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The Spirit Well

Written by Stephen R. Lawhead

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BRIGHT EMPIRES **QUEST THE THIRD:**

THE SPIRIT WELL

STEPHEN R. LAWHEAD



LION FICTION

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In Which Friday Takes a Holiday

Cassandra Clarke dug bones for a living. She spent every summer of her professional life hunkered down in trenches of various depths with a trowel in one hand and a whisk broom in the other, excavating the skeletal remains of creatures long dead, many of which were known only to science and some known to no one at all. Although digging was in her blood – her mother was Alison Brett Clarke, palaeontologist of *Turkana Boy* renown – Cassandra did not plan to spend her entire life in plexiglas goggles with dust in her hair and a damp handkerchief over her nose. Her ambition was far greater than crating up fossils to be carefully catalogued and then locked away in some musty museum basement.

Her father – the astrophysicist J. Anthony Clarke III, whose theory on the origin of the universe through quantum fluctuations in a plasma field won him a Nobel Prize nomination – enjoyed telling people that his precocious daughter was born with her feet in the dirt and her head in the stars. Those who heard that quip assumed it was a reference to her parentage and the fact that she spent so much time scrabbling around in holes in the ground. True enough, but it was also a sly allusion to his beloved Cassie's penchant for fanciful invention.

As a child Cass ran a neighbourhood theatre company from a tent in the backyard; for two summers running she cajoled kids within a six-block radius of 8th Avenue and 15th Street into performing in a string of dramas she wrote, produced, and directed. Usually the plays

involved beautiful princesses being menaced by either dinosaurs or aliens, sometimes both. Later she graduated to writing poetry and short stories for the school newspaper, and won a prize in junior high for a poem about a melancholy wildflower growing in a car park.

Despite these artistic leanings, she gravitated naturally to science. Blessed with her mother's patient persistence and her father's analytical proclivity, she excelled in her undergraduate studies and chose to follow her mother's lead into fossil hunting, spending her summers assisting in digs from China to Mexico, earning her spurs. Now, as a doctoral candidate, she was assigned as assistant director for a major Arizona excavation with career-consolidating potential.

Lately, however, the routine had begun to pall. Coprolites and Jurassic snails no longer held the fascination they once did, and the incessant backbiting and political manoeuvring endemic in upper-echelon academia – which she had always known and accepted as part of the scholastic landscape – was proving more and more of an irksome distraction. The further she travelled into darkest PhD territory, the more the fossilized remains of extinct creatures dwindled in fascination; she was rapidly specializing herself beyond caring about her subject. Whether or not the world learned what the latest new megasaurus ate for lunch sixty million years ago, what difference did it make? On bad days, which seemed to come fairly often of late, it all seemed so pointless.

More and more she found herself looking at the gorgeous Sedona sunsets and, irrationally, hankering for a clean canvas and a set of brushes – or seeing individual cacti as surrealist sculptures, or inwardly rhapsodizing about the towering, wind-carved rocks of the canyons. In ways she could not fully describe, she felt she was being moved on to other things, perhaps another life beyond science. Still, she was not willing to throw in the trowel just yet. There was a teetering mountain of work to do, and she was up to her hips, almost literally, in unclassified fossils.

Using a dental pick, Cass teased a glassy curve of mineralized bone from the hard-packed brick-coloured earth. It came free and plopped into her hand – a black, leaf-shaped stub of stone so smooth it looked as if it had been polished: the tooth of a young Tarbosaurus,

a theropod that streaked about the earth during the Cretaceous period and, until this very moment, had only ever been found in the Gobi desert. Cass had studied these creatures in detail, and now had the proof she needed to support the theory of a more far-flung population than previously recognized. There was a time when securing such a specimen would have had her doing handsprings around the camp. Today, however, she merely tossed the fossil into a plastic bucket of other such treasures, paused, and straightened. Pressing a hand to the small of her aching back, she sighed, rubbed the sweat from the nape of her neck, and, shielding her eyes from the merciless afternoon sun, muttered, "Where's Friday?"

She made a quick scan of the surrounding terrain. The same bleak landscape met her gaze, unchanged in the twenty-one days since the dig season began, unchanged in eons: blood-red sun-scoured rocks, gnarled and withered creosote bushes, many-armed saguaro, scraggly yucca, choya, and assorted cacti by the carload. Of Friday – a Yavapai Indian who acted as gofer and scout for the excavating team – there was no sign. She turned to the west and glimpsed a faded red bandanna bobbing above a haze of purple sage as the work-shy fellow sloped off into the neighbouring canyon.

She glanced at her watch. It was nearing six o'clock; there was another good hour left before they would have to gather up their tools, load the vans, and head back into town.

"How's it going down there?"

Cass turned. The voice belonged to Joe Greenough, her colleague, team leader, and chief community liaison officer for the university field team. An affable chap in his early thirties, Joe coasted up with his hands in his pockets. "Anything interesting?" He peered down into the trench in which she stood.

"Same old, same old." She reached up a hand. "Here. Help a lady out."

"Any time." Grasping her hand, he held it and smiled, but made no effort to help her up.

"Today would be good," she told him. "Any time… *now*, perhaps?"

He put a hand under her arm and pulled as she scrambled up the side of the hole. "I hear there's a new invention called a ladder,"

he said, watching her dust off the seat of her cargo jeans. "Great for climbing. If you're ever in a town that sells 'em, you should get one."

"You know me," she said, moving off. "An old-fashioned girl to my fossilized bones. Don't hold with these newfangled contraptions."

"Hey!" he called. "Where you going?"

"After Friday. I'll be right back."

"I came to talk to you," he pointed out. "Not shout."

"What? You wearing cement shoes?"

"Cass, listen." He jogged after her. "Slow down a second. It's important."

"Then speed up." She kept her eye on the quickly disappearing Indian. It was strange how the indigenous folk could cover ground so quickly without appearing to expend any effort at all. "Friday's gone walkabout, and I don't want to lose him."

"It's about the dig." Joe paused, as if remembering what he had come to say.

"Yeah, with you so far," she said, giving him a sideways glance. She saw a cloud pass over his usually sunny features. "Gosh, it must be some kind of important if it has you at a loss for words."

"It's just…" He sighed. "There's no good way to say this."

"Then say it in a bad way," she urged. "Just say it already."

"There's trouble."

"Okay… and?" Before he could reply, she went on. "Don't tell me the department is cutting back on our grant money again." She stopped walking and turned to him. "I don't believe this! After all I've done to convince –"

"No, no," he said quickly. "The grant is fine. The committee is delighted with the results."

"Okay, then." She shrugged and started walking again.

"It's the Indians," he blurted.

"Native Americans."

"They're on the warpath."

"Why? What did you say to them *this* time?" She skirted a large prickly pear and stepped lightly over a fallen saguaro limb. The university's assurances and goodwill notwithstanding, the Arizona Native American Council had long ago decided to take a dim

view of any archaeological activity in the region. So far, the project directors had been able to placate the ANAC by hiring local people to help with the dig and consult on indigenous culture – which was somewhat outside the remit of a palaeontology project, but helped keep the peace.

"Nothing to do with me," Joe protested. "Apparently there's a major celebration coming up – a holy day or something. The tribal elders are claiming the entire valley as a site of special cultural significance – a sacred landscape."

"Is it?"

"Who knows?" Joe shrugged. "Anyway, they have a state senator on their side. He's up for re-election soon, so he's got a bee in his bonnet. Senator Rodriguez – he's on the squawk box giving interviews about how we're all a bunch of cold, heartless scientists tearing up the countryside and defiling Indian burial grounds."

"This was *never* an Indian burial ground," Cass pointed out. "Anyway, we're not digging up the whole valley, only a few specific locations – the same ones we've been working for the past two years. Did you tell them that?"

Joe regarded her with a pitying expression. "You think logic and reason have anything to do with this? It's political, and it's gone septic."

"Well, that's just dandy," she huffed. "As if we didn't already have enough trouble with the Sedona Tourist Bureau and the New Agers. This isn't going to help one little bit."

"Tell me about it. I've arranged to speak to the editor over at the *Sedona Observer* tomorrow and put our case on record."

"Hold that thought," she said, and resumed her pursuit of the wayward Friday, who had passed from view behind a boulder at the foot of a washout.

"We have to stop digging until this is settled," he called after her. "Get Friday and his crew to help you tie things down and put a tarp over the trench."

"Can't hear you!" she replied.

Dodging a pumpkin-sized barrel cactus, she hurried on, leaving Greenough behind. Keeping an eye peeled for rattlesnakes – the

constant bugaboo of desert digs – she clipped along, dodging the bristles, spines, and saw-toothed edges of the local flora, all of which seemed to have been designed to puncture, slash, tear, or otherwise discourage progress one way or another. Strange, she thought, how quiet it became, and how quickly.

The thought was no sooner through her head than she heard that rarest of desert sounds: thunder. The distant rumble, clear and present on the hot dry air, brought her up short.

She glanced up to see that the sky above the towering red-rock hills and canyons of the Verde valley had grown dark with heavy, black, angry-looking clouds. Oblivious, with her head in the ground, she had failed to notice the fast-changing weather. The wind lifted, and Cassandra smelled rain. A thunderstorm in the desert was not unheard of, but rare enough to be fascinating and fragrant. The smell of washed desert air tinged with ozone was unlike anything else. It would be, she considered, less fascinating to be caught out in a lightning storm. She picked up her pace and called to the swiftly retreating figure ahead, "Friday!"

The echo of her cry came winging back to her from the surrounding canyon walls. Directly ahead rose a towering rock stack – a multibanded heap of the distinctive ruddy sandstone of the Sedona region. "Gotcha!" she muttered, certain that her quarry had ducked out of sight behind the massive wind-sculpted block of stone. She hurried on. The sky continued to lower; the mumbling, grumbling thunder grew louder and more insistent. The freshening wind sent dust devils spinning away through the sagebrush and mesquite.

As Cassandra rounded the base of the sandstone stack, she saw that it opened into one of the many feeder gullies of the larger system the locals called Secret Canyon. She thought she glimpsed a figure flitting through the shadows of the gulch some distance ahead. She shouted again, but received no answer; she sped on, moving deeper into the enormous crevice.

Her Yavapai colleague was in most significant ways the stereotypical red man: work-shy, taciturn to the point of monosyllabic, arrogant, furtive, given to odd moods. Habitually dressed in faded jeans with the cuffs stuffed into the tops of his scuffed cowboy boots, he wore

his straight black hair scraped back into a single braid that fell down the back of his sun-bleached blue shirt, and bound the end with a leather strap decorated with a bit of red rag or a quail feather. In both dress and demeanour he presented an image so patently clichéd that Cass had come to believe that it was purposefully studied, and one he worked very hard to maintain. No one could have combined so many of these dime-novel qualities by accident.

Friday, she concluded, *wanted* to be seen as the quintessential Native American of popular romance. He chased it – to the point of standing outside the Walgreens on Main Street at the weekends dressed in a fringed deerskin vest and beaded moccasins, with two eagle feathers in his hair, posing for pictures with tourists for tips: Sedona's very own drugstore Indian. All he lacked was a fistful of cigars.

As to *why* he did it, she as yet had no clue. Why play a part so obviously derisory and beneath him? Why perpetuate a demeaning cliché that belonged to a backward, less enlightened time? Was it masochism, or some kind of elaborate joke? Cass could not begin to guess.

"Friday!" she shouted, still moving forward. "Come out! I know you're in here." She paused, then added, "You're not in trouble. I just want to talk to you."

The rock walls of undulating stone, layered in alternating bands of colour, rose sheer from the floor of the gulley, which upon closer inspection appeared unnaturally straight: a curious quality Cassandra noticed but put down to a trick of the uncertain light and oddly shaped stone walls. A sudden gust of wind sent loose pebbles falling from the heights above and, with them, the first drops of rain.

"Friday!"

The sound of her voice pinged along the sandstone walls, but there was no reply from the deepening shadows ahead. The sky grew dark and angry as a bruise, the low clouds churning. The air tingled with pent energy; it felt alive, as if lightning was about to strike.

With a hand flattened over her head to protect herself from the scattershot of pebbles, Cassandra raced on, taking the straight path through the canyon to avoid the loose debris from above. The wind

shrieked a withering note, sending a sheet of rain down the length of the gulley, drenching everything in its path.

Cassandra was caught. The wind, funnelled by the canyon, surged over her, dashing cold water into her face. Blinded by the rain, she scooped water from her eyes and dived for whatever cover the overhanging ledges of stone could provide. A blast of icy wind slammed into her with the force of a jet engine, stealing the breath from her lungs and driving her along the canyon floor. She staggered forward, tripped, put out her hands to break her fall, and gritted her teeth… but the expected jolt did not come.

To her horror, the ground gave out beneath her, and she continued to tumble.

Between one step and the next she was airborne, plunging into an unseen void. The landing, when it came, was abrupt, but not the bone-breaking shock she instinctively feared. The ground on which she landed had an odd spongy granularity she could not have anticipated.

Her first thought was that she had somehow fallen through the roof of a kiva – one of the underground ritual houses favoured by the pueblo-dwelling natives of the past. These were often hidden, and the roofs were known to give way beneath the weight of unwary hikers. But whoever heard of a kiva hidden in a canyon floor?

Her second thought – an absurd possibility – was that a tornado had plucked her up and dropped her miles away. Did she not feel that she had been flying? How else to explain what she was now seeing? For stretching before her was a vast, arid plain of volcanic gravel without a single cactus or mesquite tree in sight. The towering red rocks of Sedona were gone, and in the far distance a band of black hills lined the horizon.

And that was all.

What had happened to Arizona?

Cass stared at the alien landscape, whirling in a panicky pirouette like a dancer who had inexplicably lost her partner. Panic rising, she gulped air in a futile effort at forcing herself to remain calm. Two questions chased each other round and round in her spinning thoughts: *What happened? Where am I?*