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Cast a Bright Shadow

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ONE

Red sky met white land. Between the two lay the city.

As he drove along Kings Mile, the great ice road that approached Ru Karismi from the south, the magician stared unblinking with his eagle's eyes. In the sunset, the city had that look it always had, and was intended always to have perhaps. Every wall and tower, every terrace and roof that showed above, seemed razor-carved from the surrounding snow.

Thryfe stood bracing his tallness against the onrush of the sleekar. The team of horned lashdeer appeared to fly, and the vehicle's runners barely touched the road's surface. If any had been out so late, they would have turned and gaped, knowing this smooth-streaming thing at once for the chariot of lord or Magikoy; few others could command such power. But the snowfields were empty by now, while only the occasional bank of smog or speed-smeared light revealed the steads that littered the city's outskirts.

The sun flashed and was suddenly down. Tinted glass parasols on the heights winked ruby and diamond, and went out. Half a minute more, and Thryfe had reached the outer wall.

Over Southgate the torches blazed. The gate stood open wide – they had seen him arriving. There was, of course, no challenge, and if he glimpsed the salutes of the guards,

Thryfe did not acknowledge them. He raced through the gate and on up the streeted slopes of the city, to the Stair. Here he paused only to halt the chariot and dismount. Most men took breath before they climbed, and again later. But Thryfe, ascending the thousand-stepped staircase of white marble, between its diagonally set thousand statues of steel, did not stop once either to breathe or to admire the view.

At the top, far above the city, the Gargolem came from its alcove in a high and shadowy door.

'Greetings and welcome, Highness Thryfe.'

The Gargolem was mechanical. The Magikoy had made it centuries before. Its metallic body was like that of a human male, though far larger in height and somewhat in girth. Its head was that of an unknown beast, maned and fanged, yet it spoke like a man. It was always addressed in turn.

'Good evening, Gargo. I'm here for the kings.'

'They do not know. Did you send no word?'

'No, Gargo.'

'I will do it now. Proceed.'

The door opened as night strode over the sky. Beyond, in amber air, lay the lanterned garden terraces of uppermost Ru Karismi, starred with palaces, whose complacence Thryfe had come to spoil.

Ruk Kar Is had at present three kings. The mightiest of these, Sallusdon, King Paramount, was currently in the west. Now the two Kings Accessorate waited on their balcony, looking at Thryfe.

By Ruk law, both these kings were of equal importance.

But, as with their build, they differed in the extreme. Bhorth was blond, a heavily muscled man run to fat, often argumentative, but weak. The other, Vuldir, sombre and slender, had an elegance of person and mind that were pitiless: the skins and tails of eighty black and white icenvels lined his exquisite mantle. He was known to dispatch humans with the same uneconomy.

The balcony jutted from the Kings Hall, out over the abyss of city night, which fell through a glitter of lighted windows and lamps to the Palest River three miles below. Dwarfed by distance, frozen, the Palest made another roadway, gleaming with torches. At this Thryfe gazed down. He ignored the kings, letting them loiter, for he was more powerful than they, and Vuldir at least needed reminding.

But it was Vuldir who spoke.

'What is this about, Magus? You've called us from dinner. My brother's belly will certainly never forgive you.'

His voice was acid. Brother Bhorth scowled.

Thryfe removed his gaze from the river, and met Vuldir's narrow eyes.

'The augurs that were taken, Vuldir, have changed aspect.'

Bhorth, the slow one, was still the one who swore.

Vuldir said, 'Which augurs, precisely?'

'Those that relate to the marriage of your daughter.'

'My daughter. You mean Saphay? But she sets out tomorrow, at first light.' Vuldir sounded bored. 'It's a minor affair, but may be useful. I believe you understand its relevance?'

'She is to wed into the Jafn Klow.'

'Exactly. Once our enemies, the Jafn are now our dear friends. This first marriage is tentative, naturally. If it

blossoms, Sallusdon will consider a stronger match, one from his own and his queen's royal loins.'

'I am aware of that. I'm here to tell you something new. The augurs were taken at the betrothal and seemed sound. But today, gentlemen, I saw something else.'

'What? How? Did you go searching for it?' demanded Vuldir. Rings brightened on his hand as he made, inadvertently perhaps, a gesture of dismissal. With a lesser man than Thryfe it must have sent him from the room, but no king could order one of the Magikoy. They were the servants of common men, but the superiors of princes.

However, Thryfe answered, looking from Vuldir to Bhorth and back again.

'I don't have to tell you what I have seen, or how I have seen it, nor if I searched for it – although I did not. If I say to you it *is*, then you know I speak the truth.'

'You're too volatile, maybe,' said Vuldir.

Bhorth enquired, 'What's the nature of the possible harm?'

'The death of Vuldir's daughter. Or worse than her death – though further than her death I was unable to see for her, as is often the case. There is a massing of envy and darkness. Old foes, or fresh ones, in secret. If you send Saphay out of Ruk Kar Is, she'll be lost. And much will be lost with her. I'll tell you plainly, you will be accommodating some force which will eventually destroy you.'

'*I?*' Vuldir was amazed.

'You and all your line. All the line of the Ruk. The land, the people. It will set the world on its ear.'

'Unending Winter has done that,' grumbled Bhorth, 'five hundred years and more.'

'To this, Bhorth, Unending Winter will be Summertime.'

Far back beyond the balcony and its fretted screens, music played and candles fluttered like gold butterflies.

Bhorth turned uneasily, peering through frets at the warm world that was apparently threatened.

But Vuldir said, 'Well, you've aired your fears, Magus. Our thanks.'

Bhorth spluttered in alarm. Thryfe merely turned away. He had done what he must, with proper haste and authority. No more was asked of him.

Without offering any token of respect, he walked from the balcony, and back through the sunny candlelight of the Hall. He was bowed to on every side by men and women clad in silks and jewels. He paid them no attention, and said nothing else. Like many of the Magikoy, he believed himself a fatalist. To Thryfe's pitilessness, therefore, the small blind malice of a Vuldir was nothing.

On the east and coldest side of the Womens Pavilions, King Vuldir's fifteenth daughter had her apartments. The winds, when they woke, whistled and gnawed at the shutters and glazing, which were not always in repair. Let through, they gushed along the floors like waves of ice.

Tonight the evening was windless. Yet everything else here was in motion.

Women ran back and forth through the rose-lit rooms, their anklets jangling, voices calling, their arms full of clothing, bedding and other stuff selected for a journey.

Within the central room, Saphay, the fifteenth daughter, sat contrastingly still as stone in a chair, while her old nurse wept at her side.

'I shall never see her again,' wailed the nurse, 'never, never.'

'Yes, I shall send for you,' said the princess wearily. She had declared this many times, but neither she nor the old woman believed it.

'I am thought too shabby for this court of barbarians,' bitterly wept the nurse.

'No, you're thought too fine for it.'

'And too old – I'm too old. Oh, if she leaves me, I shall die. What else will be left for me?'

Saphay said nothing. She moved only a little, nodding as another woman asked her about some garment, who then ran busily away, bawling to others.

No dinner had been served them. Probably Saphay's apartment was forgotten, for a fifteenth female child, got by a secondary king on a much lesser concubina, was low in standing. Generally she ate in the Hall, in the place reserved for such persons.

Saphay had wondered if she would miss these chilly and unluxurious rooms, miss the grandeur of the palaces, the gardens with their frost-trees, glass parasols and statuary of steel and serpentine and ice; or the city itself spread always below. But she had lived since birth on the cold-shouldered east of the terraces, and so to be sent further eastward, to the land of the Jafn Klow, had an ironic rightness.

In her childhood another nurse, not this one, had told Saphay that the Jafn ate young girls, having first roasted them alive. But she had been told many things in childhood that were lies, and was still lied to, but now knew it.

Vuldir had bothered to come himself and tell her the facts of her impending use. She was to uphold the honour

of the Ruk by marrying a Chaiord, a chieftain of the Jafn peoples.

Her father, whom mostly Saphay had seen only far off, while often hearing tales of his harshness and sense of fashion, looked her over that day, properly noticing her for the first time. 'Yes,' he remarked, 'you will do. Indeed, you're too good for this. Always remember that, girl. You're too good for the Jafn.'

Two of the apartment's little cluster of god-aspects were borne through. A violet mask glared at Saphay over a running shoulder. Then, as a mirror was hurried by, the young woman more strangely saw her own face rush past her. The glimpsed face was clouded round by topaz hair, its eyes dark as her father's, but of a different shape. Her skin, as in songs sung to others, was white as unmarked snow. But already the mirror had carried her face away.

A woman burst in at another door, bringing with her a blast of cold from the night outside. She stood, shaking off the coldness from her, wringing her hands and crying out, so all the other women stopped their activity, turning to look at her. Even the nurse did so.

'The High Magus Thryfe came to the Hall,' cried the woman who had entered. 'He took the Kings Accessorate aside. No one knows but they what he said, but he came out like an eagle, cloaked in storm. They say' – she stared at Saphay, who was not her mistress, only one more nobody the woman must serve – 'that the omens have changed. This marriage in the east is rotten and will bring only bad luck.'

Someone screamed. It was not Saphay herself. In the silence, Saphay stood up. 'Go about your duties,' she said to the woman who had come in. 'What do you know, you

insect, of the mind of a Magikoy? And the rest of you, get on with your work. Or I'll send to my father to have you whipped.'

She was only a girl, not yet seventeen years of age, yet she had learned things in Ru Karismi. Inevitably, to be harsh was one of them – she was Vuldir's daughter. And now she was obeyed.

But in her heart, Saphay thought, *It is true, I know it. It is darkness I go towards in the east, when the sun rises.*

Thryfe rode back from Ru Karismi, out of the yawning gate, along the glacial highway of ice. One of his houses lay to the south, but few would find it save he or another of his Order.

Beyond the limits of the road, the velocitous sleekar took to the snow-hills without apparent effort.

Above, the first moon rose. It was white as the snow or a girl's pure skin. Thryfe did not bother with it.

After an hour or two, he drove up into the forests. The trees, runnelled pillars resembling black glass, canopied with snow and spears of ice, were busy with ice-spiders brought out by the moon. They glided, winking like opals, under its rays, spinning webs like thin steel. Yet the passage of the sleekar broke through hundreds of these webs, leaving them behind in tatters.

The second moon was rising, a quarter like a piece of a coin, when the mansion came in sight for Thryfe.

He saw the windows shone blue, a sign of his long absence and that nothing unlooked-for had occurred.

Unhuman grooms, a lesser type of gargolem, emerged to take charge of chariot and team in the courtyard. As he

mounted the shallow steps, the torches on either side sprang alight, and the blue windows above altered with lamp flames. He touched the door only with his glance, and it opened as it would do for him alone.

So many hours had been wasted. Was it only time that was spilled away? After he had gone up into the towery, Thryfe began after all to feel anger.

The third moon rose on Ruk Kar Is.

By this brilliant triple light, bright now as the most freezing, whitest day, Thryfe cancelled his lamps and stood before the eye of the mansion's oculum. It was blank, demonstrating none of the disturbance he had witnessed earlier.

He was dissatisfied. For once he felt his youth and its passion of rage, although he was no longer quite young, and was a fatalist.

To the serene chamber, Thryfe said this: 'I shall regret not doing more. I notice the shadow of regret before me now.' He thought, *And it outshines the night.*

He had seen Saphay now and then, over recent years, in the Kings Hall. She was lovely and childish, finally almost fullgrown. Unbound, her hair hung to the backs of her knees. Yet once he had beheld her slapping a waiting-woman who annoyed her, and how the ring on her hand had caught the woman's mouth, which bled. He had not been so charmed by Saphay after that. Like her father – yes, surely. Was it for this Thryfe had let her go so readily?

But her destiny was less than the land's, and the land too he had let go.

The globe of the oculum continued to give nothing. Only the moons drifted, a three-dropped necklet of

porcelain, in the windows. Then the wind began to lift its wing across the plains.

I have done enough. Be damned to them all.

Eastward, where the moons and the wind had risen, there was a smell of burning on the air that night.

A considerable distance from the city of Ru Karismi spread an area known as the Marginal Land. It was located above the north borders of the Ruk, and cut into on the east side by the sea, which, frozen solid, extended the terrain on for miles of fluctuating, treacherous ice field. The place of burning was a day's ride inland from the ocean. Here, deep in the Marginal, ice-jungles matted the landscape, frigid tangles of obsidian and crystal, sometimes undone in clearings. In one of these lay the charcoaled embers of a large village, from which smoke yet poured.

Peb Yuve scrutinized, from the back of his flaxen transport, the sorry coffle of slaves driven off from the ruins by his men. Beside him, one of his seconds, Guri, also astride an ice-mammoth, counted gemstones, coins and bits of metal.

They were men of Olchibe, their dark yellow skin the shade of leopards in the dying arson-glow.

'Look at them, such weaklings. They'll fetch nothing in the markets of Sham.' This regretful remark was Guri's, as some of the coffle, mewling and whipped, fell down.

'No matter. This shows them, the lords in Rukar, what we may do. It's a symbol. As that it has worth for us to destroy these hovels and collect this rubbish for sale.' Peb Yuve nodded. 'Great Gods witness I have spoken.'

'Amen,' added Guri piously.

He put the cache of jewels and money into a pouch; then, like his prince, sat watching their raid's aftermath.

All about, under the static boughs of frozen figs, the Olchibe mammoths stirred like ghosts.

'The gods of these Rukar, they trouble me,' said Guri. He pushed back his fur cap, scratching at his braids.

'Why? They're false gods.'

'That's so, but nevertheless . . . Each god of the Rukar is doubled, split in two – one cruel and one fair aspect – but is still the same god. Does that give them strength, or lessen them?'

Peb Yuve did not reply.

A war leader, he was also the priest of his band, which approximated five hundred men. He thought carefully, and Guri waited in humility.

'Their gods are nothing – weak, as they themselves are. Once I knew a man among the sluhtins of Olchibe. His brain was this way, too. One hour he would be brave and glorious. Then the next he would turn, like milk, and was insolent, and vicious as a fleer-wolf.'

'Ah?'

'I shot him,' said Peb Yuve, 'with my woman bow, and with arrows for women.' He nodded again. 'I have no fear of the crack-brained gods of the Ruk.'

The coffle was upright once more. As it was dragged off, Guri visually selected for himself a woman he fancied. He knew Peb Yuve would have no interest in her. The Olchibe leader was saving his rapist skills for the near future, when they had taken the east-travelling caravan with the Rukar's princess. She was only minor royalty but, like the village

they had burned tonight, she was a symbol. She would have her worth.

In the pink dawn, the procession wound down from the city heights along the huge ramps beside the Stair. Sleekars and carriage-slees, with their teams of deer, moved under banners that ribboned scarlet and silver for the royal houses of Ruk Kar Is. On the wide avenues below, crowds came out to applaud. From balconies there dropped a few hothouse flowers, past their best, left over from the previous night.

This exodus was of small importance. It was the show of a minute. If any dedicatedly craned for a sight of the girl from the palace, sent off now to barbarians in the east, they were disappointed. Sheltered by the red silk half-shell of her slee, she was also concealed by furs. But she could mean very little to them. They had never seen her before, and probably never would again.

For herself, Saphay gazed about her through her mufflings. Ru Karismi, jewel of the ice plains, was almost as unknown to her as she to it. She saw it now for virtually the first time as she left it. Its glamour was already redundant.

The caravan departed from Kings Mile at the East Pillar. Passing the solitary pylon, it coursed away into the ice fields.

Already steaders were abroad, among the man-high channels and runnels in the packed snow, labouring on those crops which survived here. The lesser road took the caravan through plantations of dormant grain and dilf, past isolate brewing and smoking-towers, each with its

plume of steam or smoulder, hothouses and wind-strafed cots. Stooping apple groves covered the country beyond, and vine trees, their fruit packed tight within deformed trunks.

Once they emerged on to the open plains, the road became less pleasant, cratered in parts or covered by old snowdrifts hard as rock. Only their accompanying mageia could deal with these. Meanwhile freezing wind gusts slashed at their faces. Visors were snapped down from helmets; masks with glass eye shields were raised. The teams of lashdeer had covered their eyes at once with their natural blinders of transparent membrane.

The two women who attended Saphay sat grumbling nervously among the cushions of the half-shell. They had not wanted to come but had no choice, just as Saphay had not. They were afraid of the Winter, the plains, their destination. Not wishing to talk to them, and eventually not to listen to them any more, she finally told them to be quiet. Then their scarcely veiled expressions of hate and fright were familiar, all now that was.

At midday there was a halt, and the mageia called fire. She was a tall woman from a town to the west of the city, with indigo hair woven with charms. Fire arrived and hot food and wine were served. In the evening, after a raw sunset, this procedure was repeated.

The party then slept, distributed among the bulbs of tents lit and heated by the arts of magic. Outside the wind yowled, or else eerie echoing silences, often filled with imagined sounds, rang over the sheet of the snow.

Saphay could not sleep. She heard one of her women weeping like the nurse, if for the opposite reason.

Why has anyone been sent with me? I never wanted them. I would rather be alone.

She thought, *I am alone in any case.*

They travelled in this way for an endless while. Nothing varied, even the weather very little. It was always Winter. There were ice-forests, ice-lakes, ice-hills and once, in the distance, a white volcano with a cloud on it. Usually the sky was overcast, and at night starless, the occluded moons like dirty lamps.

Sometimes a town or village appeared. Twice they dined and slept not in the tents, but in a rambling inn built of whole black trees smooth as polished coal, and then an inn paved with ice-bricks.

They saw a few animals, deer of several sorts, snow-hares, woolly elephant, and an enormous bear far off, itself like moving snow.

'It isn't lion country,' the captain of the soldiers said to one of Saphay's women. 'Nothing like that here. In the east it's different, but they have their ways of dealing with them there.'

There were thirteen guards, the auspicious number selected by a mage of Vuldir's. Altogether, the caravan numbered only thirty-three persons, including the essential mageia and Saphay.

Saphay stopped telling her women to be quiet. She was learning more now of where she was going from their chatter, for they consorted with the drivers and guards at every possible juncture. So Saphay heard improbable things she assumed to be true: of the lion sleekar teams of the Jafn Klow, of their single God who lived beyond the world, and their plethora of sprites and spirits who lived *in* it; of their codes of honour and feud. She had been told

already her husband was white-haired, but had never seen him nor anyone like that, except the elderly, yet it seemed white hair was common in the east.

The road finished at the town of Freyiz. This was civilization's finish too. After Freyiz, the mageia stood in the caravan's front chariot, constantly employed in the shifting of obstacles.

'We move at a sen-snail's pace,' whined the women.

Saphay was glad of that, not wanting to reach journey's end.

Next day, the sun smashed open the sky. A dome of coolest blue overhung the plains, unmarked by anything.

The terrain offered better going. Ice-jungles appeared to the north, and the wind had dropped. They made excellent speed.

At the noon halt, the captain of the guard came over to the fire. He addressed Saphay directly.

'Madam, the mageia must have a word with you.'

Saphay stood up. When the mageia approached, Saphay bowed to her, as was customary. Behind her, the captain stood poised, unreadable. The woman nodded her charm-clinking head.

'I've seen signs, unmistakable. Trouble is coming. From the north.'

'Of what sort? Bad weather?'

'No, Saphay. Men intent on harm. They were shown to me as a wolf-pack running – but aren't wolves. Their muzzles were wet with blood.'

Saphay felt her heart stop. The captain stepped forward.

'The mageia says they're well over three hundred in number. A vandal band I'd guess, from Gech, or the Olchibe, though it's far south for them. Filthy brutes.'

Even Saphay had heard of the hordes of Gech and Olchibe and their atrocities. Her heart leapt up again and began to race – but it had nowhere to go.

'We are thirteen, and your drivers and grooms armed only with knives. Our best course is to turn back,' the captain said. His face now was grim enough. 'There was a village we passed. It offers our nicest chance.'

Saphay was aware the village had been small and pitiful, and was anyway more than a day's ride behind them.

Besides, the mageia shook her head.

'You can't outrun them. They are Fate.'

'With respect, lady,' said the captain, 'we must try. And I hope you'll help us.'

'I'll do all I can.'

She quenched the fire with a word. As it crumbled instantly into nothing, Saphay was appalled by the omen.

With the rest, she bolted to her vehicle. The whips cracked over the backs of the lashdeer, and they rushed towards the west.

Less than an hour later, the vandal band appeared from the jungle now to their right. The mageia had been dilatory or incompetent, but then she was not one of the Magikoy, only a witch from some town.

The vandals, spilling from the static dark of the jungle, were at first only a mobile dark, as if the trees had found legs. Then you saw the glint of mail, harness, weapons, and the wink of their yellow banners. They were Olchibe, and the top of every banner-staff would be crowned with a severed head – even Saphay knew this – in discrepant stages of freshness, decay or bare bone.

She was so afraid, she had no thoughts, but her women shrieked and screamed, writhing and clinging to the

slee's rail. The other slees and chariots tore forward. Where the emerging Olchibe horde looked dark to them, to the Olchibe *they* would be as clearly marked by a frenzy of thrown-up snow-spume.

The cursing of the drivers, Saphay's among them, vied with the slap of whips and sluice of ice.

Yet, even running at full stretch, Saphay noted how that dark still oozed from the jungles alongside. The horde, as warned, comprised many hundred men, who all the while lurched nearer. Once free of the shadow of the trees, Saphay could see what they rode. Mammoths moved fast when trained to it. Larger in size even than the wild elephant herds, they would also trample men underfoot, or lift them in their trunks to spit on their curving tusks.

To try to escape was futile. There was not one of the Rukarians who did not understand this, but there was no other choice. Olchibe took few prisoners, and those only as slaves.

Soon Saphay could make out individual patterns and savage images on the banners. Presently flaming arrows rained down on the vehicles.

Sleekar after sleekar skidded to avoid the started fires. Some two or three chariots had caught alight at once. The deer were screaming, and Saphay's women, too, in a dreadful harmony.

The mageia, who had tied herself to her sleekar's rail, howled her phrases to put out fire. But the Olchibe too, of course, had their witches, the eldritch Crarrowin of their sluht-camps, and these had evidently put on a preserving magic more effective than the mageia's quenching. The burning vehicles burned on.

There was no more order. Saphay found herself trapped

in a whirling wheel of fire and collision, where suddenly her driver must veer to the right to miss a tumbling chariot. Her women fell; she too was shaken to the floor. Next second, through spume and smoke and flame, the girl beheld the Olchibe looming up on their mammoths, high as stampeding towers, and so close she smelled the stench of them: men and beasts and dank wool.

Her driver plunged back nearly on top of her. She was soaked and covered in his blood. His throat was cut. She saw one of her women hauled bodily up from the half-shell by a trunk like a hairy corded serpent – screeching, she was gone suddenly into the air. The other woman, in her terror, threw herself from the slee. She landed beyond sight, among the spinning runners.

The Olchibe who had killed the driver sat backwards on the rump of one of the still-running lashdeer. He faced Saphay grinning, and she had space to study him. All the tales were exact: his skin was yellow as the banners, his teeth painted, his hair mammoth-colour whitish – perhaps as her eastern husband's was. The husband that now she would never live to wed.

The Olchibe spoke, friendly, to her. Saphay did not know his language, as she knew so little. When he swung forward to take hold of her, she pulled the lifeless driver's dagger from his belt and thrust upward.

It was a fluke. She did not, either, know enough to have grasped how to kill a man. But the blade, maybe assisted by the jolts of the slee, went straight through his windpipe. His look was one of shock as he crashed headfirst from the car.

Saphay remained crouched on the floor. The dead driver bounced against her. Everywhere around, the world

heaved with the huge phantasmal jostle of blundering mammoths. Driverless and beyond control, the lashdeer galloped headlong. Any moment, the slee must hit something, overturn, and be taken. Then they would have her. Saphay shut her eyes.

It had not occurred to her that the driver's body now hid her from the rampage. The Olchibe, tickled at such an easy conquest, for even with a minor princess a bigger retinue had been expected, paid no heed to the one runaway carriage, apparently empty save for a corpse. For the lashdeer, they had only contempt – the Olchibe scorned even to eat them.

Finally it was Peb Yuve himself, surveying the dead soldiers and frightened remains of the caravan, who turned and struck Guri across the face. 'Where is she gone?'

'The princess? *There*, Great One.'

'No, that's only some whore. *She* has gaudy hair, the Rukar royal.'

Distressed by his failure, Guri stared desperately about. Across milling mammoths, he spotted the now distant snowspray of the slee. Oddly, it raced back towards the ice-jungle.

'*There*, Great One,' Guri announced again.

Peb Yuve did not even watch Guri and his group set out. Yuve was, for that moment, more interested in the Rukar witch who, having sealed herself in a globe of force, stood glaring, as Olchibe warriors took turns in trying to pry her loose. They were electrically flung several yards each time for their pains, which vastly amused the rest, Yuve with them.

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