golden colonnades: green gardens, crimson fruit upon the trees, and a turquoise sky.

But as she looked upon the palace, a wind blew up, and a bit of sand lodged in the corner of one eye. As she closed it to rub away the grit, her other eye saw things for how they truly were.

A cold revulsion slithered up her spine, though the air boiled over the sand and salt flats.

She opened up her second eye, and everything was beautiful again. Two night-black stallions danced along the crystal path, drawing a golden chariot. An oiled groom stood at the reins, and his bronzed muscles shone in the sun.

She closed her second eye to see his true form, and regretted it immediately.

“My lady awaits you,” said the groom.

“Then I will go to her,” said the Second Sister.

With both eyes open, she set her jaw, and held her breath, and climbed into the chariot.

The reins snapped, and the wheels rattled below her feet, though the road beneath them looked so crystal smooth.

A soft breeze wafted from the gardens as they went, and under its scent of honey and flowers, some other odour lingered, sickly-sweet and dusty, but only ever barely caught.

She passed between the pillars, dismounting underneath the span of a monumental arch.

Its shadow tumbled over her as she entered the palace hall.

There, between the pools of mercury where swam the artificial fish, between the shady trees where strange birds flashed their shining wings, the first sister awaited her, seated on a gold and turquoise throne, while the *Druj* lounged to one side, supping on a tray of dates.

Wanting to appear magnificent for the occasion, the first sister had had the *Druj* sleeve one of her arms from scapula to fingertips with woven, agate-studded silver thread. She had waited many years for her sister to come, and intended to revel in the moment.

But when her silent, long-lost twin appeared at the other end of the hall, the first sister felt a pang of pity.

For while she on her throne was as young and smooth-skinned as ever, age had withered the silent sister, as it withers us all. While the first sister went gowned in damask and gossamer, the silent sister wore only the rags of a desert wanderer. Where the first sister had eyes of sempiternal turquoise, the silent sister had only her same, tired, mud-brown eyes, and one of them kept winking.

The silent sister came to a halt before the throne, and the eyes that gazed up at her twin were full of tears.

"There there, sister," said the first twin, with a moue of pity. "I know it must be difficult to see *me* like *this*, while *you* live like *that*, but you've come at last: come to the right place, where we can help you."

The silent sister did not respond, but turned instead to the *Druj*.

"What have you *done* to her," she said.

"*I*," said the *Druj*, using sensuous fingers to pull a date-pit from her crimson lips. "Haven't done anything to her."

"It's true," said the first sister. "Since the moment we first met, the *Druj* been nothing but a kind companion and wise counsellor."

The silent sister let a slow breath slide from her lungs.

Still speaking only to the *Druj*, she said. "You're right, aren't you? She did all this to herself."

The *Druj* only smiled, sucking down another date.

"Sister," said the first twin. "What are you *talking* about?"

The silent sister turned, and seemed about to speak, when an insight came to her, and she closed her mouth instead.

"Nothing," she said, after a moment's thought. "Ignore me, I'm only jealous."

"Well," said the first sister, waving a turquoise hand. "I suppose you *would* be."

"Sister," said the silent twin. "Word of your generosity has spread throughout the desert. In every town and oasis, they say no queen alive has greater charity than you."

"Well, of course they would say that," said the first sister. "It's the truth. Isn't that right, *Druj*?"

But the *Druj* didn't seem to hear. She was staring at the silent sister, with narrowing eyes. Tearing the flesh from a large and meaty date, she chewed with her mouth open, and dark fluids dribbled down her pointed chin.

Though the silent sister knew this spectacle was meant to unnerve her, she ignored it, and began to climb the dais steps toward her sister's golden throne.

"Since you have so much to give," the silent sister said. "And I am so poor and downtrodden, I was wondering if I might ask a favour. That is, if it's in your power to grant."

The first sister scoffed.

"All things are in my power," she said. "And I shall deign to help my poor, pathetic twin. Ask me!"

Taking another step, so she stood at her sister's knee, the silent twin said,

"I was wondering: just for a second, just to see what it was like, would you let me see through one of your eyes?"

The *Druj* surged to its feet.

"Don't listen!" It shouted. "It's a trick!"

But the silent sister laughed, shaking her head.

"I should be so lucky," she said. "I could never fool my sister. *She* was always the smart one."

"She's right, *Druj*," said the first sister, with a patronizing smile. "There's a reason *I'm* up here and *she's* down there."

The *Druj* wolfed down another date. She no longer looked so beautiful. Her silk robes were beginning to resemble ruffled vulture's wings.

"You fool," said the *Druj*. "Can't you see she's manipulating you?"

The first sister flushed with anger, and without another word turned back to her sibling, pulling one turquoise eye from its socket.

At the same time, with a steadying breath, the silent sister raised clawed fingers to her own eye, and dug them in.

A, wet, sucking sound echoed in the distant spaces of the hall, followed by a small *pop*. Red tears ran. The silent twin let slip a single gasp of pain.

The first sister flinched at the sight. The *Druj* broke into raucous, vulture-laughter.

“Um,” said the first sister, offering the turquoise orb. “Here you go.”

But the silent sister did not take the offered eye. Instead, she grasped her sister by the wrist, pulling her down and forward. At the same moment, she wrapped the rough, bloody fingers of her other hand around her sister’s crowned head, using the thumb to plunk her own ragged, red eyeball into her sister’s empty socket.

The first sister shrieked and fell back. She blinked several times; the new eye stung. And then she opened it, and saw...

Reality.

She tumbled away from the chair, which was no throne, but the lap of a bloated corpse that leaned against the wall. She shrieked again as she slid, not down marble steps to the edge of a silver pool, but down a sand slope, into tainted water, where no mechanical fish swam, but only the vile larvae of bloated desert flies. She tried to stand, but couldn’t. She had no lapis leg, or turquoise hand, just grimy wooden pegs. That arm that had been sleeved was silver was bare, bare down to the drying inner tendons and bones. She moaned, unable to free herself from the slime, and as the water stilled below her, she saw her true reflection for the first time in years.

She had grown old. She was hideous to look upon. She had one brown eye, one withered breast, a hunger-bloated belly, and a mouth of scurvy-rotted teeth. She had given away her body: she was a stump swaddled in greasy rags.

She began to scream and weep. A pair of strong arms lifted her from the mire and held her close, rocking back and forth. It was her sister; after all those years, and all she had done, it was her sister. She let herself go, and wept for what a fool she’d been.

In time, exhaustion overcame grief, and the twins stood together, in silent embrace.

A polite cough shattered the reverie.

They looked up. The *Druj* was perched upon what had seemed to be the throne. Gone were its silks and cosmetic smile. Now, it was a thing half human, half vulture, embodying only the vilest aspects of both. On the platter discarded by its feet lay, not a heap of dates, but a pile of balled-up scraps of skin from the first sister’s peeled arm.

“Well how wonderful,” said the *Druj*. “*You* tricked your sister into seeing the truth, and *you* finally saw what’s been happening for all these years. I suppose I should be grateful: you’ve given me so very much *to eat*.”

The *Druj* darkened and grew, until its now-empty eyes yawned like the grave, and its black wings spread like the arches of a sepulchre.

"But," said the *Druj*. "What will you do *now*? Do you think you can *escape* me? Bow down and I might let you live. Give up your eyes, and I may not tear you limb from limb."

In the silent sister's arms, the mutilated twin shivered: terrified, helpless. But the silent sister just stared into the *Druj*, the way someone peers into a darkened room, to see if there is anything inside.

At last, the silent twin said, "No."

"No?!" Screamed the *Druj*.

"No," said the silent sister. "I'm not afraid of you. You cannot hurt us."

"*Believe* me," cackled the *Druj*, beating its wings so the sand roared around them. "I can do *more* than hurt you, and if you don't do as I say, I *will*."

The silent sister laughed.

"Liar," she said.

"*I am no liar*," howled the *Druj*, and lowered over them until its carrion-rending beak was inches from their eyes.

"No," said the silent sister. "You're less than a liar. You're a lie."

"*I will drink the milk from your bones*," shrieked the *Druj*.

But the silent sister reached out, and behold! Where they should have touched the *Druj*, her fingers passed instead through empty air.

"There's no truth in you," said the silent sister. "And that makes you, *nothing*."

And the *Druj* was gone.

The sisters stood alone in an empty ruin. The sun was still shining outside.

Here, there were no gardens or turquoise pillars, only a shallow salt-flat between two dunes, puddled with brackish, standing water. A ruined caravansary sagged behind them, half-buried in the sand. No crimson banners flowed on the wind: only rags that snapped from skeletal bodies twisting in crows-cages.

There had been a chariot here before, gilded, and drawn by black horses at the hands of a muscled groom. Now, they saw the truth: a starved mule and a broken cart, where a blind mummy hunched at the reins.

And it was horrible, but it was the truth. And it was better because it was the truth.

They took the mule with them, and returned across the desert.

And when they arrived back at the city, the silent sister's family and friends welcomed her twin like she was a queen returning to her own palace.

In time, the first sister learned to return their love, and became a thoughtful person who did the best she could for others.

And so it was, by the long route and the longer one, that both sisters became wise.