

The Unraveling

by Antonio de las Morenas

The long grass bowed beneath the wind, endlessly into the horizon, an unbroken sea of pale yellow stalks paying homage to the sun. In its center was a brown circle: packed earth, huts arranged in a smaller circle within, and within that, another, of men standing with their hands linked. They wore the skins of buffalo, had long, braided hair, flesh the color of cream and coffee, and eyes like dark flint, hardened from years of staring into the sun. And at their center was a large patchwork of hides, hoisted on poles, beneath it a fire, within its own circle of irregularly shaped stones.

Before it the shaman intoned, a thin, wasted figure; very old, face like a wooden mask that had been cut upon by a thousand different emotions, each of them as alien to Gideon as the noises that issued from his throat. Beside him, Erasmus crouched in the dirt, looking exactly like the middleman he was: braided hair, shifting tattoos, hide vest, and a pair of sand-colored trousers and boots like Gideon's own.

He translated, "Out here, belief can kill a man."

The men nodded slowly, deliberately, muttering their assent, half in broken English, the others in their language, which was very musical, though incoherent to Gideon, and seemed to use click-like sounds for many of its consonants.

The shaman lifted his head, and spoke again, in a voice so faint that even his own tribesmen had to lean forward to hear what he was saying. Erasmus nodded his head while listening, a habit acquired at the Rail, which held little meaning, he had told Gideon, for his people out in the Unraveling. He translated, "Yes, and it can also make

him stronger, if he can give himself to... its dance. But first you must learn their language, he says. You must let go of your southern fears and superstitions.” He brought his eyes up to meet Gideon’s. “He doesn’t think it’s possible. He says no southerner’s ever been able to do it before. That they’ve always gotten lost.”

Gideon looked back at Erasmus, hard. “I can do it.” He turned to the witchdoctor. “I will.”

The shaman’s laugh was a haggard sound, like air escaping a wounded balloon. Partway into it he began to cough violently. He cleared his throat. Smiling broadly, he met Gideon’s eyes with his own, gentler gaze, and continued his discourse.

By the time they finished, Gideon’s safari jacket was damp with sweat, his forehead burnt raw by the sun. Erasmus pulled aside the hide that covered the hut’s entrance, and then followed in after him.

“So what is it you’re planning to do out here?” he asked.

Gideon lowered himself onto the thatched mat in the corner. “I’m just here to survey the place, Erasmus. What the Board decides to do, exactly, is out of my hands. But listen: we’re here to *save* your culture. If we don’t act fast, the Kungari could move in, burn your huts here, and then the last of your people’ll be driven off their land, just like they were driven off of theirs. And I know they don’t have anywhere to go. The Unraveling’s growing, Erasmus; it’s swallowing everything in its path. They’ll be forced to move into the cities, and all of this,” Gideon gestures with his head toward the thatched walls of the hut, “will be gone.”

Erasmus' eyes narrowed. "My people have lived with the Unraveling for as long they can remember. What can your Board do to save my culture from that which it does not even understand?"

Gideon nodded. "You've lived here, at the outskirts, where the effects can be relatively subtle. Fear of a large dog can make it larger, make it more viscous; impatience can make a day drag on, not just palpably, like it does anywhere, but so that a watch will actually record more time elapsing in your hut than it does for the people outside. But further in, things begin to distort even more. You heard what your shaman said: not that those who came before me merely failed, packed up, and headed back to the Rail, but that the Unraveling actually swallowed them, they were lost, and nobody ever saw them again."

Erasmus muttered something under his breath. It sounded like a curse. "And still you ignore: he has gone there, he has seen his spirit turned inside out, and made to color the sky. It is possible."

"Something which holds great fascination for me. But these are your shamans, your wise men, those who've been conditioned or touched in some special way so the Unraveling doesn't swallow them. And even they disappear. This place can't survive that. And even if it could: other people are being pushed back, cultures are being thrust together, the world is shrinking, and none of this will survive intact."

"So you do what?"

“We freeze places like this. We call in the University’s cryo-experts and load your village into moving trucks. That way people will be able to enjoy its charms for aeons to come. It’ll be safe from the Unraveling.”

I really don’t have more than this. I have only vague ideas for the arc of this story, but this is more than I had before.