

Red Bodhisattva
By Alexander Saxton

You could be forgiven for being afraid, Kaisen thought, as she walked alone through the Hall of Bodhisattvas.

She would never have admitted to such a thing, and she had been brought up to never show any emotion, let alone fear. But even though she had lived at the Monastery for decades, a low dread still clutched at her heart each time she entered the hall.

It had been centuries since the nuns here practiced their particular style of mummification. But the monastery was many thousands of years older than that, and so the glass sarcophagi of the Sainted Mothers filled this vast space in their silent millennia: rank upon endless, silent rank, retreating back into dim and silent galleries, where only the dim gleam of distant glass hinted at their presence in the reddish gloom.

But was it *truly* silent? Each time she walked through this space Kaisen felt as though unheard communication flitted from coffin to coffin; she felt the pressure of those mummified eyes, as though the Bodhisattvas were watching her, seeing through her, and murmuring to each other through the aether of her faults.

It was the colour, she decided, that was so unsettling. For the only light that shone in this dim, great expanse came from fixtures set into the backs of the glass sarcophagi, and so was filtered through the red fluid in which each saint had been embalmed. Each dim, rare bulb cast great shadows across the floor in the shape of skeletal frames, and crooked, claw-like fingers.

She was near the end of the hall now, and each footstep that rang against the worn stone echoed away like a red bird into the darkness. She was neither barefoot nor sandalled, but wore a pair of black-and-red designer sneakers. Her *kasaya*, robe, was not stitched together from discarded grey cloth like the ones worn by the embalmed women, but was instead woven from black-and-red patterned silk damask. The Sisters had come a long way. As individuals, they still eschewed personal property (though of course, you needed to wear clothes). As an organization, however, with convents on a dozen worlds, their assets had swollen into the billions.

Kaisen stopped at the end of the hall. A thick silence rushed in to fill the vacuum left by her footsteps. She was standing before the centremost sarcophagus, the one out from which all the others spiralled, like wax hexagons from the queen of a hive, and she was staring, as she had often forced herself to do, into the preserved eyes of the Sainted Mother Azureyah.

A distant rumble rolled through the floor, but it did not fill Kaisen with holy dread. It was only artillery, booming from the next valley over. The Revolution was drawing closer by the hour. The Sisters were running out of time.

Azureyah. She looked nothing like the popular image of her, the one you could see printed on t-shirts or raised in front-yard shrines across this planet, in the same way you might see Jesus, Che Guevara, or Cameron Kemper on more civilized worlds. She didn't look like a miracle worker or wondermaker; it was hard to understand why the valley-people held her in such cretinous awe. Mummification shrank a person, but even in life, Azureyah couldn't have stood more than four foot eleven.

Kaisen, on the other hand, raised with modern nutrition and gene support, was more than a foot taller. With health came beauty: and though Kaisen did not consider herself vain, she took a certain pride in her physical health: in the sheen that vitality gave her skin and hair. According to the chronicles, Azureyah had only lived to sixty. Kaisen was sixty-three, and yet the woman on the other side of the glass looked as though she had been three decades Kaisen's senior when they had sealed her, still living, into that bell jar coffin.

"So what makes you so calm?" Kaisen murmured. Even speaking softly, her voice rustled back at her from among the distant dead saints. "Look at you: you're nothing; a bald, ugly little woman, old before your time. So what makes you so special?"

But the woman in the jar said nothing.

Another distant rumble rolled through the silence. Artillery; where on *earths* had they dug *that* up? Or was it jury-rigged out of industrial piping and cargo drums? This planet was an embarrassing backwater with a tin-pot regime; she wondered if the people who came to plunder the Monastery would be armed with rifles or pointed sticks.

"Kaisen!"

A voice from behind her: hushed, but still loud among the silent, mummified mothers. Seralah was a nervous presence at the entrance of the hall, glancing back through the ancient double doors as she swung them shut behind her.

"Well," said Kaisen. "What did Mother Jonneh have to say?"

But Kaisen was sure she knew the answer already. The current Mother was a tiresome throwback; she lacked imagination and daring; she would never go along with Kaisen's plan.

Seralah shook her head as she scurried across the floor, crossing and uncrossing her arms, and shooting furtive glances up at the mummies on either side, as if expecting them to lunge out and violate her.

"It's a no, Kaisen," she whimpered. "Mother Jonneh says it's a bad idea; worse: blasphemous."

Kaisen sighed, and leaned back against Azureyah's sarcophagus, ignoring the small, irrational part of her brain that imagined the thing inside would try and pull her through the glass.

"Yes, I thought that might be her answer. Do it anyway."

Seralah's eyes widened.

"But the Mother said...."

"Mother Jonneh is not immune to the deceptions of this world: not yet. She is human, and fallible, and she is wrong this time. I'll talk to her. In the meantime, begin setting up. Tell the Sisters in the infirmary that the Reverend Mother needs them to start hooking up the machine."

But Seralah hesitated. She was wearing a look that Kaisen had seen from members of the servant-class before. A wide-eyed, paralyzed look; like prey. Poor Seralah. Kaisen sighed and pulled the smaller woman into an embrace. Seralah flinched, but did not try and escape.

"Poor Seralah," Kaisen murmured into her scalp. The embrace was gentle, but with an implied menace. Seralah was a fragile woman: born into poverty, with no gene correctives, and a touch of childhood rickets. Kaisen could have crushed her like a songbird. "So much knowledge inside that big skull of yours; so little courage, so little Will inside that heart. Little Bird, tell me: who was it that got their family's doctor to look after your brother when he got sick?"

"I don't—" Seralah began, but Kaisen squeezed her close, squeezed the air out of her answer, and talked over her.

"And who paid the bills, Seralah? I've taken care of you, Little Bird; you know I have your best interests at heart. So just do this one thing for me: I promise it's for the best, and I promise you won't get in trouble. Okay?"

Seralah held out for a moment longer, but in the end, she wasn't strong enough to resist.

"Alright, alright," she said, tapping Kaisen's shoulder. "You're right: I'll do what you ask."

"Don't do it for me, Little Bird," said Kaisen, releasing her from the squeeze to hold at arm's length. "Do it for you, okay?"

Seralah nodded, though she was blinking back tears, and when Kaisen let her go, she scuttled back to the doors and squeezed through, her footsteps skittering down to the infirmary.

Artillery boomed as if in response. It had to be closer now; Kaisen thought she could see its shockwave rippling through the jars of sainted honey. Not much time left, and so much more action to be taken.

She sighed, and as she strode for the door, she imagined she could feel the slow judgment of ten thousand dead eyes dripping down on her, smothering and thick.

“Who are you to judge?” she hissed. Her voice slithered back to her from the dry red darkness. “You all jumped off the wheel; but some of us still have to ride it.”

The bodies did not respond; they merely hung silent in their glass cases, suspended like dry jellyfish in a coagulating sea; and her only answer came from the mindless, wandering repetitions of her echo.

‘The wheel... the wheel... the wheel...’

This is how it was done:

When the nuns first came to this mountaintop so long ago, they found that two species, and only two, survived together on the alpine tundra. One was the honey flower; and the red bee was its symbiont. When the bitterest periods of cold arrived, the carmine sap within the honey flower would not freeze; instead, because of its special properties, it *vitrified*, becoming supercooled, an amorphous solid, like glass. Because no ice crystals formed, the cell walls of the plant were never ruptured by their expanding, jagged edges; and so, when the weather warmed again, the honey-flower could return to life. Likewise, when the thick-furred mountain bees brewed crimson honey from this flower, their mellified larvae would survive, and thaw, and quickly breed to pollinate the honey-flower again.

Now, when a Reverend Mother decided that her work was done, she would begin to drink a tincture of the honey flower’s toxic sap. She would abstain from any food but powdered lentils and tannic herbs. After one year and a day, she would cease to drink water, and live on nothing but honey-flower tea and bitter honey. After forty days of this, she would lower herself into a glass sarcophagus and begin to meditate, breathing through a tube as it was filled with red honey. The nuns would carry her up to the mountain’s coldest peak, and once the honey had vitrified, the tube would be withdrawn, the bell jar topped-up, and then left for forty days. At the end of this time, it could be returned to the Hall, and the body within would be preserved more perfectly than in salt and natron, or even ice.

The Mothers did not preserve themselves to chase immortal life. Rather, they embraced an early death so their example might inspire others on the road to enlightenment.

To reach the place where Reverend Mother Jonneh lived, Kaizen had to climb three hundred steps, to a high and crumbling arm of the monastery, set upon a granite shoulder of the mountain.

In spite of how opulent the monastery had become, the nuns still lived and slept in small, undecorated cells. The Reverend Mother's was much like any other, set apart only by its isolated location and by the absence of a fourth wall. It was open to the wind and elements, and overlooked a drop that seemed endless. On the sharp outcroppings that rose around and below this precarious room, clouds of bristling red honey-flower grew, pollinated by the huge and red-dark alpine bees. Both plant and insect matched the blood-red sunset, tinted by the smoke of burning cities on the plain below.

"Kaisen," said Mother Jonneh. She was standing by the precipice, and did not turn to look as Kaisen entered the room. "I expected you to come."

"I've ordered Seralah to go ahead with my plan," Kaisen said. "We're going to wake them up."

"Poor Seralah," said the Mother. "She always was your creature, wasn't she?"

Jonneh turned at last. She was not much older than Kaisen, but like her counterparts in the glass coffins, she seemed quite ancient. It was one of the many things Kaisen hated about her.

"Kaisen..." she said. "Kaisen, you're dealing with powers you do not understand. You need to stop."

"I'm dealing with powers that could save us, Jonneh." Kaisen threw herself into a hard chair in the corner, and put her feet up on the Reverend Mother's bed. "You think the Revolution will just leave us be? We're too rich a target."

"They will not kill harmless old women."

Kaisen laughed.

"So you'd just *let* them plunder us? Everything we've worked for: gone. Every scrap of gold and silver, every reliquary. We'd be beggars, paupers. Unless we *do* something."

"Something *monstrous*, Kaisen. This monastery has survived eight thousand years. It's been plundered before. It will be again. That's just the nature of the wheel, and it's not what matters."

Kaizen made a disgusted noise.

"The Bodhisattvas have the power to *protect* us, Jonneh. They can go back to sleep when the monastery is safe."

“Nothing in this world is safe, Kaisen. Do not end their liberation. They will not thank you for it.”

Kaizen took her feet down from the bed, and leaned forward, baring her teeth.

“Haven’t you been listening? It’s already happening: it’s done.”

“Then why are you here?”

Kaisen stood. Red flowers glowed outside; the colour of the red sunset, each one shining like the glass jar of a mummified nun.

There was a moment of silence as Jonneh realized what Kaisen had come here to do.

“Ah.”

It took only a moment for Kaisen to cross the room and shove her into empty space. The old woman did not try to resist; it would have been futile. But her dark eyes held onto Kaisen’s, unwavering, as she fell, red and dark, between red-blossomed terraces of rock and empty vastnesses beyond. She did not cry out; she plummeted silently, as if drifting down through red honey. And then she vanished into the mists and shadows below, which were stained by the red sugar of twilight.

It was Seralah, poor, weak, brilliant Seralah, with her past life as an indentured researcher in the laboratories owned by Kaisen’s family, who had discovered a way to reverse the process. In Springtime, both flower and bee returned from their saccharine comas: it was perhaps possible, then, to return the Bodhisattvas as well.

“It takes blood,” she had said, all those months ago, showing Kaisen the rock marmot she had shepherded through death and back to simulated life. “All the tissues are perfectly preserved in the honey lacquer: if you pump in oxygenated blood, pumping out the lacquer, then the brain can wake up and the heart can be restarted.”

It should have been miraculous, sublime, but even Kaisen, who considered herself iron-livered, found some inward part of herself appalled by the spectacle. The marmot: hairless, desiccated, lurched and staggered across the stainless-steel workbench, slipping in a slurry of mingled blood, honey and meconium, stumbling over the soiled IV tubes it had torn out of its own flesh. The creature was making a pitiable noise, halfway between a bleat and a howl; a sound of pure animal fear and anguish.

“Why is it behaving like this?” Kaisen had said. She was pleased to hear no tinge of horror in her own voice.

“Not... not all sections of the brain seem to be working properly,” Seralah had said. “I don’t know if it’s damage, or if they just need time, or...”

“It doesn’t matter.” Kaisen had cut her off, as the ruined marmot began to gnaw and slurp at the IV tube that had previously pumped blood into its body. “All that matters is that we can use them.”

As night deepened, the distant thud of artillery did not die away, but crept nearer, as the rebels gained momentum and shattered government resistance in the mountain passes. Many of the sisters had fled already, but not Kaisen: Kaisen did not run: people ran from her.

“How much longer?” She snapped.

It was the first time she had spent the night in the Hall of Bodhisattvas, and it was beginning to wear on her. To spend hour after hour under the gaze of those blind, all-seeing eyes: to watch the slow aimless gestures of the mummified fingers, as they drifted with the stochastic wanderings of sugar molecules.

“Almost there,” said Seralah. Refugees had flocked to the monastery for weeks, many of them injured or dying, or freshly dead, their bodies still warm as weeping family members dragged them over the threshold. All this is to say, the Monastery had no shortage of fresh human blood. Now, the machines were humming, and dark fluid was stuttering through plastic tubes into the viscous fluid of Azureyah’s Sarcophagus. It had been difficult to remove the great lead plug from the top of the glass jar. Kaisen had resorted to the use of a crowbar. Likewise Seralah had struggled to jam cannulas into the mummified arteries and veins; she had broken three hypodermics and drenched herself with sanguine nectar in the attempt.

But now it was happening: the machine hummed and chuckled, pumping black blood up from the infirmary, and pushing red syrup from the mummy’s veins to spill across the stone-tile floor. Time enough to clean up the mess when the treasury was secured.

“Not a moment too soon,” muttered Kaisen. It was nearly sunrise. From outside, the glass-rattling boom of artillery had been joined by the distant clatter of small-arms fire, the occasional howl of a plasma-lance. The revolution was coming up the mountain. It would take the power of saints to turn it aside.

“Kaisen...”

“What is it?”

“Look.”

She realized then that the hum of the machine had kicked out, and the old, familiar, eerie silence had shuffled back in to fill the Hall. But the red syrup was still pumping out on its own.

“Does that mean...”

“Yes,” breathed Seralah. “Her heart has restarted.”

Incredible. The feeling was absolutely incredible. Kaisen shut her eyes and took a moment to drink it in; the triumph, sweet as floral nectar, glorious as a mountain sunset.

“Pop the next lid, and start pumping blood into the next one. I want as many as possible ready by the time rebels arrive at...”

She trailed off.

She had reopened her eyes, just in time to see an unsettling thing. Inside the red murk of the glass sarcophagus, for the first time in three thousand years, the blind eyes of Reverend Mother Azureyah blinked.

And then those unseeing pupils focused, like the eyepiece of a microscope. And for all the times that Kaisen had thought the eyes were staring at her, this was the first time she was actually seen.

And at that moment, she regretted everything that she had done.

Because the eyes that stared back at her were not the eyes of a saint: they were windows into the reptile brain of a sleepwalking corpse; and there was nothing in them but hunger and thirst.

Slowly, with a sustained and honeyed motion, a mummified fist struck the inside of the glass.

And as slowly as the mummy had moved, the glass splintered, and white spiderwebs spread out across the red. Ruby beads began to seep between the cracks.

“Kaisen...” said Seralah, stepping back. *Thud. Crack. Seep.* Kaisen felt a surge of contempt at the smaller woman’s lack of courage, before realizing that she, too, was backing away.

Thud. Crack. Seep

And then the glass exploded outward.

Red shards left stinging trails as they tore across the arm she flung in front of her face. Seralah screamed, and a horrible wet retching sound was followed by the splatter of red honey from the Bodhisattva's lungs. Kaisen lowered her arm and stared, frozen in horror at the sight of Azureyah's hunched body, at the way it swayed and trembled with hysterical strength, the way it staggered and stumbled, as though concussed. An open cooler lay close-by, filled with bags of blood, and the Bodhisattva lurched toward them, as if drawn like a honeybee to nectar. Could it smell blood through the plastic? Could its desiccated tongue taste iron on the air? It fell upon the bags, tearing them apart with pointed, withered fingers, and then drank with mindless abandon, making small sounds of rage and anguish; it was a body that had been reminded how to suffer, but had forgotten how to cope with suffering, and so it drank until its stomach bloated, and thin vomit mingled with the pints of blood and crimson honey that dribbled down its rib cage to slosh across the floor. And all this while Kaisen and Seralah just stood and watched, wide-eyed, and paralyzed, like prey.

At last the body's head snapped up, and it stared at them both with eyes that were living, yet empty, like twin caverns, each with the light of a lone, dim lightbulb wandering through their vast darknesses.

And there was a single word, unarticulated, writ across Azureyah's face:

More.

At last, Kaisen felt herself unfreeze; she turned to run, and saw that Seralah was already ahead of her. The thing behind them was drawing ragged breath at last, and using that breath to scream as it gave chase across the slick stone floor.

The other Bodhisattvas looked on in silence.

Kaisen and Seralah sprinted out of the hall, just as a nearby artillery strike shook dust from the ceiling of the passage leading down; they met each other's glance and turned for the long stair that led to the upper dormitories instead, seconds before Azureyah burst from the hall behind them, coughing and howling, leaving crimson hand-and-footprints on the steps as she scrambled after them on all-fours, gaining speed as she relearned the use of her limbs.

In her sneakers and good health, Kaisen gained on Seralah, and then shoved past her, arriving at the dormitories to find the doors all locked, either because the nuns had fled, or else had barricaded themselves inside.

"Up," she commanded, as a gasping Seralah arrived behind her at the landing. "The Reverend Mother's room."

It was the one door she knew would be unlocked.

Azureyah lunged out onto the landing behind them, and keened, and laughed, hoarse-throated as rust drawn across stone, and chased them as they crashed through a door that led outside, and to the long, cold flight of steps that led to the Chamber of the Reverend Mother.

Now Kaisen and Seralah were both beginning to flag, and they slipped on the frost-polished steps, struggling with every breath to pull oxygen from the thin, cold air. Behind them, red-slathered Azureyah only gained in speed, and her wet panting drew closer by the second.

With a final burst of effort, Kaisen lunged ahead, lungs straining, reaching the door of the lone chamber seconds before Seralah.

“Kaisen, Kaisen, wait!”

But Kaisen slammed and locked the door behind her, throwing her weight back against it, and leaving Seralah to pound with her fists and beg on the other side. Kaisen shut her eyes and said nothing. A second later, another impact came, and then the shriek, the gasp, and the ripping noise: that inarticulate sound of fingernails ripping through a human neck. And then there were wet sounds that lasted for a very long time.

Outside the great open window that faced her, the one from which she had flung Mother Jonneh, the sun was beginning to rise red, staining the walls around Kaisen the colour of honey flowers.

After some time, a polite knock came at the door.

Kaisen squeezed her eyes shut again and tried not to breathe.

And then, all of a sudden, she found herself sitting on the bed beside the window.

The door clicked open, and a small figure stepped out into the scarlet light.

“Could you tell me,” said a hoarse voice in an archaic dialect. “Why am I here, and why am I covered in blood?”

Kaisen recoiled against the wall as the Bodhisattva stepped past her, coming to the window precipice so she was all silhouetted by dawnlight.

Kaisen lied to her then, but Azureyah had moved beyond the deceptions of this world, and she could only hear the truth.

“Ah, I understand,” she said. “I see what you’ve done, Kaisen. You should have let me sleep.”

“But you have the power to protect the monastery,” said Kaisen. To protect everything we have.”

“Power? Maybe.” Azureyah made a little gesture with her hand, and her sodden, bloody robe was suddenly clean and grey. “But what do you have to protect?”

“Money, Investments” said Kaisen. “Power and influence. The ability to help so many more people than you ever could in your day.”

“No Kaisen,” the Boddhisattva said. “All you ever really have is one moment of wakefulness. If even that.”

And then a cloud of broken glass and red mist thundered through the open door like hurricane debris, and Kaisen shielded her face with her arms.

And when she raised her head again, she saw that the glass sarcophagus had reassembled itself, facing the rising sun, and that Azureyah was floating once again in silent meditation, forever preserved in red honey.

For a long time, Kaisen sat watching the sun rise through Azureyah’s crimson glass.

And after that she walked downhill, ignoring Seralah’s torn and ruined body, ignoring the empty, blood-soaked hall, and the bruise-eyed sisters who still toiled in the infirmary, struggling against the endless tide of torn and ruined human forms. She tore a satchel from the hands of one of the dead, and dumped it out on the floor, and wandered through the halls alone, filling it to the seams with every scrap of gold and silver she could carry.

By sunset, she escaped through the lines and made her way halfway down to the valley. From where she stood, as she glanced back, she could see red smoke rising from the place where she had lived so many years. Could she still catch the red gleam of sunset, reflecting from the glass where Azureyah slept? She turned her back before she could be sure, and walked slowly down, out of the angled beams of crimson twilight, and let the golden weight of her heavy satchel bear her down, down the winding mountain road that wound, ever deeper into reddish night.

Her feet were growing sore, but maybe someone ahead would offer her a ride. In the darkness just beyond her sight, she heard the wooden creaking of a wheel.