

Babel

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by Gill James

Bridge House

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The Prophecy

“There’s a woman walking into the place where the poorer people live,” she said. “She is carrying the book, with its beautiful cover, all silver, blue and gold. She carries the story of the Babel tower, the tower that was built to reach God. And God was angry and caused them to not understand each other.

“She carries the book. She is about to become a mother. Not just yet. In some months time. But you can clearly see that her belly’s getting bigger. She holds it, as if the baby has just moved. She seems pleased to feel it alive. I don’t think she has had this experience before. I think it is the first time the baby has kicked.

She is carrying a book. She is dressed strangely. I think this is some time in the future. And I think there is something not right about her being pregnant. This is happening at a time when babies no longer grow in the womb. She is having a natural pregnancy. It’s a sort of miracle birth again. This is why she has come here.

“They greet her, these poor people. They seem to treat her better than her own people do. It’s like the Good Samaritan.

“It’s fading a little. I can’t hear what they are saying. We seem to move on. We’re going into the future. She lives in the caves. They look after her. There is something very precious about the child she is going to have. He is to be a Peace Child. Days and weeks pass in seconds as I watch.

“Then it becomes clearer again. She goes into labour. The old woman who looks after her tells her not to push, then tells her to push. The baby is born. The mother names him. I can’t quite hear what she says. But it begins with K. Kevin? No. Kel – Kal ... I don’t know. I can’t hear.

“Peace Child. I’ve come across that idea before. They give peace children when they’ve been at war. The children are born in one tribe and grow up with another. They understand both peoples. They are the go-between. But this is the Peace Child, capital P, capital C.

“I can see further. But it’s vaguer. He has to do something quite spectacular. He is a peace child. But he has to be **the** Peace Child.

“He’s ill. That illness makes him be a peace child. He helps the othersthe others who are ill. He helps to find the cure.

“I can feel the loneliness. His loneliness. He is isolated.

“But that’s it. He understands them. The others. And he understands his own. He is the bridge.

“And it’s to do with Babel. He brings down the tower. He brings down the Tower of Babel. Then they all understand each other. He makes them all understand.

“Yes, then the Tower falls down. He has to tell the stories. They can understand because he tells them stories But they have to understand the words of the stories. They have to be willing to learn the words.

“He has a big mission. But it could save the world. Yes, he is going to save the world and it is all to do with overcoming the tower. They will all be taught to understand each other.”

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Switch-off

Ben Alki

The Ceremonial Temple was as silent as ever, just like it always was before the switch-off ritual. Ben Alki Mazrouth took a deep breath. He didn't mind this moment so much. He found it magical in a way, waiting for this most solemn of ceremonies to begin.

Everything was as it should be. All the metal and veriglass fittings had been polished so that they reflected the bright lights from the chandeliers back up to the high ceiling. He cast an eye along the rows of plush comfissessels. They were hovering gently, waiting for the well-wishers to come and sit on them. He made his way over to the big plastikholz doors, which looked so solid they could convince you they were the really heavy wood like in the Citadel of Elders. He took another big breath and then opened first the right hand door and then the left. The mourners were waiting for him.

They all filed in and sat down. He was used to the sad faces. He had served as the celebrant for one hundred of these rituals now. He knew just how impressive that was for someone as young as him. It was probably time he stopped though it was easier just to carry on. At least now he knew what to expect.

They sat down in the comfissessels, which swung and tipped to and fro a little, seeking a balancing point. One or two of the well-wishers whispered to each other. Others just stared, looking at nothing in particular. They all sat rigidly, some on the edge of their sessels, others picking imaginary fluff from their ceremonial purple tunics.

Ben Alki heard the tiny bleep which meant that Kemnat had arrived.

"All rise to greet the departant," Ben Alki called.

The family members were the first to get up on to their feet. They were followed soon after by the good friends in the outer rows. Those watching through the veriglass windows were already standing. There had not been enough room to offer them floating comfissessels or even old-fashioned hardsessels. The departant was one of the most popular elders Terrestra had ever known.

On the dataserve concealed beneath his lectern Ben Alki could see the crowd outside. They were watching via the huge dataserve screens. Suddenly they became quiet and pulled themselves to attention as the soft notes of an electrolute began to play a requiem-like melody. The curtains on the rear wall of the Temple silently glided open. The enormous bed, covered in drapes made from silks and satins and other old-world materials, and known as the Resting Place Entrance, slid into place.

Ben Alki saw the look of sudden shock in the eyes of the departant's immediate family. That always happened, even if they were old enough to have been to many departure ceremonies. Most of the recent ceremonies had been for older departants. So, the people who had attended were older too. They'd pushed the age back for compulsory switch-off. After so many deaths from the Starlight Racer pandemic, there was not so much need. Oh, he'd listened to all the arguments from those who thought that they should now let nature take its course but Ben Alki didn't quite see how it would work. Apart from those who had succumbed to the Starlight disease, Terrestrans were a pretty healthy lot. Especially the Elders, who were so well looked after.

The woman at the end of the front row caught his eye. He'd seen that look before as well. They hated him for what he did. Everyone knew that switch-off was inevitable, yet when it came to it, they didn't want it to happen.

The woman's eyes were red-rimmed and swollen as if she had been crying. Ben Alki guessed she must be the former attachment of the departant elder.

Just as well the ones who are going don't look like that, thought Ben Alki.

Of course, they didn't. They were heavily sedated. Had been for days.

The side door slid open. Ben Alki didn't like to think too much about what was actually about to happen at this point. This was just a job, he told himself, a highly paid one at that. He let his thoughts drift over to what he would be doing that evening. He might watch some sport on the dataserve or he might go along to the recently refurbished New Laguna nectar bar. Sophia Arkland might be there, if he was lucky.

The attendant guided the aged elder in. The old man looked fine. You would not know he was drugged up to the eyeballs. He looked well with it and relaxed. The counsellor had obviously done his job properly, convinced him that this was the right thing to do and that he had much to be proud of. Ben Alki wondered what Joshran Elder had selected for his life show. He'd have a lot to talk about for sure.

The attendant had now parked the hoversessel in the middle of the small platform. The elder was smiling at his family and friends. He looked as if he was being kind, but Ben Alki knew it was just the effect of the sedative drug he'd been given – even though it was true that Joshran Elder was a kind man.

“Joshran Kemnat, Elder of Culture and Education, inhabitant of Terrestra, do you agree to the termination of your stewardship?” said Ben Alki.

“I do,” replied the elder.

“And do you account to that stewardship every aspect of your life, including the physical, the intellectual and the spiritual, and of all those aspects of which you have charge including the personal?”

“I do,” replied the elder.

“Then it is fitting that the ceremony of departure may take place. Who is to bear witness?” The words came from Ben Alki's mouth without him having to think. *What am I really talking about?* he asked himself.

“We are,” said a man and a woman standing near the red-eyed woman.

Ben Alki guessed they might be Joshran's children. He passed them the small tablet dataserve and they pressed their palms to its sensors.

“Joshran Kemnat,” said Ben Alki “please make your way to the Resting Place Entrance. The reposant will be administered shortly.” Ben Alki turned to the dataserve. “Privacy settings,” he commanded.

The thick black curtains slid across the veriglass windows. The screen showing the crowds outside went dark, but seconds before the sound was disconnected Ben Alki heard a loud scream, followed by someone shouting “Don't go, Joshran! We need you!” Hysterical sobs began just before the sound from outside went dead.

Up until now, all the fuss about Joshran Kemnat had seemed to Ben Alki just like some dramatic pageant, the beginnings of a movie. But no, what he had just heard was grief – raw, genuine and utter grief. His concentration slipped a little and the feelings he always managed to ignore during these ceremonies now began to take over. That had never happened before. He'd never known as much about the departants as he did about Joshran Elder.

He pulled himself up sharply and began to move closer to the family members, whilst the attendant who had helped the old man on to the stage now helped him into the large bed.

“In a few moments my colleague will inject the reposant,” Ben Alki said in a hushed tone to the well-wishers. “You will then have about forty minutes to say your goodbyes. He will suffer no pain. He will gradually become sleepy and will drop into a short coma.”

The medic was already standing in the doorway. Ben Alki nodded to him. The man in the white tunic made his way over to the over-sized bed where the attendant was now helping the old man from the comfissessel into the Resting Place Entrance. Two other attendants were getting ready the gifts which the Elder had chosen for his near ones.

Ben Alki liked to keep well out of the way at this point. This may be his hundredth ceremony, but this part really spooked him. Besides, this was a really important last intimate moment for the family and close friends.

He went into the little side-room with the one-way veriglass. Malthus Smid, the annihilation operator was already there.

“Won’t be another one for ten days,” said Malthus. “What are you going to do then?”

Ben Alki shrugged. That was definitely one of the perks of this job – especially since the Starlight Fever had done much of their work for them. You only had to work when you had to work. There were lots of days off; it was a sort of compensation for having to do a job that only a few were prepared to do. Most people would find it thoroughly gruesome and it was never discussed in polite society. As they were so well paid, Malthus and Ben Alki and the other employees of the Ceremonial Temple could afford to do really interesting things with all their spare time.

Ben Alki found himself thinking about Sophia again. Spending some more time with her would be a good idea.

“Do you think they will stop this?” asked Malthus. “Now that we’re not quite so crowded?”

Ben Alki did not know. Anyway, the vaccines and antidotes being sent from Zandra were working so well that they would soon be back to normal.

“I mean,” continued Malthus. “Now that we’re trading with Zandra, we might start trading with others and then we’d start catching all sorts of things and we’d start falling down like the Z Zoners do.”

Ben Alki shut his eyes – partly to think better, and partly so that he did not have to watch what was going on inside the Temple.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I really don’t.”

Part of him wanted this whole business to stop. He’d decided some time ago it wasn’t right – he was actually helping with a murder. Another part of him worried about what he might do to earn a living if it did stop. At just nineteen, he was able to live a very nice life, thank you very much. He had no qualifications. It wasn’t that he was not bright – no he prided himself on being pretty clever. But he enjoyed being lazy. All he’d had to do was learn to keep his face nice and serious. That had not been a problem. He really looked the part – tall, thin and with a rather long face. He was such a cynic anyway.

Mind you, next to Malthus, he was quite a saint.

“Oh sacred elders, look what he’s giving her,” cried Malthus.

Ben Alki opened his eyes and looked through the one-way veriglass. The youngest of the well-wishers, a girl who looked about eighteen, was kneeling at the side of the old man. He was handing her what looked like a permanent attachment robe.

“You don’t think the old guy’s offering to attach to her, do you? I mean, look well if he’s asking her to have sex with him. It has been known you know.”

“Shut up,” said Ben Alki. “He’s probably telling her he approves of her boyfriend.”

One by one the mourners made their way up to Elder Joshran. Ben Alki was amazed every time at how calm the departants seemed. Okay, he knew about the drugs, but even so.

“Oh, come on, lulus,” shouted Malthus. “Let him go to sleep. Then we can zap and compost and then we’re out of here. Should I change the air?”

The last of the well-wishers had made their way up to the Resting Place Entrance. Soon the elder would become sleepy and then he would slip into the coma. Reducing the oxygen in the air often speeded that process up, though the well-wishers never noticed the difference.

Ben Alki shook his head.

“Let him go in his own time,” he said.

“Boring,” said Malthus. Then he settled down. Both of them stared through the window. They watched the old man talking to his friends and family. It was clear he was getting tired. He closed his eyes and seemed to fall asleep. The well-wishers gradually stopped talking. A few minutes later, there was a tap on the door. Ben Alki opened it.

“He’s in the coma now,” said the medic. “I think we’ve got about ten minutes.”

Some of the well-wishers were weeping. Two sat on the bed with the Elder and stroked his hair. The rest just stood solemnly around the Resting Place Entrance, looking a little awkward, not knowing what to do.

“Respiration slowing,” said the medic, looking at his wrist dataserve. “Heart arrhythmic. Life signs weak.”

They say it’s peaceful, thought Ben Alki. *But how do we really know what is going on? He could be still conscious, just paralyzed.* Oh, he knew about all the research, how they’d measured the brainwaves and how there’d been no evidence of any pain or fear. But where had they got that idea from about going down a tunnel towards some light? Why on Terrestra was he doing this job?

“Death has occurred,” said the medic suddenly.

“Let’s go!” cried Malthus.

Ben Alki now made his way out to the people he must now think of as mourners.

“Our loved one has now gone,” he said, putting his solemn voice back on. “Please now say your last farewell. In a few minutes, we shall complete the ceremony in full view of the public.”

He turned to the man who had been named as Chief Mourner. “Let me know as soon as you are ready,” he said.

There was a mumbled conversation now amongst the mourners. The man Ben Alki had spoken to nodded his head.

“Friends, family and well-wishers,” said Ben Alki. “Will you now make your way to your places?” He turned to the dataserve. “Public settings,” he commanded the machine.

The curtains behind the mourners drew back so that those behind the veriglass could follow the final part of the ceremony.

“Friends, relations, fellow Terrestrans,” said Ben Alki. “Our beloved Joshran Kemnat has now departed from us. We ask you to salute his body as it now makes its final journey to its last resting place. We invite you then to celebrate with us the life of this extraordinary man.”