

PRAISE FOR REBECCA ORE'S PREVIOUS BOOKS
FROM AQUEDUCT

CENTURIES AGO AND VERY FAST

Finalist for the 2010 Lambda Award

"In *Centuries Ago and Very Fast*, Rebecca Ore pulls off an audacious experiment: using the raw language and deliberate focus on sexual encounters of 'slash' fiction to relate a series of linked episodes and moments of reflection from the stupendously long life of a gay male, from his earliest days as a mammoth-hunting caveman to around the present."

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"Ah, but a true power chord is infinitely replenishable, given enough talent on the part of the author. And Rebecca Ore proves this to the max with her new 'novel in stories,' *Centuries Ago and Very Fast*.... This novel comes with an endorsement from Samuel Delany, and on sexual and gender issues it exhibits the same polished rawness and sophisticated yet wide-eyed wonderment that Delany's writing is famous for."

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"*Centuries Ago and Very Fast*...has a kinetic energy and hard-to-define originality that held me captivated from first word to last. Profane—scandalous?—the book wraps stories around stories, combines the surreal with the mundane and everyday."

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—Donald D'Ammassa, *Critical Mass*, 4/22/09

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“Rebecca is up to her old tricks here: surprising, puzzling, and delighting us at every turn; and in this sleek, lean detective tale, coolly twisting the tail of Time itself. Ore is that rarest of creatures, a writers’ writer that readers also love.”

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Time and Robbery is a daring new novel by one of the field’s most capable writers. It features a gay immortal named Vel who can travel through time by sheer force of will, an ability he must use to travel back to his younger self to save his future descendants.

—John DeNardo, *Kirkus Book Reviews*, February 29, 2012

Collected Ogoense
and Other Stories

Collected Ogoense and Other Stories

by

Rebecca Ore



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This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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To Boyd Davis

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HYPOCAUST & BATHYSPHERE

A boy breaking deadwood in the forest saw God send two more future people to the time glade. He left his wood and crook and ran to tell the manor.

The Lord was sparring with his nephew in the courtyard, stopping sword blows with shields and padded coats. “My Lord,” the boy said, pulling at his greasy hair as if he had a cap to remove.

The Lord nodded to his nephew, and both lowered their swords and shields. “Must be more people from the future.” The boy nodded enthusiastically. The Lord tried to remember if this boy was kin to his reeve, Tod Ball, and if so, how.

“I’ve never quite understood why God sends them here,” the Lord’s nephew said. “Especially since we haven’t met one yet who *planned* to come to this time and place.”

The boy said, “The priest says God doesn’t want them roaming all over time. They come here because Cecil can explain them to us.”

The Lord said, “Perhaps this is a place they can come without tearing the fabric of the universe, but I can’t believe a peasant boy is responsible. We’re either going to die of the pestilence, or we’re not going to talk about them for the historical record. Tell the house staff to fire up the hypocaust. That always amazes them.”

“Uncle, it’s better to wear clothes than to heat a house. Frost kills the fleas.”

“But watching time travelers step onto a Roman style warm floor is so amusing.” The Lord left his practice gear to

his nephew, picked up his sharp sword, and went down to the millpond to see if the priest's youngest brother, Cecil, was still watching perch and bream from inside his iron ball with the polished glass windows.

The pond bubbled. A villein girl worked the bellows. "My Lord," she said, trying to bob and pump the bellows at the same time. She looked as though she was on the verge of womanhood, twelve perhaps, if she'd been well fed. Otherwise, perhaps as old as fifteen.

"Can you signal him to rise? We've got more time travelers."

"My Lord, Cecil told me he hates them. The last one accused him of being a...a...chrah..."

"Anachronistic," the Lord said. "So are *they*. Does the priest really believe they come here because of Cecil?"

"The priest thinks God wants them to know Cecil. Cecil thinks time is like a thread, and this is the beginning of the fibers that extend to their times."

"I hate metaphors that come from textiles," the Lord said. "I prefer those that come from swordplay."

The girl said, "And it may be that they come here because the *more* they come here, the more they *have* to come here, like a road where feet grind down a passage until horses and carts find it the only way to travel."

"Is that what you think?"

She shrugged. "They come here because they come here," the girl said. "Tell them to be polite to Cecil. He's really pissed because none of them have ever heard of him."

Morty and Sara materialized through the gate. Morty scuffed the ground and said, "Perhaps this is a cultic deep woods dancing ground; the earth seems well-packed."

"Do you have any idea what time it could be?" Sara said.

"Bath, 1352, if the machinery worked properly, but since it's obviously fall and we were supposed to arrive in the spring,

something's off." Morty had a brain chip and visual enhancements, but the internal clock needed to be reset. His implants gave him the temperature.

Sara pulled out her compass and chronologically believable astrolabe. "If we're not too far off, then we should be able to shoot Polaris tonight and figure out from the maps in your file where the nearest manor might be." She checked the liquid nitrogen freezer they'd brought with them to collect tissue samples. It was disguised as a wooden distaff, heavier than most distaffs Sara had seen in museums, a long staff of oak about an inch thick. All women in the Middle Ages carried distaffs. Some medieval illustrations showed them being used as weapons.

Had the Pestilence been caused by rat fleas and *Yersinia pesti*? Or by anthrax aerosol spores? Or by combinations of diseases? Until the twentieth century, everyone believed in the black rats and fleas explanation, but by the late twentieth century, Twigg, in *The Black Plague: A Biological Reappraisal*, wondered how a rat and a flea that originated in Southeast Asia survived British summers, much less British winters. Fresh tissue samples should stop the debate.

The Lord told the priest, "They'll stay in the woods tonight to see the sky. Most of them have astrolabes to check where and when they are."

"I could go to them, my Lord." Over the years, the priest had learned several dialects of Future as well as Latin, Welsh, and Saxon.

"Suit yourself," the Lord said in one of those dialects.

The priest remembered that he'd nailed the Lord with a quarterstaff the last time they'd sparred. He bowed and said, "Perhaps thieves will be out, my Lord. I'd be pleased if I had your protection."

Yes, I did appoint this priest, the Lord thought. The Lord's father had let the priest's father pay the fine to have him educated. *I appointed him here because otherwise it looked like he was headed for Oxford. But that was before Crecy, and before his younger brother's infernal bathysphere machine.* He said, "Between your cudgel and my sword, we should prevail against any number of thieves and future people."

"With your permission, my Lord, I'll arrange for their baptism, as, since they haven't been born yet in real time, whatever sacraments they may have won't be valid."

The Lord thought, *And how many angels can God put to dancing on the head of a pin?* He nodded, then walked back to the stable to have his horse saddled. "What happened to your donkey?" he asked the priest.

"My Lord, I had expenses."

"Your sister whelped again. Why didn't you see to it that she did better than to marry a cottar?"

"Yes, my Lord, but my sister was headstrong. I'm the only one who bent to the Lord's will."

And which Lord did he mean? the Lord wondered wryly. The Lord said, "I think we've got a donkey you could ride." He felt very grateful for his distant cousin, who served as the family confessor. *That priest had no gift for languages, not even Latin, but one did prefer to confess to a peer, not to the son of a man one had owned.*

"My Lord, there's no need to rush," the priest said, bowing his head. "Time travelers generally bring weapons and sufficient supplies."

"I'd like to get a few Cokes before they drink them all," the Lord said. "And your brother Cecil likes to play with the cans. He's down in the pond; isn't it a bit too cold?"

"He wants to find winter frogs. I told him the tad breed out of pond scum in the spring, and the frogs all die of frost, but he's not sure."

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“Perhaps your brother has involved us in paradoxes. Perhaps because of *him*, we all die off, and my renovated hypocaust and manor become lost in a navigation canal.”

“Yes, my Lord, but we don’t *necessarily* die off. You can count on this village to be closed-mouthed. We know we’re not mad or deluded by demons, but since the next village tends to be jealous of some of our more prosperous people, we know we’d have grief if we spoke.”

“I suspect we mostly die of the plague, but then, I’ve been black-biled since Crecy. Give a villein a long bow, but make from the point and never turn your back on them. If those time people are so concerned about paradoxes, they shouldn’t sneak in canned drinks.”

“My Lord, you’re so right.”

About dusk, the time travelers saw two men, one obviously a knight, the other a tonsured priest, ride up. Both men wore linen head covers that looked like cropped versions of women’s wimples. The Lord had a beard. The priest had stubble. “When are you from?” the priest asked, saying it, “Qhwne air yaf freom?”

Morty pulled on his ear to start the translation chip. The priest said, “We might out gay through the sounds to teach your computer.”

The Lord said in French, “Je ne parle pas vos langues. Parlez vous avec le pater.”

Sara thought he was trying to speak Spanish or Italian. He pronounced every letter. “How do they know we’re time travelers?” Sara asked.

“Oh, *that* dialect of Future!” the priest said. “Our future Englishmen.”

“Why do they all come from the same three-hundred-year span?” the Lord asked the priest.

“Perhaps because the Final Judgment comes in the twenty-second century,” the priest said.

Morty said, “They’re talking about final judgment.”

“Goodly sirs, when are we?” Sara asked, hoping that much would be intelligible to English-speaking people who’d been dealing with time travelers.

“The year 1348. We’re waiting for the plague, which may kill all in this village to avoid temporal paradoxes,” the priest said, looking sideways at his Lord to see if the terrible worm in the steel cocoon understood. “Then our relics will be obliterated by a navigation canal. We inherited a modern map and some books from one of your people who died here.”

Sara was more than a bit confused. These people sounded like they’d entertained different time traveler teams each week for decades. All she could say at that moment, though, was, “But we’re not near Bath, are we?”

The Lord said, “She’s attractive for a peasant descendant. I’ll order boiled sheets and steamed blankets so vermin won’t shock her passion.”

“Oui, mon signeur,” the priest said, thinking *better time travelers than village girls*. “Ma’am, no, you are not near Bath. You’re in what used to be the Danelaw. God sends time travelers to us for His own mysterious purposes, perhaps to avoid paradoxes, perhaps to show you how true Christians live, perhaps to subdue my younger brother’s pride. Since you haven’t been born yet, we need to arrange a christening.”

Sara decided the only sensible response was a curtsy. Morty bowed and said, “I understand that you’ve had trouble with the murrain and don’t have a lot of food. We can leave now, or we can leave in two weeks.”

The Lord spoke. The priest said, “My Lord wants to know if any of you smuggled in any canned soft drinks. He’s especially fond of Dr. Pepper. You could spend gold at the manor,

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copper in the village. Surely, you brought something to trade for your keep in these poor times.”

Morty bowed and fished a handblown glass bottle out of his pack. He said, “Tell him to mix it with water. It’s concentrated Dr. Pepper syrup.”

Sara said, “Morty, you’re not supposed to bring stuff like that! Good-father, tell your Lord that we brought some Saracens-style gold coins and some shillings and pennies. They are actual duplicates from our time, but the metal weights are honest.”

“No can?” the Lord asked almost comprehensibly. *New cabn?* He trusted the future coins would not appear to be counterfeit. But if they proved badly made, he’d resmelt the gold ones.

Everyone shook heads and bowed low, even Sara. This knight hadn’t seemed to recognize her earlier curtsy. He smiled at them and turned his horse, stopping from time to time so they could catch up to him.

The Lord wondered why God always sent him such obvious peasants. Cleaner than their ancestors, though. He wondered if time travelers realized that the very *threads* of their clothes made people nervous. His wife, after much examination of time traveler clothes, said that the machines that made time travelers’ clothes were too dumb to leave subtle messages in the spinning and weaving. That’s why the villeins had turned their wool combs on the *first* time traveler. He wore inhuman clothes and was obviously no saint. He also perhaps discovered a pot quern or two, or a fulling trough. Some villeins couldn’t be broken of cheating their Lord’s mills.

The second time traveler looked like a peasant trying to evade her Lord’s fulling mill by weaving and wearing unfulled cloth so sleazy one could see through the loose weave. Underneath, she wore brain-dead machine cloth. The Lord knew none of them expected to be undressed by fourteenth century hands. From her, the Lord had learned how to unhook bras.

When they caught up to his horse the third time, the Lord said, "At least, you didn't try to fool us with bad post-Modern hand spinning and weaving."

Sara made out the word "postmodern," and said to Morty, "You'll never learn anything true and uncontaminated about the Middle Ages *now*."

The priest said, "Only God knows true and uncontaminated things. A human would have to sacrifice his life completely to another to even begin to know the surface of that other. All humans get gists and piths in lives that were surface sketches of immortal souls."

Morty asked, "What did he say about the postmodern?"

The priest said, "My Lord's glad you didn't try to fool us with bad hand-weaving. Machine-made cloth strikes us as odd, but some of the handwoven crap worn out of the twenty-first century is positively insulting."

"This duplicates hand-spinning and weaving," Morty said.

"Machines don't leave the same signs," the priest said.

Sara said, "I can spin. I learned over the summer." She flourished her distaff.

The priest smiled and translated for the Lord. The Lord said, "If true, my lady wife will be so surprised." One earlier time traveler could spin as well as a six-year-old girl. She claimed she'd sprained her wrist earlier when she saw how well his lady and her women spun. No other time traveler did even that well. "You people generally cook marvelously."

Finally, they reached the manor house. The time travelers saw Norman walls built on a Roman stone foundation. One small shed attached to the main hall was wattle-and-daub. The main hall was stone, but it was smaller than Sara had expected and so looked like a triple-wide prefab with delusions of grandeur. Jutting above was a round tower. The Lord's own confessor came out from the tower and glared at the vicar priest. The Lord swung off his horse and said, "They brought Dr. Pepper syrup."

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Morty said, “But it doesn’t fizz.”

“Fizz?” the priest asked.

“Little bubbles in the beaker.”

The Lord’s confessor said, “Ask them if they might bring it in cans next time. Cecil collects the cans.”

Sara understood. She saw smoke rising from the wattle-and-daub shed, but none from the manor’s roof vents. Fleas, lice, rats, and greasy rushes waited inside for her, she was sure.

In front of the door was a box stood on end, one long side open. A man, obviously the porter, lay curled in the box. When the Lord kicked the box, the man flinched and climbed to his feet. He was four inches shorter than the Lord, dressed in a calf-length tunic that looked like gray upholstery with black stripes and black leggings that looked like the maker couldn’t decide whether these were to be trousers or hose. Bowing, he opened the door.

Inside, the floor was warm. The windows were green glass that looked as though someone had heated drink bottles and spun them out into lumpy sheets. Though the light was dim, Sara made out the center floor mosaic of Neptune on dolphins.

Morty asked, “Have you always had the hypocaust?”

The Lord said, “We built on top of it. Roman, don’t you know. Not really practical in this climate, but the weather’s been unseasonably warm for the Little Ice Age. Men of the Danelaw weren’t so feared of pagan things as the Anglos.” He didn’t tell them that another time-traveler had discovered it under the ancient foundation when the Lord had been a boy, visiting here with his uncle.

“What will you do?” Sara asked.

“For now, when it’s colder than this, we build fires in tripod braziers, so as not to mar the floor tiles. We vent the smoke through the roof. The creosote in the smoke kills wood-eating insects in the roof timbers, so our system is quite practical for

our time. My wife might have some cast-off fur-lined dresses you could wear. You said you had Saracen coins.”

“But the smoke. You’d have sinus problems all the time,” Morty said.

The Lord smiled and said, “I have enough villeins to get my wood cut a year before we burn it. Good aged wood doesn’t smoke as much as green wood. If you find you’re too cold, you can help out in the cookhouse. Otherwise, I can put you up with my reeve.”

“We thought we’d be your guests,” Sara said.

“What did your ancestors do in the nineteenth century?” the Lord asked. He was beginning to understand them better, or else they’d figured out how to speak better, probably some combination of the two.

Sara’s nineteenth century ancestors had been colliers, agricultural laborers, a ditcher, and textile workers, so she knew better than to answer. She said, “If you’re not happy to have us around, we *could* have gone straight back to our time before we left the woods, but now we’re stranded here for two weeks.”

“My dear, you don’t need to rush away. I think you’re going to be as comfortable in the village as you could be here. You can come up to my house from time to time.” The Lord turned to the priest and said, “Put them up with my reeve, Tod Ball.” The Lord knew the priest hated rich villeins almost as much as he despised Lords, both as equally descended from Adam and Eve as the lowest he. The priest grumbled, but Ball had married the priest’s cousin. The Lord continued, “You’ll learn so much from my reeve. Village life is the core of medieval existence. My kind simply defends it.”

Morty said, “I’m a specialist in medieval technologies, so I want to see everything.” Sara, the med tech, had always been an avid amateur history buff, with an undergraduate degree in it, but the more she studied history, the more she realized that the past would have been more complicated than the future

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if the past had been as densely populated. Morty shrugged at Sara, who hoped that shrug wasn't recognizably Jewish. The Jews had been expelled from England over sixty years earlier, when the king owed them too many marks.

The priest told Morty and Sara, "The reeve, Tod Ball, has the biggest allotment in the village, plus the Lord farms out the oven to his brother. He's always had beautiful daughters who ally him with many other families. He's married to one of my kinswomen. One son came back to weave for the village. Ball always gets re-elected reeve."

The priest led Sara and Morty on foot through strip fields, some furlongs planted in winter crops, some fallow in hay, others now stubble or dead bean vines.

"They look just like oxen at the reenactment villages," Morty said when he saw the first oxen. "I thought they'd be tiny or something."

The priest said, "We've lost a lot of our stock to the murrain, so what's left has plenty of fodder."

Sara said, "The animals in the Luttrell Psalter looked big enough." The oxen were definitely bigger than Jersey cows, not as big as Holsteins. Sheep ate away at bean and grain stubble, fenced-in with wattles. Sara felt that the past too much resembled a reenactment village. A boy sat on a log weaving more wattles, sticking withes through wood sticks lashed into rectangles. Outside, among the village houses, geese hissed at pigs over scraps, while chickens scratched up bugs, just like their descendants did.

In a small garden, two peasant men were spading. Morty said, "Turning over the garden so frost breaks up the clods. Amazing."

"More peasants," Sara said. The peasants wore shapeless garments in striped and dotted browns, blues, and yellows. Most of the wool looked almost like felt, fullled into a solid

sheet that wouldn't fray when snagged or cut. The belts looked card-woven when they weren't leather. The women's garments were long, to mid-calf, while the men's were shorter, but Sara could see no shaping other than gussets and gores. No darts, no curved cuts.

Not quite like a reenactment village. The weaving was better.

"Does that look like card-weaving to you?" Morty said to Sara.

The priest said, "It *is* card-weaving. Weaving cards are fragile, thick parchment, thrown out when the holes in them tear, and so don't survive often in the historical record."

In front of them, on the path, two women wood gatherers, in tunics and with their heads covered in beige kerchiefs, drove a pair of oxen yoked to a sledge. Not oxen, but rather cows? Yes, the draft animals had udders, shriveled now, and big bellies. The cows seemed unenthusiastic. Morty grinned like a teenaged boy seeing his first naked willing girl. He went up and walked around them, touched the yoke, then came back to Sara and the priest and said, "The Medievals really *did* use cows as draft animals!"

The cows lurched unevenly in the yoke, twisting their hindquarters and tossing their heads. The women broke off branches from every tree they passed and threw them onto the pile on the sledge, which scraped across the ground on runners. One of the women had a distaff loaded with unspun wool tucked in her belt. A heavy stick, though not as thick as Sara's, it could have served as a prop weapon in one of the medieval drawings. The top was carved, not lathe-turned, to a knob where a linen ribbon descended in spirals to bind the wool. The spindle, with a wooden whorl, dangled in a half hitch from the distaff's top knob. Sara knew she couldn't spin thread so evenly. Her liquid nitrogen cooler looked less and less like a real distaff, no wool tied to it, no spindle dangling from spun thread half-hitched around the top ball.

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Sara looked around and saw that almost all the women had distaffs stuck through their belts. At least she'd gotten that right. A few wore even wider belts stuffed with straw, one steel knitting needle almost two feet long stuck into a belt, hands working stitches from the needle in the belt to other needles. Knitting surcoats in the round, Sara thought. The thread came down from the left hand. When the knitters turned to other tasks, they flung the knitting over their shoulders, or stuck a couple of the pins into their knitting belts.

Morty said, "I thought knitting came later."

Sara stopped between two houses and looked back. The village would just be visible from the manor. Some of the houses looked like small versions of Elizabethan houses, half-timbered with clay infill. Others were wattle-and-daub hovels. Each had a small garden surrounding the house, dead now except for what appeared to be kale, cabbage, and bean stubble. The village smelled of urine, but not so much of shit. The priest led them to the largest of the timber-framed houses and said, "Tod Ball may not be free, but he is rich."

Ball's house was larger than the manor. His roof smoked at both ends. His door was paneled oak, quite smoothed and fitted, and swung open. Morty ran his hand around the door and said, "Mortise and tenon frame, free-floating panels. Quite well done."

The priest said, "Tod Ball traded Curt the Carpenter for that door." He knocked on it, and a woman opened it a crack, looked out at them.

Tod Ball the reeve was a big serf about five feet, nine inches, with ginger beard stubble and a basin haircut. He wore somewhat more shaped clothes than Sara'd seen earlier, but no shoes. His feet were huge and callused along the insteps as well as on the soles. What he spoke was Middle Anglo with chunks of Danish. Morty's and Sara's computers chopped at

the speech for a few minutes, but obviously, they were being welcomed in.

About 25 watts for the whole house, Sara thought, after her eyes adjusted. The only light came from the doors and the fire on a stone hearth in the center of the floor.

When the computers recovered, Morty and Sara heard the reeve saying, "We're like this, the Lord and I." He held up his forefinger and middle finger twined together.

The priest said, "I've got hens to tend. My sister is recovering from childbed."

"Your cousin my wife and me'll entertain these time people," Tod Ball said. "I got plenty as long as God doesn't send too many of them. Can the woman spin?"

"Probably not," the priest said, "even if she thinks she can, but they'll pay their way with passable coppers."

"We can understand you now," Morty said. "I'm Morty, and the woman is Sara."

Sara said, "I can spin a little but I hurt my wrist."

"Good." Ball came over and patted both of them on the shoulders. "Most time people do best at cooking. If you can make us a custard and ham pie, with chopped Good King Henry, what you call a quiche, I've got an oven."

Sara remembered that the contemps ate a domesticated cousin of lamb's quarters. The priest said, "It's really the Lord's oven."

Ball said, "I helped my brother get the oven farm, paid the Lord's fee for him, but a man who's not active won't make good of the farming of even a mill, much less an oven. Come, sit, tell me about how men make crops in your time."

Hanging from hooks in the ceiling beams were huge wooden mallets, wooden spades with iron only along the cutting edge, other wooden rakes, billhooks. In the corner, a younger man worked on a floor loom, various parts rising and falling, his bare feet moving over long treadles hinged at the

back. A woman and four girls made thread, one from flax on a drop spindle with a stone whorl, the others wool thread on the more usual spindle. Ball said, “My goodwife, my little ones. The two older boys are at the butts, shooting. The boy’s supposed to be working for his master, but the man died in the pestilence down south, and my boy felt he’d be safer if he came home with the cart and loom.”

Sara said, “I guess no one in the village would inform the guild or his master’s heirs.”

Ball said, “My Lord said the boy could weave here until we knew what better was to happen, and he’d clear the boy with the guild and the heirs, if they survived.”

Morty said, “The other boys? Practicing with long bows?” He peered back up at the collection of medieval farm tools.

Sara said, “You have a large family.”

The woman finally spoke, “We lost two boys and several girls.” She was pregnant now. Sara thought that Ball’s wife looked to be about fifty, although probably she was really only thirty or thirty-five. She’d lost several teeth, pulled when the rot got too bad, perhaps.

“More to come,” Ball said. “I feed her well.” He nodded to the priest, who left them then. Sara felt slightly uneasy.

Morty said, “Does the village have a bath house?”

Ball’s wife, whose name they never learned, said, “Bath-houses are dangerous.”

Ball said, “I’ll go with you, Morty.”

Ball’s wife sighed and said, “The Lady will be coming by tomorrow to take linen for shifts. If Sara can wind quills, my son will appreciate it.”

The weaver said, “Mother, couldn’t you wind them? These time travelers....”

Sara asked, “I’d be perfectly happy to do it if I can do it fast enough. How do you wind quills?”

The weaver sighed and shook his head. Ball's wife pulled from one corner of the parlor what looked like a miniature spinning wheel and a handful of goose quill barrels, cut open at each end.

Sara watched as the woman slipped the quill onto a spike stuck out beyond two small upright posts. A leather cord went around the wheel and around the base of the spike set between the two posts. The woman pulled out a hand-shaped but fired and glazed clay bowl with sides curved in slightly at the top. In the bottom, to one side, was a clay loop. Ball's wife turned to a basket and pulled out a ball of fine linen thread and a leather bottle. She poured water in the bowl up to the top of the clay loop in the bottom, then threaded the linen through the loop and handed it, wet, to Sara. "Wind it back and forth," Ball's wife said. "Don't wind so the threads can slip between each other." She took Sara's hand and showed her how to turn the wheel by pushing the spokes away from Sara's body.

Sara wound the thread so that each thread round lay beside the next, trying for the neatness of a spool of thread or a level winding fishing reel. When she began to wind back the other way, the weaver said, "Get her to do it *right*, Ma, or wind them yourself."

Sara felt a blow between her shoulders, not an attack, but a solid thump.

Ball's wife had *hit* her. "Back and forth, from one end to the other, make the spirals slant, not straight up and down. Otherwise the next level will bind," Ball's wife said. "And it must fit in this." Ball's wife held up the shuttle. It was only an inch high, but longer than the shuttles Sara had seen in her own time. Ball's wife put down the shuttle and guided Sara's hands through the movements, then thumped her again, as if that would make Sara remember better. The weaving boy turned his head toward Sara and grinned. He looked to be

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about fourteen, with a freckled face, a shock of sandy hair, strong legs, and bare feet treading the loom.

Sara remembered what Samuel Johnson had said later, that the Medievals felt corporal punishment was less spiritually damaging than bribes, flattery, competitiveness, and other mental tricks used to get people to learn. They bumped their boys against village boundaries on Rogation Day. Dubbing knights was done with blows calculated to knock a man off his feet. Pain aided memory. To avoid another thumping and to prove she wasn't just another incompetent from the future, she was very careful with the next quills, but the weaver had to wait for them.

Ball's wife sighed and asked, "What do you do in the future?" She put another ball of linen thread in the bowl and added more water.

"I study diseases," Sara said. She pulled the end of the thread through the clay loop and up to the winding wheel.

"I'd offer to exchange herbal lore with you, but I already know that you can't compound your own simples. What's the point of studying diseases if you can't make the cures?"

Sara wanted to ask what was the point of fooling yourself that you could cure illnesses when you *couldn't*, but decided to try filling bobbins faster. The weaver wove them still damp. Sara's hands were cold and chafed by the thread when they stopped. The room was dark. A bell was ringing.

Ball's wife said, "Midnight. Five yards since vespers."

"I'm good," the weaver said. He stood up from the bench and rubbed his bottom and lower back.

Sara wondered where Morty and the reeve had gone, but didn't say anything as Ball's wife led her to a huge bed. The girls and the boy came and joined them in it, wiggling out of their clothes when they got under the covers.

Sara stripped down to bra and panties. Ball's wife, obviously familiar with time travelers, said, "One of those

make-your-tits-look-younger things. Take off that rig and sleep in your shift. Linen won't startle us out of sleep."

"We slept over at the bathhouse," Morty claimed. All five men standing around the hearth looked clean and roughly shaved.

"How are the boys doing?" Ball's wife asked her husband.

"Cutwit said he almost had a girl to wife, but she's marrying a freeman. Poor freeman, buying such a piece of ass from the Lord."

The son who must have been Cutwit said, "I do want to get married."

"Find a more faithful girl," his mother told him. "Not so pretty."

Morty said, "The bathhouse plumbing is really neat. The pipes into the big tub have real valves. Who'd have thought this small village would have had a bathhouse?"

Ball's wife said, "Good women go on alternate days. Our bishop insists."

The Lady came to inspect the linen at noon the next day. She rode in astride a mare that looked like a somewhat coarse American Saddle Horse or Tennessee Walker. Genuine medieval amblers, Sara thought, the stock that provided those two more recent breeds with their comfortable gaits. The horse's head was more like a pony's head, round jaws and short ears. Two young squires and a page followed the Lady on similar horses, but only the page dismounted to help her off her mare. Then he climbed back on his horse, and the three gentlemen waited while the Lady came in.

Sara felt that she looked peasantry in comparison to the Lady. The Lady's hair was completely concealed under her linen headdress, but her eyebrows and lashes were dark blonde. She wore a little square silk hat over the linen coif, and her

wimple was tied back as if it had been hair. She had blue eyes, was wrinkled but very fair. She seemed never to bare her teeth and had probably lost many of them in child bearing and nursing, if ladies nursed their own babies in this period. Otherwise, she looked healthy. The Lady wore a dark blue surcoat of fine wool thread over a silk underdress, dyed crimson. Sara felt that the Lady was overdressed for a visit to villeins, but perhaps the Lady wanted to intimidate them with her elegance.

“So you’re the time traveler’s woman? I see our reeve gave you a shift.” Her nails looked shaved, not cut, pared with a pen knife. Sara had learned that the medieval penknife was nothing like a twentieth century pen knife. Quills took a stout sharp blade.

As the Lady bent over the loom, the reeve’s wife whispered, “She eats shell and bones when she’s breeding. I tell my girls if they want more of their teeth through breeding, they ought to eat burnt shells. Some say ashes help.”

Sara decided to be perverse. “Sure she’s not a witch?”

“No, it’s shells. Marl gives good heart for the land, shells give good heart for a breeding woman.”

The Lady unwound the linen from the cloth beam, checking it, then piling it in erratic folds on the floor rushes. Sara saw now that the boy had woven complex treadled patterns in that dim light, not plain weave. The Lady said, “Open the door wider,” and the reeve’s wife did. The children all backed away and sat on benches around the wall.

The Lady said, “You did good work with my thread.” The boy weaver smiled and bowed to her, then grinned at his mother. He seemed genuinely pleased with the compliment. “Wash it and bring it up to the house. We’ll give you a sweet, a goose, and two hares.”

“Yes, my Lady,” the boy said. Sara suspected that the hares would come to the family, but he’d get all the sweet. It didn’t

sound like he was getting any actual money for his work, though.

The Lady said, “Morty, we understand you know something about the pestilence.”

“Not enough,” Morty said. “If it’s related to the cattle murrains, but isn’t the anthrax of our day, we could die, too. Or if it’s a different illness than we’ve been led to expect. Probably more than one disease entity is involved.”

Sara knew that if they caught anthrax, despite what vaccines and bioenhancements they’d had, they were to throw just the frozen samples through the gate. Then a team dressed in biohazard suits would come through the gate and take them straight into an isolation unit.

The Lady said, “Of course, you’d like to believe it was something *we* were too ignorant to deal with, but something *your* physicians could manage quite well.”

“I don’t have that bias,” Morty said, “but most people in my era still believe that the plague came from fleas and rats, because we can control *them*. Personally, I suspect it was anthrax, a murrain that killed people as well as sheep, like wool sorter’s disease, only worse. Perhaps anthrax and another couple of diseases.”

The Lady said, “I will survive. I’m well nourished.”

“Perhaps, my Lady,” Morty said.

“What *does* kill me?” she asked.

Morty’s eyes defocused as he consulted his implant. He said, “I don’t have a file on any county north of Somerset. You’re not in the historical records for Somerset County.”

“We are north of there,” the Lady said. “Enough. We’ll guard our manor from strangers. Where would be safest for my sons?”

“Scotland,” Morty said.

“I think not,” the Lady said. “Scots would kill my sons.”

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“Isolated castles,” Morty said. “The rich don’t suffer as much as the peasants.”

“Say villeins, virgaters, cottars, honor them with what status God gave them,” the Lady said.

“Why don’t you honor the poorer ones with more *food*?” Morty said. “I saw them all naked in the bathhouse.”

“Look at our reeve’s family. Does his family look pinched and starving?”

“No.”

“It’s up to the peasants. They breed themselves out of land. Perhaps God sent this pestilence to thin them.”

Sara hoped that Morty didn’t ask her why she needed imported silk, and how many bushels of wheat and shillings of rent bought it. He said, “I’m not used to your era, even though I’ve read about it.”

The Lady said, “I’m so glad I don’t live in your rude future. You come to this place, eat my folks’ food, talk away their time, pay them in false coin, then say to me that I make them to starve.”

The village church bell tolled three times then. All heads turned toward the sound. The Lady said, “The other time people didn’t come to study the pestilence.”

“We did,” Morty said. “But we were planning to arrive after the worst of it.”

Sara said, “I’m glad we can be honest with you. You know what we are. I guess I’d feel unclean being a spy from the future watching people die around me.”

The Lady said, “You’d never have fooled me into thinking you were my rank, or even my countrywoman.”

“But I *am* British,” Sara said.

The Lady said, “I’m Norman and Dane. Not Welsh, not Saxon, not British, not Scot nor Pict. We beat *them*.”

Sara hoped that Morty didn’t argue with her about the Danes. Everyone bowed the Lady out. The weaving boy cut

the cloth off the warping beam, pulled away the unwoven threads at the end of the warp, and put them in a leather bag. "For the papermakers," he said to Morty and Sara.

Ball said, "I get along well with my Lord, but my Lady is a cunt."

Sara said, "Morty, I'm sure glad you didn't argue with her about the Danes not being such hot conquerors."

Morty said, "What a bitch. What can I do around here to help out, other than by just being some sort of time-traveling tourist? Why do you keep your tools hanging from the roof inside here and not in a tool shed?"

Ball said, "Tools cheap when *you* come from?" He reached up and brought down two wooden spades with iron tips, handing one of them to Morty. "Woman," he said to his wife, "you got some clogs that would fit this man?"

The weaver son shaved a bit at the insides of the wooden soles of a pair of shoes with a scorper until Marty felt reasonably comfortable. Ball went out barefooted.

Sara asked, "What are they going to do?"

"Dig a clamp for cabbages and parsnips, or hill the leeks," Ball's wife said. "You know anything about setting up a warp? We've got to get the loom redressed for field clothes."

"Perhaps if you can show me."

The weaving boy shook his head.

"It's a wool warp," his mother said. "They're a lot more forgiving."

"Let her cook, Ma," the boy said.

His mother said, "My journeyman son's a very smart boy."

Sara wasn't sure quite what Ball's wife meant by that. "What do you have to cook?"

"Parsnips, cabbage, beans been soaked, salt herring, couple cheeses, bread in the hamper. Got a bit of honey if you want to make a frumenty with the summer wheat."

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The hamper was a wooden box suspended by ropes from the rafters. After setting the beans on to cook in a covered pot suspended on a crane over the fire, Sara checked the hamper to see if the bread was anything she'd want to eat. It looked a little hard, but otherwise edible. "Got any ale and flour?" she asked, wondering if she'd be inventing Welsh rabbit for the first time. She'd spotted a tripod pot on the hearth.

Sara chipped the cheese into little bits with a knife, then dusted flour over it. The goodwife seemed to know what Sara planned to do and dipped out ale from a bucket and put it in the pot. She told Sara, "I've even got a peppercorn and salt."

While the beans cooked, Sara fried cabbage in lard and poppy seed, then crushed the peppercorn and added it to the boiling ale. She dumped in the floured cheese, stirred, then pulled the concoction back from the fire.

The goodwife had been cutting bread slices and toasting them upright on an iron angle plate all the while.

The boy stopped his warping, washed his hands, and came up with a wooden bowl and spoon. They all broke the bread into spoon-sized bits in their bowls before pouring the cheese sauce over. The Medievals put the cabbage in with the rest of the meal.

"Smart girl," the goodwife said. Sara realized how hungry she'd been and nodded as she ate. The bread was made of more grains than wheat, and the cheese tasted vaguely like feta, or goat cheese. Ewe cheese. The solitary peppercorn got lost in the wilder flavors.

After Sara finished, she said, "I thought you ate off trenchers. Bread."

"Stuff soaks through bread. Bowls are better," the goodwife said. "You did good cabbage, though it's still a mite green. I'll beat you if we get the flux of it."

"The lard was quite hot."

“We can’t use lard every day now,” the goodwife said. “You’ll have to learn to cook cheaper.”

“Couldn’t I buy the household some oils?”

“What with the pest, no oils or fats to be had other than what the village grows.”

The weaver sent the newly woven linen to the bathhouse to be washed. After the linen was dry, he laid it over a log and beat it with a wooden club. Morty said, “I wish I had a camera.”

“The Lord wants Sara to come with me to the manor house,” the weaver said.

After Sara bathed by the fire in a wash barrel, Ball’s wife dressed Sara in a best linen shift. Fussing through her chests, Ball’s wife pulled out a blue-dyed overdress with dark pink flower patterns across the top of the bodice. Sara was about to ask if the overdress was embroidered when she remembered that peasant weavers often wove *in* patterns rather than take a needle to them after they were woven. Then she wondered why Ball’s wife wanted her to be so dressed up? Probably to show how prosperous the reeve was.

Ball’s wife said, “Our master lets us keep some of the lambs’ wool for our own clothes.” She pulled out a pair of dark pink stockings made from bias-cut woven wool that matched the color of the weft insertions. They were cut at the top in a pattern that allowed for a cord to run through the holes. Sara used the cords as garters above her knees. She didn’t like the seam under her foot, but peasants didn’t wear knitted socks, at least not in this village.

The weaver boy asked, “Is she ready yet?”

“We haven’t finished with her hair, but you can come in now.”

The weaver boy came in, the linen rolled and under his arm. He looked for a clean place to put it, shrugged, and kept

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holding it. “Ma, she’d look quite nice if you set her cap back a bit to show her hair.”

Ball’s wife nodded and arranged the cap and wimple accordingly. Then she went through the chest again and pulled out a pair of slippers. “Pull off the hose and don’t dress your feet until you get to the castle,” she told Sara.

“Is there frost?”

The boy asked, “Ma, better give her clogs.”

“Is Morty going too?”

“Your companion is down at the pond with Cecil and his bathysphere.”

“Bathysphere?”

“Yes, Cecil’s my cousin,” the woman said, “and our priest’s youngest brother. Decided that if a boy was to polish glass as jewelers do the Lord’s jewels, then he could see through it much better than if it were left blown glass.”

“Did he get the idea from time travelers?” Sara asked.

“He described it to one before he made it. Cecil claims that all the future person did was name his machine a bathysphere. Don’t ever tell him he didn’t invent it himself. Hates being accused of being derivative. We think that the Lord should release him for the priesthood. We’re all saving to pay the fee.”

“Sounds like an extremely bright boy.” Unfortunately, Cecil must have died in the plague, since Sara’d never come across anyone like him in the fourteenth century historical accounts.

“Well, you’re ready for the Lord, now,” Ball’s wife said, pulling the cap back a bit more, exposing Sara’s earlobes.