

LESSONS IN LAVA

A volcanic adventure, featuring **Dari**, as associated in this world with Darkarri, and the goddess **Pelehonuamea**, as associated in this world with Hawaiian mythic tradition.



as told by Chaobang
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Lessons in Lava

*Where will we find peace?
Oh, how we yearn on the road
Above, below, moving here and there*

Aia lā 'o Pele/There is Pele (traditional Hawaiian chant)

Kīlauea Caldera, Hawai'i

United States of America, Sol III (Earth)

Eight years before Dari set forth across the worlds

'DANGER – Lava area closed!' 'Do not approach fumes!' 'Stay on established paths!' 'Beware of getting trapped by lava!'

The signs should have alarmed anyone in their right mind. If the bright red lettering didn't do it, there was always the accompanying hellscape of charred ashen plains, basalt spreads, belching fumaroles and oozing molten rock. This after all was one of the most active volcanoes in the world, infamous for the tendency of its flows, unstoppable, in constant eruption, to reshape the surrounding landscape on a whim.

It is a special person, let us say, who comes to such places for fun.

Try telling that however to the young brunette in a bright green T-shirt who stood gripping the fence in both hands, bouncing on the soles of her sneakers and smiling agape, her hazel eyes thirsty with excitement as they drank their fill of this sulphurous cauldron.

She wasn't 'special!' – she liked to retort. She was just Dari.

It was everyone else who was weird.

Little Dari (the 'little' was ironic: she was noticeably tall for her age) loved places like this. In these untamed landscapes, the nonsensical rules of day to day life fell to pieces: swamped by the lava, buried beneath the forest's weight of life, swept off on the winds or sunk to the bottom of the sea. In nature's hands, you didn't have to worry about what arrogant grown-ups told you to do, or the latest hurtful rumours your classmates were spreading about you. The trees, the cliffs, the caves,

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the rivers; hell, even this pit of fire and brimstone: these *made sense*. Sure, they could be dangerous. But it was a danger that wasn't specifically out to get you, Dari might have argued. Unlike certain friends, relatives or teachers she could name, its power was reasonable, honest, and couldn't have cared less about what she looked like, what she wore, how she talked to people, or who she fancied. She respected it, and so it respected her back.

She'd take every chance to immerse in these wild spaces: on family holidays, school field trips, or escapes with friends like this one. Wandering off to trek through the woods, clamber through caverns or interrogate the locals, she'd learn her own lessons about a place's legends and history, its ancient ruins or strange rock formations, and relish feeling so tiny and insignificant in a world that otherwise seemed to waste so much energy trying to convince her the sky would fall in unless she arranged every little aspect of her life as she was told. Often she'd get lost, and end up in some frightening moment of self-conscious solitude – high in the branches, deep in the darkness, caught in the river's flow. But these were cathartic moments too. In them she felt alive, felt free; felt *real*, and in touch with the underlying realness of her planet. It was a feeling well worth the earful awaiting her afterwards.

She could have grown up to be a famous explorer, they all said, if only she'd lived two or three centuries earlier.

A shame, that. In this globalised age when you could whip across the world on a plane within hours, or instantly pull up a map of anywhere important on your smartphone, didn't exploring look suspiciously like...well, seeking a way out of reality? What use, now, such a curious nose, such restless legs, if not to chase daydreams and imaginary worlds? To waste productive energy, that is, on dangerous escapism?

The fire and brimstone, at least, weren't asking.

"Heh. Pretty amazing, eh Dari?" she said out loud. "Don't you think it looks like, I dunno, another planet or something?"

A few nearby heads swung her way, as if wondering who she was talking to.

She blushed, self-consciously. Held still till they turned away.

Yeah. Another on the list of things for which people had a go at her.

She grumbled inaudibly, while she waited for them to wander off. They took their time. But once they did...

...an impish grin surfaced on her face, and with eyes to the lava plains she wiggled her fingers sneakily, and added in a undertone: "How about it then, Dari? Hmm? Where d'you think this bossy volcano goddess lives?"

Her gaze drifted to another of those warning signs. This one read: "It is ILLEGAL to remove rocks, sand or minerals from the Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park'. The

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small print carried detailed legislation courtesy of the United States National Parks Service with the obligatory threats of fines and imprisonment.

She chuckled. She had worked out the real reason for local sensitivities on this matter. It had nothing to do with the laws of some imperialist country thousands of miles away which, as far as she could counter-intuit from her obviously biased history books, had little business being here in the first place. It had a great deal more to do with this island's fearsome forger and matron deity: Pele, goddess of volcanoes, fire, lightning, destruction, and a good deal else on a lengthy catalogue of cataclysmically awesome phenomena.

They took Madame Pele seriously around here, oh yes they did, and visitors were warned to think better of crossing her. The worst thing you could do, they told Dari, the singular mischief guaranteed to earn the volcano goddess's ire, would be to make off with pieces of her volcano's mineral bounty: sacred down to the tiniest rock, shell, and grain of sand, for each was produced by Pele's all-encompassing body and under her fierce maternal protection. The 'Curse of Pele', they called her inevitable wrath upon those poor sods who dared take what was hers, because oh yes, there were *consequences*, as attested by the thousands of lava fragments and sand vials returned to the island's post offices each year, typically accompanied by tear-stained letters of apology and pleas for forgiveness.

According to the folklore, this great land-shaper had her lair right here in the crater of the volcano in whose maw young Dari, along with a few gaggles of other tourists, stood now. And it was in fact on account of Madame Pele that this was so; or more accurately, a quarrel she had ignited between Dari and her travel fellows that morning.

The trouble was this. On the matter of gods, Dari had found her friends held rigidly to either of two general views. One was that gods weren't real, that was that, and to speak as if they might be was to bring your sanity into question. The other view was that there was a god, but strictly one, that is to say, theirs; and that even a hint of an attempt to expand the language of divinity – say, to the impostors worshipped by people who hadn't learnt the truth yet – was an unforgivable offence, to say nothing of how it brought your sanity into question.

The positions sounded contradictory, but Dari had found them more in common than they appeared. When she'd suggested *belief* might not be the point, the two blocs had stared at her in equal confusion. She'd then found that her interest in the indigenous folklore managed to antagonise both the rationalist kids and the kids from fundamentalist families simultaneously. Neither seemed to get her view that there were valuable and fascinating things you could learn from stories like Pele's about the local history, geology or ways of life. So she'd dropped the matter, it had clearly upset them, and Dari was a considerate soul, content

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when it counted to be kind rather than right. But it was too late, they just wouldn't let it go, and in the end they'd joined forces to call her names for lacking a grip on the *real world*.

So had Dari – caring, compassionate, but never a doormat – stormed from the hostel and harrumphed her way up Kīlauea's slopes, chestnut hair leaping to her steps as she grumbled about what, to her, seemed the *real* question.

“Hmph. And why should some grown-up” – gods included, it so happened – “get to tell you what to do? You don't have to put up with that, do you Dari?”

Whether or not Pele existed as such was beside the point. Either she was there, or her name represented some other tell-Dari-what-to-do force – say, the United States National Parks Service – that actually was there. What mattered was that it sounded like this Pele, being all fire and brimstone and huge eruptions and stern-voiced, steam-eared straw effigy in the hostel lobby and the rest of it, was threatening to punish her if she didn't do as she was told.

And she couldn't have that. It was all well standing in nature's palm and trembling in happy awe at its mind-blowing power. But that didn't mean power got to do whatever it liked, and if it bullied her, massive and mind-blowing or not, it got the bollocking it deserved.

“Hmph!” twelve-year-old Dari snorted. “Why shouldn't you take some of these rocks then? Maybe you should, just so the bossy old woman gets your point! This lava's so cool, and it's not like she's got any shortage of it round here...”

She looked about. Most of the tourists were absorbed in the view, or in their guides' commentaries, or had their heads in their rucksacks as they prepared for more ambitious hikes across the crater. She spotted a team of what looked like professional volcanologists, fiddling around with some funny instruments by the visitor centre. She was thankful for her height at times like these. At a distance she tended to appear older than she was, such that no stranger thought to pay this lone youth any mind.

“Heh, no. You won't regret this,” she told herself, forcing a grin. “You *won't*. You show her who's boss, Dari. You're not doing anything wrong.”

Her eyes darted here and there, a little nervily this time. Just to make sure.

Then she ducked under the fence, more clumsily than she'd imagined, and scooped up a couple of small black rocks, which she stashed cheekily in the pocket of her shorts before anyone noticed.



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Unease shadowed Dari that evening. But it shouldn't, she kept telling herself. What was she worried for?

It certainly wasn't guilt, gods forbid. Or Pele forbid, she dared think.

Her giggle came out awkward.

"Heh. It's not *really* such a big deal...is it?"

It wasn't as though the waiter she'd just ordered her food from would call the police if she told him what she'd done. And it wasn't as if her friends, dining and laughing over jokes she didn't understand at the nearby table, would give so much as a toss if she said she had something interesting to show them.

Her hand found the lava chunks in her pocket. She grasped one and fondled it idly, drawing her fingers across its pockmarked surface. It felt satisfying. A trophy. The intrepid Indiana Dari's well-won prize for defying the gods.

Her eyes found the hostel's Pele effigy, leering at her from the corner as she sat there sipping her fruit punch. It was roped together from palm fibres, and had one of those fog-machine things that periodically belched smoke from hidden nozzles, lit orange by a floor-lamp. The effect made her think of a malfunctioning traffic light.

She smiled, despite herself. Without necessarily intending it, she redoubled her caress of the secret treasure in her pocket. Spun it around in her fingertips. Squeezed it in her fist.

"Come on Dari. Stop being silly," she chided herself with a mild grin. "Heh. She's looking at you, see? What if she comes after you?"

This nagging sense that her deed had not gone unnoticed: it was just that tingle which adults trained you to feel after anything at all they considered transgressive.

Like talking to yourself. Or daydreaming.

That had to be it. Yeah. That was all.

Besides, no-one had seen her. She wouldn't get stopped at the airport; they were just rocks, she could have picked them up anywhere. They probably wouldn't even check. Then she'd drop them in a drawer when she got home and have forgotten all about them after a month or two. (And for what it was worth, no mistake, all these predictions did indeed transpire.)

It wasn't as if there'd be actual *consequences*.

Yeah.

As she shuffled through her flight information and tickets for the journey home, a conversation from the neighbouring table reached her ears:

"You see, they talk as if the Curse of Pele is some thousand-year-old tradition. Well that's hogwash. There's no evidence for it. It'll be a recent invention, by rangers or bus drivers or something with the rise of the modern tourism industry.

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You know, to frighten these crowds out of wrecking the environment or tracking volcano dust about their vehicles.”

Dari exhaled, feeling the weight on her shoulders ease.

Still – she couldn’t help but feel a touch disappointed. Put that way, all the mystique went out of it. She’d gone to all that trouble over some meaningless consumer-age fantasy.



Kīlauea Caldera

UNKNOWN

Fifteen days after Dari set forth across the worlds

“MMMMPHHH! Mmmnff, nnfff, *mmn-n-n-n-nnnffff!!*!”

Dari wriggled and squealed, all authority wrung from her mind, as those monstrous, mountain-sized breasts – They were *breasts! How?! –* kneaded her between them like a pebble.

It couldn’t be happening – it was ludicrous! – how could anything alive be this massive? Yet how might she argue with the masses in question when they’d packed her bodily away in their dominating press, enveloped her ten times over, and now proceeded to apply all of said mass, oh yes, she was afforded no doubt, *all of it, to rub and roll and squash and smother her whole?*

“How? How?” – her stranded brain screamed from its confinement; but it was hapless, the rest of Dari just wasn’t hearing. Her ears, her eyes, her nose, her lips, her skin, all of her in fact, right now knew only one thing.

“*Gmmnnnnphhh! Nnnmphh...hnnphh...hnnnnnnnfff...*”

That is to say, two.

“Oh, be still, child,” the flesh-mountains resounded into her, each word a full-body massage in its own right. “What interest had old Madame Pele in telling you what to do? None at all, you little free spirit. It was you who ventured to test her. Behold! As you helped yourself to what sprang from my earthen flesh, it is well that now it helps itself to you.”

“*Mmm-nnnphh! Mmph-mm-nnffhh! Nnnngh, nnnnhh...*”

Heaving and shuddering, lifting and lowering: on and on they worked, having their burly way with this bewildered young woman whose life just a few days earlier, would you believe it, had been an unexceptional one of late-night essays and stacks of textbooks, of primary and secondary sources, classes and

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coursework, training weights and running shoes, Wi-Fi passwords and cereal bars and packets of crisps and mugs of tea, of foldable maps and secret fancies and annoying relatives and classmates asking why she was weird; which knew so little of the pleasures of the flesh beyond fleeting encounters and a reservoir of frustrated, stigmatised daydreams...

But the life of a student, a life among others her size: well, that was the daydream now. Anything separated from you by planetary masses of strapping, flexing, impenetrable hot tissue might as well not exist at all.

How? How could a reality built up over twenty years get yanked away just like that, so suddenly, so inexplicably, receding already to distant imagination, to be replaced by that of a tiny frog wedged between boulders, a pea between pillows, a marble down the gap between cushions, a ball of dough pressed between rollers; *a tiny girl trapped in a volcano goddess's cleavage?*

A *real goddess!* Real flesh, real heat, *real breasts* – no, she couldn't believe it, she couldn't! But how could she not, with it crushing her entire sensory existence? She *had* to believe it, they demanded it, all that she presently knew demanded it; but she couldn't, just couldn't, she would have if she could, yes she would, please believe her, anything to placate these meaty monsters chewing on her body like a stick of mint-flavoured breasting-gum; but *how*, when she simply had no experience or evolutionary equipment to process it for what it was (because who the heck did!?) This – *didn't – happen! This wasn't what breasts were for!* But they are, Dari, they told her every wriggling cell, they are and you'll know it, as they pressed her this way and that way, pressed up, pressed down, pressed her into one then the other – “This can't – be real...*nghaaahh, this can't be real!*” It was a total mental roadblock, she had no way past till an almighty SQUEEZE ought to have flattened it for good; only it didn't, it merely sent her thoughts into a full-blown white-out in this terrifying tempest of stimulation and humiliation, of mind-numbing arousal and soul-cringing awkwardness colliding under high pressure in a pungent crucible of supple, steamrolling flesh...

...after which the pressure eased a little, just enough that a wisp of air brushed her face, and her sweat dripped free, and like those droplets, her thoughts trickled back; only to get no further than “These are breasts...*b-b-breasts...*it can't be real...*it can't be real!...it – MMMNNPHHH!*”

...and so on and on and on.

Wh-What's happened to me? What's happened to my life?! No, no no no no...Who are these women? Why do they – h-how – WHYYYY?!

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Dari could no more escape this consciousness-cyclone than the clasp of this pair of monumental mammaries. She'd been swept round, unceasing, since that fateful day when everything changed; a day which itself thwarted her apprehension, because it was too appalling, too bizarre, too out-of-nowhere: it simply *couldn't be real!*

You couldn't just *shrink people!* Wasn't there some physical law or something against that? The one that made those giant monster movies more funny than frightening? Or, maybe more to the point here, those comics and cartoons about mad scientists with shrink rays she'd so enjoyed as a kid? Sure her imagination went nuts sometimes, but she at least understood that they were called *fairy tales* and *science fiction* for a reason!

And *why her?* Of all people, what could possibly have brought it on harmless, boring, socially awkward Dari, sitting glued to her textbook on the sofa of her student dorm as she and a billion other twenty-year-olds might have been on that night or any other?

Shrunk – chased – picked up – swallowed – stomached; it wasn't just the way it had come totally out of the blue, nor even the primal terror of the experience itself. No, it was simply that no aspect of the event that upended her life translated into her accumulated cognitive frameworks, or even her imaginative ones, flexible as those might be, for things that happened in the real world. These things just didn't happen, *couldn't* happen; her scurrying little brain had never built the neural pathways to entertain them; and she was saying it again and again, yes, she knew it, but how much plainer could she put it?!

And then – oh yes, it hadn't even started – if *that* was too much to press through her innocent forehead, what hope then the part about getting digested – *killed*, for all she knew – then waking up healthy, fit, and utterly bewildered on an unfamiliar riverbed some time later?

Yeah, good luck with it Dari, she could hear the universe quip at her. Five millennia of human science, philosophy and religion can't help you with that one I'm afraid, but I'm sure a clever girl like you will do just fine.

Still not enough? In that case, how about a freaking *tear in the fabric of spacetime?* Which she'd clambered through, because of course she had, because *here* was a life turned upside down and inside out sideways, while *there* was a cosy-looking bedroom, a forest, a mountain, a cave, a ruin, because it was *there*, and *there* was where Dari the Explorer had always gone in times of struggle or strife, *there* was where things made sense...

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...which, if things still *did* make sense, they might have. What could have prepared her for what she found – what found *her* – instead?

“Oh? You’ll make a nice appetiser.”

“You’ll go wonderfully with my tea.”

“Ooooh! I’ve got just the place for you!”

Yeah.

火

The whirlwind divided into two zones, she’d found.

On the more intense side, she’d found herself blown through the fingers and pockets, crotches and cleavages, lips and oesophagi of one outlandish giantess after another. The chase or grab could come at any moment, sending her heart rocketing, her skin sweltering, her shoulders shaking, and her composure parting ways with her for the duration. It was unpreventable, no matter how she might flail, yell or plead, and from beginning to end reduced her to a chaos of squealing, wriggling adrenaline.

The cyclone’s calmer zone, through which she reeled before and after these encounters, was a dazed, disoriented limbo of staggering through a frighteningly magnified universe, scavenging crumbs from plates or water from puddles, huddling under a mushroom or a fallen branch or a pepper pot and trying to talk sense into herself with arms trembling and eyes clenched tight. And if she spotted another crack in space, she’d stumble straight through, as thought determined that each promised a reset, a chink in the delirium, an exit back to the waking world.

But it wasn’t. No matter where she ended up, sooner rather than later, a hand or a tongue would scoop her up and round and round she’d go once more: her body squeezing and churning in a prison of flesh, her nostrils packed with bodily odours, a booming song of female delight filling her ears, the heat, the toss from tissue to tissue, the avalanching sweat and saliva and stomach juices, drenching after drenching in sensations she’d never felt, never known how to feel, simply had no points for comparison, no mental folders for the sorting...

The problem, as far as processing it was concerned, lay in the contrast. Once she made it out of a given body and gained the distance of a spacetime rift or two, the unreal memories slipped right off her back, off the story of Dari as she knew it. *It was all a dream*: that, the cookie-cutter narrative for stuff like this, remained the path of least resistance. It helped that each time she awakened she’d be back

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in her clothes, the very same she'd been studying in that evening: her favourite green tube top, light black vest and athletic skirt, armbands, shoes – Dari liked loosening up with a workout after her study sessions – and of course her trusty anklet. On that evidence they hadn't been digested off her after all.

That made it possible, if not painless, for her to wrestle aside those more surreal delusions. "It's just nightmares," she'd tell herself. "Because of the stress. That's what comes of secretly being so irredeemably horny all your life, isn't it Dari? But, suppose for a moment...suppose you *did* get shrunk. I know, I know, just play with it for now. Maybe if you actually pay attention this time you can find someone who can restore you, or wake you up, or maybe even some community of other tiny people who live in little leaf-houses and ride ants and have an army or whatever, isn't that how it's supposed to go in stories like these? If you just –"

Then would come the snatch and the "mmmphh!" and the world would flip once more: from too nonsensical to be real, to too nerve-firingly *physical* to be anything but.

What hope had anyone, least of all stubborn, straightforward little Dari, of balancing these experiences?

It was impressive, all things said, that she caught onto this problem after only a few circuits.

In theory, that might have set her on a path to resolving it.

In practice, she instead found herself yanked yet another rung up the absurdity ladder in the most mortifying fashion: specifically, by getting fumbled into an anus.

Dari had a thing about women's bums. A *large* thing, which she'd never mentioned because the very lurch of those smooth, curved, robust formations made her tingly in the skin, hot in the cheeks and shy as a tiny little squirrel; sensations which had done little to help her anticipate, still less prepare for, the experience of getting eaten alive by one. Slurped in through its supple, squashing sphincter, face-first, startled and squirming and kicking and twisting and squeaking into her captress's pitch-dark rectum, where to be packed pulpily away for hours on end, doubly immobilised in wet fat and agitation...

A few days later it happened again. And so her sense of the *real* got mashed around anew, because she'd never forget it. Twice was more than enough. Real or not, it'd been squeezed into her face, her chest, her arms, her legs: the cellular memory of how it felt to be wrapped in squamous epithelium and sandwiched in a twin-pack press of gluteal muscle. From now on the appearance of a rump, always a spark of sensual thrill, would simultaneously bring out instincts like those of a mouse staring up the nozzle of a gluttonous, voluptuous vacuum-cleaner.

"Nnngh...it isn't real...this *c-can't* be real...! Wake up, Dari, p-please, please, just wnnp mmmppff..."

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Needless to say, she couldn't even pinch herself when she needed it most.

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At last, after maybe two weeks of this reverie (she guessed), she'd dragged herself into a world, or part of one, thick with alien plant-like growths. They had soft beds of roots like giant green spaghetti, great glossy leaves to shelter her from the rain, and there were these funny furry spherical birds which, aside from hopping up to nudge her for no obvious reason, more or less left her alone.

Still delirious from her latest stomaching, she'd let her instincts carry her: washing off some residual mucus in a trickle of water draining down a plant stalk; stretching, because she'd come out stiff, as one does; then nestling into the roots, where she stared straight ahead and left the storm in her mind to spin out.

The hours had passed. She got up. Stretched some more. Went through her morning exercise routine, by rote. Mooched around gathering a few edible-looking seeds then brought them back to her root-nest to munch on. For what it was worth, they were tasty.

"I'm not a snack," she moped, morosely. "I'm Dari. I have a life. I'm not for eating. This can't be real."

Not for the first time, she wondered if she should cry.

"Bah. What's that about, Dari?" piped up her inner critic. "Where's the sense in getting upset about something that isn't happening?"

So instead she folded her arms and huffed, annoyed at herself and everything in general.

Sat like that awhile, hearing the patter of rain on leaves in the sky.

Dabbed at her cheek with an armband.

Time dragged on. The rain eased. Those silly birds came and went. A chubby millipede nosed past, trundling over her legs as though she weren't there.

It grew dark.

Was this now the longest she'd gone without one of those...encounters?

Giant women. Giant women who eat me or stick me in their...What - the - actual - fuck?

It couldn't be real. It was preposterous. Had someone slipped some psychedelic substance into her tea? Maybe classmates from her university's less salubrious social element, especially those with access to the chemistry labs; might they have spiked her sports drink while she did her squats with her back turned, or sprinkled some dodgy powder over her dinner while she sat daydreaming? Had she

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blundered into a poorly-tested virtual reality experiment, thinking it was a massage chair or something, at just the moment some madcap virus was loosed to run amok in its programming?

Or...

Had she died?

She shuddered.

From a rare sudden illness or suchlike? Perhaps she'd picked something up from a plant sting or insect bite on one of her absent-minded ramblings in tropical countries.

Probably while thinking about bums instead of paying attention.

Yeah. That much she could believe.

She'd seen documentaries about such things. Pathogens or parasites that sit dormant under your skin for years then suddenly take you out without warning.

...

No. This *couldn't* be death. What the heck kind of afterlife was this?

Those gaps between...worlds, or mirages, or softwares, whatever these were – those ways from *here* to *there* – were they the culprits? Had she been mistaken to plunge from one to the next, deeper into the simulation, the rabbit hole, the matrix?

In that case, perhaps it was time to stop.

“Yeah. Good thinking, Dari. If it's a dream, you'll wake up sooner or later, right? Well, this...place feels safe enough. Better keep your head down and wait it out rather than risk another of those...rifts and do yourself more damage, imagining what it's like to get stuck in some...nnggh...someone's...h-hole, again. Yeesh. How could something so weird feel so...*real*?”

Her skin remembered. She felt her cheeks flush furiously. Forced her mind to change tack; reached instead for the only world she'd known till this fortnight. Her parents. Her annoying cousins. Her fellow students, who misplaced her books and didn't know history and didn't wash the dishes properly and set off the smoke alarms at three o'clock in the morning. Her dorm room, the lecture theatre, late evenings in the library hunched over old maps and traveller's tales till they kicked her out at closing time, the local park with those convenient but all-too-often occupied exercise machines, and that fluffy white dog which *always* ran up to lick her when it saw her using them. The woods outside town; squinting through the clouded plane window for her first glimpse of Peru or Baffin Island or the Mekong Delta...

How long had she been gone now? What would they think had happened? Would they be searching for her?

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They could be difficult. Drive her up the wall, even. She couldn't stand stupid conflicts, so they were used to her getting fed up and going off on her own. But after this long, surely they must be getting worried.

"No, they'll be fine, because this, whatever it is, isn't real," she insisted. She'd be waking up on that sofa before she knew it, and would have to rush straight away to finish her essay on the mistreatment of the First Nations during the European colonisation of Canada. Heck, if she was lucky this might be one of those wardrobe things where she'd find no time had passed in the real world at all.

She'd have a row with them about extending the deadline. Again. Wardrobe or no wardrobe, because they just had to be inherently a pain.

She'd never imagined the thought of it as a relief.

Would she even remember this dream?

"I'm sure as hell not mentioning a *word* of this...stuff, to anyone..." she muttered.

And if she did remember, could she ever look at another woman again without imagining...

"Meh, what does that change? You were always too timid to look for more than two seconds anyway, you hopeless thing."

Her eyelids grew heavy. She dozed off, mumbling incoherent.

Mumbled again as she stirred, some time later: "I'm not...food. N-Not...nngh...an appetiser...nnnfff..." A yawn. "G-Giants – *hwaah* – aren't real. They're *not*. No...mmnh...evidence. People don't just – nnnh – s-shrink..."

A twist side to side: shoulders, neck. Eyes wide open. Blink-blink-blink, as though the next one might transport her back to her dorm room.

Nope. Still her shelter of giant roots, leaves and moist-smelling soil. The millipede was munching a fungus nearby.

She groaned. Not out of the woods yet then.

She was wide awake within a minute or two, a benefit of staying fit. That'd be the first thing, then: stretches, morning exercises, a hearty breakfast. Those seeds tasted nourishing enough.

Then she'd decide what to do.

In a little while. Yeah.

Why hurry?

No harm in lying here a little longer and thinking of nothing. It'd be easier on her.

All she could do was wait, after all.

She sat up. Shook her hair loose and ran her hands through it. Then she lay back and folded her arms behind her head.

Smiled weakly, for the first time in days.

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Things always felt better after a good sleep. The brain sorted your thoughts while you slumbered, she'd read somewhere. Sure enough, it seemed to have stashed certain hallucinations as deep in the filing cabinets as they could go. Messy, with corners sticking out, but better than nothing.

"Come on. You'll be okay Dari. You're clueless sometimes and you know it, but you just take care of yourself and keep pushing on through...whatever this is. Soon you'll wake up and it'll all be over."

She chewed her lip.

Scratched an itch on her waist.

Raised a leg and revolved it, watching her anklet spin.

Opened her mouth in surprise, as a fissure between worlds eased into being right there above her.

Stared in puzzlement for a while.

"Huh. That's odd. Are they...supposed to do that?"

She winced. A heavy heat fell from this one. The other side glowed orange-red.

Then it went dark; something moving –

Dari wailed as an enormous brown hand lurched through, gathered her up in pillar-sized fingers and carried her away.



"N-No, no, what just – h-how did...!"

A *reality-bomb*, a change in everything instantly: "Wh-Where the heck am I? What the – *Nnaah! Nnaaaahhhh...!*"

High in the air, fastened in impossible fingertips; a lava lake, a crater filled with bubbling, sputtering red as far as she could see, those gargantuan fingers, that hand – that *arm!* Thick like a ridge, muscled as rock, yellowy-brown as the richest silicate soils; stout, plump, *fat*, the arm not of an athlete or a warrior but a *world-builder*, a brawn that could scoop out oceans, shove continents in place, punch out sea monsters, carry mountains about as if they were shopping bags, and still have strength left to cradle a small moon to sleep in a geothermal embrace...

And it was holding her! This arm's gigantic hand, with its colossal bulk, earthy hue, resolute grasp, was *holding her* like a clay figurine it'd just finished sculpting!

Oh, this was more than she was ready for, she knew it already; but she just *had* to be the clever, too-curious-for-her-own-good little explorer that she was and send her gawping eyes on a voyage of discovery up those alarming biceps, up, up,

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all the way up to a strapping bare shoulder that might have hefted a rucksack of asteroids onto its back – and with it...

“Giant! G-G-Giant! Aaaaaack...!!!”

“That will do child.” The voice boomed the air about her as the fingers fastened her into the giantess’s palm. Sweeping heat, sweet sulphurous scents, sponge-soft skin yet a grip strong as stone; overwhelmed in this manner, and already baking into sweat from the lava below, the wayward wanderer was brought body-to-face with the woman – no, the Woman! – who’d apparently reached across dimensions and picked her up out of nowhere.

“Aahh, aahh, aaahh...”

Too much to take in, too much upon too much – just *too much Woman* for poor little Dari’s eyes! This titan sat submerged to the waist in a lake of roiling magma; a vast, muscular knee protruded like a desert island just waiting to strand our little explorer. Everything above that bombarded her senses as a missile battery might bombard a gerbil: a huge, no-nonsense heavy fabric robe, red as the earth and bound by a workmanlike knot on one shoulder, molten strands dripping off in curtains where it met the viscous soup, while further up, much further up, swelling to emerge portentous from its rim, Dari’s first glimpse of twin formations huge and hefty as lava domes sent her startled eyes fleeing out along that other arm, robust and ample as the first, to where it grasped a skyscraper-length heartwood digging staff, roughly carved and sturdy as a basalt column. The sight of it stirring the lava with what Dari read as impatience flustered her further, and her gaze took flight yet again, scurrying up, up, up those cliffs of surging, heaving matronly physique – only to be caught, this time most petrifyingly of all, by a face that might have been the very countenance of geology-as-Woman. Forehead, nose, lips, cheeks: features ruddy and thickset as though from a diet of the upper mantle’s richest minerals and crystals; a relentless pyroclastic flow of dark hair, thick and wavy, bursting with cinders and glimmering like glass where it caught the lava’s glow; but what finally did it for Dari were the eyes, it was always the eyes, and these were assuredly not the eyes of some hungrily fascinated stranger.

“Did you think to outrun the ground you stood on, little grasshopper?” The Woman’s pronouncement thundered unto the girl in her hand. Her voice seemed to echo from deep, dark caverns far beneath where mortals tread.

This Woman’s eyes – this *goddess’s* eyes, Dari could avoid the notion no more – had already decided. Had known straight away what must be done as though it were a matter of cosmic law. She could see it: the unstoppable blaze of those pupils, roaring with purpose. And whatever they’d decided to do with Dari – something massive, something terrifying, something probably involving fire, she

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just *knew* it – that something was set in stone, carved into the bedrock of fate, as inevitable as the rolling paths of the planets.

“Aaahh-nnah-naahh-naah-nnah-nahh-naah-nnah *whoareyou?!*” she contrived to squeak.

The goddess’s crushing glare seemed to take issue with Dari’s audacity; to compress her deeper into that squashy palm, as though in guilt at forgetting the face of her own mother. Was she supposed to recognise this Woman? Through the heat and smoke stifling her brain, she glimpsed it: the knowledge that yes, if she knew what was good for her she bloody well should...

Then she yelped, for to a grunt of tectonic disapproval, the enormous fingers began to fondle her like some curious marble, dragging their bulky tips across her chest, her legs, her face, making a mess of her hair. The goddess’s expectant frown, all the heavier in the lava’s rising glow, loomed through their gaps as they caressed the agitated Dari like a prized gemstone, rubbed her all over, spun her around in their tips; and then she loosed a scream, for the entire stout hand had closed her up in a fist, whereupon it clasped, gently at first, then tighter, and tighter...

“Nnnnnnnnnfffff!!!!”

She’d remembered. A trickle of memory from the high headwaters of her *real* life, wrenched through the earth to drip upon her muffled tongue:

“Nnnnhh, nnn, nnngh, nnnghh – *Pe-Pe-Pe-le...!*”

The finger-ranges unfurled, revealing a Dari trembling beetroot-red. Those guilty little cheeks must have known, right then, that they faced the dawn of a whole new understanding of *consequences*.

“I have watched you, wilful child,” boomed the one who would administer those consequences. “You know you took what was not yours to take. Now observe! For now you are taken, here to the heart of Pelehonumea’s domain.”

The legends, the stories, the warnings, the *lava chunks that silly little girl plucked from the sacred soil of a huge, angry volcano goddess* – it tormented back too thick, too fast, too many unresolved swamps of red-hot memory to catch and arrange while pinned in these squirm-inducing fingertips...

...which might be why, of all possible responses, instead of those that might have more wisely begun with ‘sorry’, Dari just had to trip on the image of that straw effigy from the hostel and blurt out:

“Bu-Bu-But I thought Pele was...!”

She realised what she’d been about to say. Clamped her mouth shut; cringed...

Thin, the whispering smoke seemed to helpfully finished for her.

The silence that followed – approximately six septillion kilograms of it, to be rigorous – told Dari that this had not necessarily been the reply that best preserved her interests.

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“Eeeeeek! I d-didn’t – I’m sorry! – I meant, no, w-wait!” she stammered, as Madame Pele raised her up to her eyes.

“Did you not wonder, you tiny green grasshopper, why I did not shake the earth beneath your staircase, or topple you from your bicycle, or singe you in your bath, as usually serves to instruct those who take what is mine?”

Flinching and yelping at the lightning across the goddess’s iris-flames, and wincing in the gusts of igneous breath from her great lips, Dari felt for the first time in eight years that she just perhaps ought to have given more thought to this question.

“It is because yours was a different quality of mischief, little wanderer. You sought not to deny my power, nor to challenge it. No: yours was the mischief of a *skittish little lizard who wished to be put in her place*. Too nervy to speak it outright, yet too headstrong, too naughty, not to test Madame Pele’s patience with the silliest provocation you thought you could get away with; and too restless in these tiny legs, too inquisitive in this tiny nose, to not one day slip loose of your buried realm and scamper into the open circles, that she might take you in hand and bring you to task on her seat of fire.”

And intrepid little Dari, feeling tinier than ever in her life, was left with not a flicker of a doubt in her tremulous heart that she was in *deep, deep trouble*.

“And now you have Madame Pele’s attention, as you craved. Well? What have you to say for yourself?”

“...nnnnnnnnhh!!”

Poor Dari! Had any adult in her youth addressed her like this, seeking control for control’s sake, they’d have got it back in both ears with compound interest. But it was a quite different phenomenon, to be sure, when it came steaming into her pill-sized self through the cavernous lips of a *goddess of fire and volcanoes*, before those nerve-detonating flesh-cliffs, those rumbling formations of mind-packing muscle and skin, this mountain-raising manifestation of the motherly might of the righteous earth itself.

What about history? – she scrambled to ask her brain, feebly, a desperate last gasp. *Is this where it finally saves me? Surely there’s something, anything in what I’ve studied that’ll give me a way out of here!*

But even she, wanderer off the beaten curriculum that she was, knew no record of anyone who’d won an argument with a volcano.

Sure, she could almost hear her own reply, it was too much for Pliny the Elder, but gallant little Dari the Explorer with her pocket flashlight and tourist visa and cute little abs wants a go? Well good luck with it.

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No wonder, then, that when it came to it, all she had left was: “N-No – w-wait – please! I d-didn’t know – didn’t mean t-to – I thought it w-was just rocks – aaaaaaack...!”

“You knew.” The divine countenance cut her off, as the fingertips of judgement firmed up around her. “You knew. And be you but a tiny green ball of mischief in my hand, you are formed of my minerals, born of my flesh, which makes you my child and I the one who must chasten you.”

Dari whimpered – “Oh no, oh no, oh no...!” For what could she do when it was no longer partial humans that would instruct her, but the crust, the continents, the mantle and magma, the obsidian glass and the alkali basalt, the carbon, the silicon, the sulphur, the phosphorus – the planet Herself?

And the goddess Pele, who in good maternal form found it natural to explain exactly what Dari had done wrong, pronounced her sentence:

“The rocks, little girl, are my children, drawn forth by these arms of mine from the churning earth. And when Madame Pele places a rock somewhere, she places it there for a reason. Be it to enrich the soil for your crops, or hold up your homes, or raise your fires, or draw the fish to your poles; from the mightiest boulders to the gentlest gravels and sands, each has power when put in its righteous place. So it shall be with you.”

Dari racked her frantic brains, trying to work out what that meant.

Jerked in the goddess’s fingers as a molten surge distracted her. Glanced down and saw it was the lava, churning round the base of the staff as it was laid against the crater’s rim.

Followed the arm that released it, as it bent in towards the goddess’s chest...

...then cried out in horror as a single finger hooked the diagonal border of that great robe and pulled it down: just a tug, but enough to bring the huge, firm heft of that seismic bosom into the lava’s glow, a startling spectacle, even with only the uppermost curves revealed; and which swelled, rapidly overtaking Dari’s field of view, as the other hand carried her to the funnelling crevice...

The last of Dari’s self-control deserted her, she yelped and writhed and threw out her hands as her world filled with the curl of fingers, the gleam of rich flesh, the overpowering heat of thundering, hungering shadows...

“Wait! W-Wait! Please! No, no, it can’t be real, this can’t be – oh m-my g-god – ahh! Aaaaahhhh – nnmghp!”

A rush of air, a jolting impact; then the light returned as the hand rose away, and Dari loosed a wail as she realised she’d been tucked between those massifs, immobilised up to her own bust (which, it might be said, was struggling with oppressive feelings quite its own right now) with only her flustered little head and arms protruding.

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Lifted and lowered on the goddess's breaths, her fast-flourishing prey-mind and sexual timidity both detonated at once. Her exclamations were wordless now, it was every nerve for itself, and she plunged her hands down, fingers spread, to press herself from the meaty monsters engulfing her, only for her palms to recoil straight off those trembling surfaces – *they were Breasts!* – bigger than her – she was too shy, they made her feel so *tiny!* – no, she *had* to touch them, had to prise herself from their grasp before they consumed her! The mere thought set her yelping like a puppy, but she dragged up the courage from goodness knows where and went for it again, clenching her muscles then plunging her arms into that soft, supple tissue, only to squeal in dismay as they sank into its yielding surface, warming up as it rose to surround them, because she was too tiny, her fit little body no match for these mighty glands, with their flesh thick as earth and their veins full of fire, their millions of years of fat-strata closing up on her, dragging her in, folding the sky away...

Her adrenaline wave receded; her awareness resurfaced; and realising once again where she was, she let out one final scream – which broke off as a huge thumb pressed in on her face and chest and, with a single twist, squashed her all the way in.



Round and round, round and round, on and on and on...

“Mmph...mmph...mmph...mmph...mmph...mmph...”

Stretched to the scales of geological time, seconds and minutes lose meaning; drawn out to continental distances, the yards and metres fall aside. So it went for Dari's thoughts, her feelings, even her instincts, as the Earth-Shaper's chest buried her in the weight of millennia.

What measure a hapless squirm, a muffled moan, to tectonic spheres which just – never – stopped? Moving on orders of magnitude far beyond the reach of her minuscule struggles (though perhaps, for such deific formations were allowed their secrets, reacting at times just to impress the point), they converged and receded, slipped over and under, shifted side to side; and even when apparently relaxed – that is, when the mover of mountains took breaks from applying them to impart Dari's most rigorous lessons – they drifted on subterranean breath, rippled to the currents of deep tissues and fluids, and pounded, quake after quake, to the rhythms of the volcano goddess's magma-pumping heart.

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Holy or worldly, physical or spiritual: to Dari the difference had gone up in smoke. The shake of a woman's chest, with all the erogenous sparks it set off to intimidate a girl starting to realise she was now portable to most of them, would henceforth also register in her mind as a cosmological phenomenon. And though she didn't know it yet – right now she knew only breast – an upbringing's worth of storybooks, movies and internet memes would be little help with that either.

“Mmnff...mmmmmmfffh...nnnn, nnnn, nnggh...!”

Is it not strange, in circumstances like these, that sometimes the tiniest, most trivial things make all the difference?

In Dari's case, it was the sense of a cool, hard line on her ankle: pressed sometimes on this side, sometimes that. Though the perpetual massage had long since twisted her shoes off, the feeling had yet to fade. Rather, it grew stronger for being her sole sensory anomaly in an otherwise hot, soft world of absolute breast.

It helped that she knew it so well.

“M-My...anklet...nnngpffh...”

There in her mind it was too now, a little hoop of gold-painted metal jammed between a door and its frame, a hammer and its anvil, a mountain of boob-flesh and her last little window of conscious thought...

Perhaps she knew it too well. A silly little souvenir from her travels to which she'd taken a fondness and now wore wherever she went. It just felt right to her.

Felt Dari.

Felt *real*.

And if it *was* real, that meant...

“Nnnnhhh...! Th-This is...nnnghhh...it's n-not...a dream...”

Rumble, rumble, rumble...

“Nnnn, n-no, no! – MMMPPFFHHH...!!!”

Richter 9, a seismograph read somewhere.

“Haahh...haaahhh...whyyy...”

When next her remedial pulverisation eased up, she latched on to that familiar strip with all her mental teeth.

Her thought-zone widened, if only a fraction. Could she make progress, while she had it?

“Boobs...they're *b-boobs*...I'm getting m-mashed...in the *b-boobs of a volcano goddess*...*b-but*, I can't be...this can't be real, it's all *j-just a gllnnnpff!*”

One moment compelling, the next compellingly ridiculous; alas, even here, even now, the ghostly anchors of *real life* remained too weighty to raise!

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“N-No...I’m...g-going to wake up at any moment, b-back on the couch, with that book on my waist, and, s-snacks to nn-mn-mnnnpffhh! Hahh, haahh...my...p-planner...fees...d-due...next week...b-books...to return...librarnnngghh...!”

Somehow, if goddesses’ busts were to become a regular feature in her life, it seemed unlikely that they would take much account of her planner in scheduling their engagements with her.

“Have you learnt your lesson, my little green gemstone?” Her whole world addressed her, working her like dough with the very asking.

“Nnnnn...!!”

A reflexive burst of squirms, because her analytical little historian’s brain, which could be surprisingly sharp when it needed to be, parsed in those words the implication of a way out.

Apparently it was the wrong answer.

“Hmph. You have not. You resist and resist. I have put you in your place for a reason, my tiny emerald beetle. A stubborn beetle, a naïve little beetle, but still *my* beetle, and by earth and fire, a beetle who shall *learn* that her Great-Mother Pele would raise the ground and bring down the sky if that is what it takes to bring her to understanding. Until then, you shall stay where you belong.”

A cry of alarm from Dari, or at least an attempt at one – “Glmmpphhhh!!!” – dwindling to a defeated whine – “Mmnbbll...” – as a pectoral flex wrenched her in deep for some renewed tectonic upheaval.

“Mmph...mmph...mmph...mmnph...”

She was tiring now. She could barely feel her own squirms. Her limbs were stiff from their ironing, she was slipping about on the slick of her own sweat, and the sandy, steamy scent of her bountiful pair of hosts had subdued her through the mouth and nostrils. Her body couldn’t admit it, it would twitch on, such was her nature; but after such long and onerous embedding, her bosomed-out brain, at least, could only accede to their conquest.

Put in your place, it echoed back at her. *In your place. Where you belong.*

“N-No...I d-don’t...”

As you helped yourself to what sprang from my earthen flesh, so it is well that now it helps itself to you.

She cringed so hard, not helped at all by the flesh in question steamrolling her face.

“This is n-not...I w-won’t...nngghh! It’s *humiliating*...!”

She was losing. Even her evidence-based history-brain was telling her: come on Dari. You know you’re not getting out of here on your own. Till they let you go – *if* they let you go – mightn’t it be sensible to see if there are less nerve-racking ways to think about them?

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She grimaced. Other ways? *What, like those stupid textbook pictures from high school? Convergent boundaries? Divergent boundaries? Subduction zones?*

Up and down, up and down, wobbled, pressed, bounced, pressed...

Abduction zones?

“R-Really, Dari...f-fine time to be a s-smart-ass...”

Well it was true, she reflected. She *had* got picked up and stuffed in here out of nowhere.

“Nnnnnnghhh...! J-Just...*why...h-how...?*”

She pressed her lips sideways; tried to sigh. The rubbing had spread her arms and legs out now. Jammed her spread-eagled in the fissure. They were flexing her. Stretch, stretch: like she did to relax after her morning exercises.

Well, not so like it, strictly. But it was something. Something loosely familiar.

There really wasn't much else.

Relax, Dari, she told herself. Just try. No – try.

“B-But I'm in...g-giant b-boobs...”

You deserve it. Isn't that what she's trying to teach you?

The last train of thought left in the station. Might as well see if they'd let her on.

“I'll never – nnnghh...t-take a g-goddess's...rocks...again. W-Will always...ask first...”

Wasn't it fair enough? Since she'd pocketed Madame Pele's lava, why shouldn't Madame Pele “pocket” Dari in turn?

“Urghh...m-maybe you really – did ask for this, D-Dari. Nnnghh, you silly, s-silly girl...”

She resigned. Released her muscles; allowed her body to sink as it would in the clasping globes.

After all...

Come on Dari, admit it, she argued with herself.

“Wha – n-no, that's too – nnnfff...”

Another massive crush; but she'd let go, had no struggle left, so she shut her eyes and just...*experienced* it, groaningly, as they fastened her into each other and shifted slow, deliberate, in opposite directions: left and right, left and right...

You know you like it.

The tiniest, pluckiest neuron in her brain – and then it immediately dumped its voltage so the others couldn't find it.

“Nnnnnnnnn...!”

She couldn't bring herself to think it. No, not even to herself. What the heck did she think she was?

She'd calmed, though; and in this state, felt the vibrations of a caramelly churn from deep beneath. Like a subcutaneous lake of melting crystals, releasing heat

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which, spreading gently through the layers of fat, reached the surface after millions of years to enfold their trapped little mortal in olivine warmth.

“W-Well...maybe it’s not – nnggh – *un-comfortable*, I g-guess...?”

And she did have to admit: there was no acidic sizzle on the skin, no gasping through gastric fumes, those heralds of fading consciousness that made for the most starkly unpleasant parts of her shrunken ordeal so far. She was too packed away to see it, but guessed the goddess must have been regularly prying open the vent, as it were, allowing the pungent skin-steam to escape and supplying her cleavage captive with such air as kept her alive and squirming.

Yeah. She was safe here. Why had she taken this long to realise? They were heavy – so *unspeakably heavy* – yet pliant enough in their surface layers to cushion her through even the most awesome crushes and collisions.

It occurred to her that this might be the most secure position she’d found herself in since her world was upturned. Not only weren’t these mountains hurting her, she couldn’t imagine anything that might get *through* them to hurt her.

Meteors, for instance, would probably bounce right off.

She didn’t even have to do anything.

Indeed, she couldn’t. Hers was to stay secured in their sturdy, protective embrace; to stew in her own timidity as *gigantic volcano-goddess breasts* smothered her like a sacrifice straight off the altar, clasped her like a doll they’d whisked from its bed, concealed her from the world like an idol they’d snatched from its temple, savoured her like a delicious suck-sweet that never lost its flavour, dominated her utterly like the bashful, clueless, woman-shy little Dari-toy she’d become...

...

It was so embarrassing!!

Before she knew it she was squealing all over again, her twists and turns only amplifying the effective breast-to-Dari rub rate as she spiralled up a staircase of sheepish agitation, squirming, squirming; still squirming as the pressure eased up, and gargantuan fingers, last met so long ago that their Dari-intimidation potential was reset to its peak, dug her from the chasm, ferried her flailing and wailing through the air, lower, lower, lower –

A massive splash and a hiss of billowing steam.

火

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...Water?

Water! This Dari knew, this everybody knew: water, *real* water, washing her back into a channel of the life she knew.

Dari's every cell, hair and nail cried freedom. The heat, sweat and indignity were rinsed from her skin, her clothes sang with relief as they relinquished their ashen burdens, and her limbs rejoiced as, liberated at last, they shook out the stress of captivity and whirled and kicked for the surface.

"-haa! Haah, haah...huuuuuu...!"

Her chest heaved – her own this time, thank goodness; she gulped down mouthful after mouthful of crisp mountain air, plunged her head back in, drank her fill of this blessed spring water, then burst through the surface again and shook out her hair, spraying droplets everywhere.

This, now, felt real enough.

"Urrrrrrghh! Where – h-how...?"

An orange-red sky, just as before. But: huge tropical trees, a chilly breeze, snow on rocks in the distance.

She was shivering, she realised. And not because of the water, nor the wind.

It would take more than those to bring sense to what she'd been through.

"N-n-nnnh...!"

Too soon! Imprinted too deep, not ready, nowhere near ready to think through it. Too numbed by it to think of anything else.

You wanted to stay there, Dari. That same rascal of a brain cell again?

"N-No I didn't!"

Giant breasts.

"Nnnngn...!"

You liked it. You asked for it, after all.

"S-Stop...!"

And isn't she sort of your type? Or she would be if she wasn't, you know, far too big for you, and a primal deity of lava and destruction and maybe a prehistoric mass extinction or two and –

This time it went too far. With an infuriated growl, Dari wrestled her damnable cognitive back-seat driver into a sack and slammed the boot on it, hard.

She breathed out, long and slow.

Then she floated there grumbling about how it always knew exactly where to jiggle the needle.

"Sort of my...type? Seriously? Ugh. Let's just leave it."

She felt her nerves settle. This place: still so huge, but at least it bore a passing resemblance to the sorts of environments she was used to exploring.

Beneath the water, she felt the anklet dance against her shin.

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“Don’t kid yourself Dari. You’re not back to reality yet. I don’t know what the heck all that was, but it’s pretty safe to say this is more than some dream. That means you’ve got a lot of thinking to do, and things to find out, and decisions to make, so you’d better find a way out of here before...she...”

A shadow had fallen.

Somehow Dari knew, without looking up, that it wasn’t a cloud.

She looked up.

Wailed at ascending pitch as the thumb and fingers fumbled for her and plucked her from the spring.

火

“Please, n-no more! I’ve learned! I’ve learned!”

“I will decide if you learned.”

“Eek!”

The hand round Dari formed a bowl, bringing her directly beneath the volcanic countenance. The great robe had been drawn back across the site of her reprimand, but her view of those leviathans listing beneath its rim, to say nothing of the bare slope still projecting on one side, did nothing to slow her return to overwhelmed squirrelism.

“Well then, little greenstone? What have you to say to old Madame Pele? Was it worth troubling her to teach you your place within her generous abundance?”

“Nnn, nnn...nnah, n-not again, pleasepleaseplease don’t put me in there again!!”

An eruptive surge: “Put you in there again?! Speak clearly child!”

“Y-Yes, I – *gyaaah*, n-n-no!! No, no, please, I’ve learned! I’ve learned! I understand! I – I – I...”

“You understand *what*, child?” The square-shouldered Woman-massif loomed in, her cindery breath gusting Dari onto her backside.

“Eeeep! *I’m sorry!* I, I – *I’m really, really sorry* I took your rocks, ah, ah, *Mamaaack* – M-Madame Pele! P-Please, please forgive me, I promise I’ll never ever do it again!”

The goddess’s eyes narrowed.

“What use have I for apologies? I am the matriarch who flashes in the heavens, who raises the earth from the waves. Will your sorries stir the magma into islands? Will your promises shield the cliffs from the bite of the sea?”

Dari whimpered. With an admonishment like that, who needed shrink rays?

She backed up; hit the base of Pele’s fingers; hunched into a shuddering ball of bewilderment. What else could she do? Before the last few days she’d never

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witnessed anyone diviner than bearded old monks in mountain temples; never met anyone with both the strength to lift her and the bravery to try; never had more than a certain proportion of her surface area in contact with another person's at once, and even that only in exceptional circumstances (indeed, those of her birth had resumed a startling relevance). There comes a point when smashing too many records too hard, too fast risks smashing the database along with them.

Not that this registered with a conversation partner who measured her own records on logarithmic scales.

"I am not convinced. See how you shake, little greenstone. Your base is not steady. I sense you are a long way still from learning your righteous alignment in the bosom of the world."

"Nnnah! N-No, no, I learned it, I learned it! Ohh, I w-won't ever touch a goddess's stuff again, I won't, I won't..."

"Today you will not. But tomorrow you will, and the day after that. I can tell already, my roving beetle, that you shall persist in getting underfoot, scurrying where you should not, making a meal of yourself, and biting off more than you can chew. Again and again you shall irk the hard-working matrons of all the circles and spaces, who will have to put down their tools to re-impress you into your place. Though your voice pleads otherwise, remember that your minerals, your organics, your solids, your liquids, and yes, your gases too, are all Madame Pele's and chatter to her still. I know your nature better than you think."

"Nnn, nnn, nnnnnn...!"

"Hmph. Well, you may go."

"Nnn, nnn...*wha-?!*"

Taken by surprise, Dari fell flat in the goddess's palm. The bounce returned her to her senses; she landed, then struggled to push herself up on the squashy surface.

"Y-You...you're letting me go?"

"You have rolled your way loose from the buried realm, little human, to tumble about on the open world-beds. You are like the grain of sand that pops through the surface of a rain puddle and beholds for the first time the vastness of the lava field. You are not ready. Nor however will it do to keep you sealed in my chest. For now I am satisfied to let you learn as you go."

Still a bundle of nerves and confusion, still flinching in the heat and pressure of the volcano goddess's overwhelming presence, Dari nonetheless felt a weight lifting. She'd made it through another spin of the cyclone! Soon she'd be back in the calm zone. Have her feet on the ground, as people generally do.

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“But I shall watch you. Remember it was you who naughtied for Madame Pele’s attention. It remains my place to take you in hand when I deem necessary.”

Dari yelped, tripping again as though shoved by the reminder. And she mumbled before she could stop herself: “W-Well...with things as they are, m-maybe that isn’t so bad...”

“What was that, little beetle? Have you an issue?”

“Eek!” she floundered. “Nothing, i-it was nothing! No issue, no issue at all!”

“Good. You may return my rocks.”

Dari stopped floundering.

“...huh?”

“The rocks you took from their place in my caldera. You may set them beside you in my palm. I shall restore them to their righteous place.”

She stared blankly.

Then the weight she’d felt lift: its wings disintegrated in midair and down it fell, larger and larger over her head...

In a flash of panic she burst out: “B-But, it’s not like I have them here! I must have lost them years ago, in a drawer, or the basement or something, I...!”

Her awareness caught up. In that instant, suspended though she was above this thousand-degree cauldron of cauldrons, Dari felt as though she’d turned to ice.

The next thing she heard was the echo of her words, rattling off the inside of her skull. Interestingly enough, they came back different. Something like: “You stupid, stupid, *stupid*...”

“Lost them, you say,” pronounced the volcano goddess.

It’s funny how the unique lighting effect of lava, that volatile glow from beneath, casting shadows upwards, not only dramatically brings out any features lit up in its gleam but imparts them with this sense of scorching mystique. That might include, just for example, eyes of blistering unamusement, or broad, flaring nostrils, or pouting lips large enough to bulldoze buildings...

“Lost them in the basement, you say.”

For all Dari’s high-pitched emissions, the echo rolled on: “...stupid, stupid, *stupid*! Ohh, you have *done it* this time Dari. This one is *aaaaaall* on you. Well enjoy.”

The lava-matron’s eyes were flashing. Yellow lightning tore through her irises, striking so close that Dari could smell the sparks.

“Would you care to tell me,” the volcano-woman rumbled, the tremors before the rupture, “what good for the cycles of the earth you expect my rocks to do from your *basement*?”

“Ahh, ahh, aaahh...!”

Madame Pele’s voice was deepening, her body seething and venting steam, her fingers toppling like falling columns on Dari’s guilty figure...

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“You, you wayward green grasshopper: you would tell me that you not only moved what was mine from its righteous place, but proceeded, as though it had no place at all, to lose it in your basement?”

Dari screamed, for real this time, as you generally do when you realise a deific embodiment of millions of cubic kilometres of roiling, crust-shattering, village-obliterating magma is cross with you.

“How would you have me remedy your mischief?” the goddess roared, her voice-blasts showering Dari with cinders. “Shall I stick my hand in your house and take them back myself?!”

“Eeeeeeeeee – no no no, please don’t, please don’t!” Granted her family could do her head in, but she didn’t resent them *that* much, she was sure! “I’m really, really sorry, I didn’t mean, I’ll – oh no, oh no...”

The thoughts raced through her head: *You’ve pissed off a goddess. You’ve pissed off a goddess and you’re in MASSIVE trouble. You’ve seen what she can do to you! What do you do to show her you’re sorry? Wait, she doesn’t want sorry, does she? What does she want? What do you do? Help, help, help...*

She could never say, in hindsight, where it came from. Maybe it was one of those old movies she’d seen, at five years old or thereabouts, with tribespeople of questionable (that is, likely colonial) depiction making sacrifices to volcano gods. More likely it was simply her upbringing in a culture where, when it came to gods and their relationships with mortals, the latter’s prescribed modes of interaction were really quite limited. It might have helped if she’d thought of the alternatives she’d found on her travels. She didn’t. Right when it counted, the whirling lights and screaming sirens of her memory just had to toss out their worst possible recommendation.

Dari scrambled to her knees. Jerked her arms back and forth, unsure whether to raise them high or bring her palms together. Eventually opting for the latter, she stammered in a worshipful tone: “Oh great Madame Pele, please hear my –”

That was all it took.

The explosive seethe of Pele’s snort hurled Dari sidelong into those fingers – and they were darkening, roughening, the skin of the goddess’s hand transforming into a field of clumpy black rock, which, crumbling beneath Dari’s palms and knees, exposed fierce red cores which scorched her, causing her to yelp, and twist, and jump on all fours with shouts of “Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!”; and at the same time the great face and shoulders blackened, and hardened, and swelled, and cracked with fissures through which lashes of crimson-gold magma, raw and pure, fountained into the air, all of which only magnified the rage in those features and with it Dari’s mushrooming dismay; and then she shrieked, for the lava-fingers had clamped

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around her, pinning her arms and wrapping her up to her shoulders, as the goddess bellowed:

“You *dare* address me in the manner of the *man-worshippers*? Those who disrespect my land, abuse those who care for it, disgrace the very earth and fire from which they spawned?!”

And then she did the most terrifying thing of all; a thing whose significance Dari had played enough video games, or at any rate watched enough of them on YouTube, to grasp at once.

She stood up.

With an enormous creaking and cracking of the lithosphere, the volcano goddess hauled herself to her feet in the roiling crater, sending shockwaves through all the worlds to which her lair connected, as well as piling a wave of displaced lava over the rim to cause billions of dollars worth of damage. And as everyone knows, when a boss-level character in the lava stands up, well, that is how you know you are deep in the serious stuff.

And she thundered in Dari’s face, causing her mousey hair to fan out behind her: “You reckless child, falling in with the wrong crowds, soaking in their unfitting influence like a naughty pumice rolling in carbon oil! Have you forgotten what I am? Have you forgotten the nature of Madame Pele’s power?”

Needless to say, our poor shrunken twenty-year-old history undergrad was having trouble making further contributions to so advanced an exchange. The same could not be said for her more practiced counterpart, whose chant crashed forth, ringing as though from all the crags and caverns in the world:

“*She is Pelehonuaamea, Shaper of the Sacred Land, the Earth-Eating Woman, She who Flashes in the Heavens!*

She is the restless earth,

She is the cresting flame,

She is the deafening roar,

She is the sea that bursts,

She is the crack that splits the land,

She is the pack of molten hounds,

She is the night of burning rain,

She is the fire that rings the sea,

She is the year with no summer, the sky with no sun,

She is the thunder crackling at the light of dawn,

She is steam blast and pyroclast, silica and scoria,

She is rhyolite and andesite, acid rain and lahar,

She is breaker of towers, sinker of fleets,

She is Great-Mother, Ever-Sister, Lover on whose skin you sleep,

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*She knows the secrets of the unhewn stone,
She sets the beat of era and eon,
She is the flesh in whom all belong,
She answers only to moon and sun:
PELE! PELE! From the crater She comes!"*

To which Dari, who it should be remembered bore a keen and diligent passion for information of this nature, was alas not having the best of days where her flair for critical reaction was concerned.

"Nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn...!"

The Woman, at any rate, blasted home her point:

"She protects you, carries you, shelters you, nourishes you. But do not mistake what she is. You do not make performances out of your devotion to her, nor recite hollow adorations, nor beseech her for favours or curses – as though her power may be *negotiated* with, or *chooses* some children over others, or *rewards*, or *punishes*, or touts *jealousy* (she spat the word like foulest tephra) for you to compete for; as though she asks, or expects, a thing from you in return!"

"B-Butyourepunishingme!!!" Dari squeaked at peak pitch.

The smouldering glower this gained her gave her to feel it might just be a good idea, when the lava's literally spurting out through the cracks, to stop digging.

"She does not punish," the breath-storm sulphurously corrected her. "She does as she does, and you, child: you *learn*."

"Nnnnn...! Nnnnn...!"

Likely the wise Woman of earth and fire knew there was little more Dari *could* learn through this approach; because after a fraught few moments, the eruptions from the goddess's hide began to ease. Her fissures dimmed, dried, sealed; and her basalt surface – face, arms, shoulders, chest – softened and smoothed, back to the rich fields of yellow-brown tissue that did such discomfiture to Dari's cheeks. The lava-bed of her fist likewise firmed back into thick, toasty flesh, as the goddess's expression, still ominous in displeasure, nonetheless regained its matronly composure.

A composure which, as Dari found herself dangled before it between thumb and forefinger, well communicated just how many kilobars of trouble she was in this time.

"There are stones," the goddess set out for her, "which roll from my arms sure of shape, solid and steady for their journeys. Others are headstrong, or shaky, or know not their seams, and these must be trained, worked, improved before they are ready. And then, little beetle, there are those with no clue at all. Those who without the most arduous guidance would crumble to dust as they are *swept upon raging rapids, corroded by rains, trampled by merciless glaciers...*"

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...at which point, the corner of Dari's eye glimpsed the goddess take hold of her robe at waist level, and draw it behind her...

"...and these I must *mould*, and *bake*, and *roll*, and *press*, and *polish* and *polish* and *polish* some more till they reach a shape fit to conduct the potential within them."

What is she doing? What is she doing?! Dari's inner voice rose in a fluster, as her eyes boggled at the stupendous slab that was the goddess's thigh.

"I see now, clear as clearest crystal, that you are one of these most difficult cases. A rash little granule, too long immersed in the rigid faults of her buried land. But now you have tumbled into the open circles, and are shocked to find that the ground you thought was solid is in fact an ocean of liquid rock, shifting and sliding to your every step. If I release you as you are, you will struggle. You will splinter and sink without ever having the chance to pursue your righteousness. Yes, that is you, little greenstone..."

...and here, the great hand enclosed Dari up to her shoulders as it set off on a long conveyance: downwards, past the goddess's neck; past her still-alarming central formations; past even her soaring red-curtained abdominal cliffs; all the way down, in fact, to where that curtain drew back on some truly alarming formations, to which Dari, too abruptly introduced, cried out:

"W-Wait - stop! What are you - wh-where are you taking - Eeeeeek! N-No! Too big! Too big!"

"...yes, that is you, the most naïve of my children, the one who craves *longest*, *firmer*, most *dedicated* rectification. So tell me, again: is your *basement* the righteous place for Madame Pele's treasured progeny? How about you, little emerald-girl? Did you fail to think of it because maybe you are not *lost*, when put into storage in a Woman's basement?"

"Too big! Too big! It can't be real!" was all Dari could squeal, as those impossible hemispheres, gleaming resplendent orange-gold from their prolonged immersion in the lava, worked her senses in ways for which nothing, that is, absolutely nothing could have prepared her...

And of course - no shadow to make it easier on her. Only the full empyreal radiance of the lava lake from which all lava flows.

Unfortunate, that.

And some people worry about lava.

"No, no, no - don't sit on me! She's going to sit on me!"

Dari would never admit - and still won't tell if you ask - whether this was her genuine belief, or merely some last-ditch attempt to reverse-psychologise the universe out of what was actually coming.

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Which became apparent, as the volcano goddess's free hand came down, and, interposing its digits to heave apart the upside-down mountains...

Ohh, now *that* was a fumarole.

“...nnnnnnnnnnnnnaaaaahh!!!”

Hot, deep, rumbling, gurgling, that hydrothermal clamour, that subterranean churn; and it had this corpulent toroid structure around its rim, no really, this astonishing ring-shaped formation of thick organic material packed in to extraordinary densities, with these folded creases all the way round, stretching taut with each pulse and no doubt rich with the most luxuriant deposits of halides, oxides and sulphates – really it was incredible the way it swelled and throbbed, you had to see it; a dramatic demonstration, all in all, of the marvels of the living earth, of nature unsurpassed in the grandness of her arts and manufactures.

Even Dari the Explorer, face to face with this magnificence, could not help but take leave of her faculties.

“Oh my god no, n-no, she's not – *aaaahh, she is! Eeee, eeee* – n-no, not that! No, no, please! Not that! Anything but...!!!”

But the only godly voice of current pertinence rang down:

“Now must *you* be the little souvenir: the unsuspecting little emerald, plucked casually from her bed to be buried away, incubated at length, out of reach as the continents shift around her...”

“*Aaaahh it's not real! It's not real! Ohhh, it can't be real, it can't, it can't...*”

“...and she too shall know, what it is to be left sequestered as her collector goes about her labours, because ohh yes, you wriggling beetle, the Earth-Shaper's tasks do not cease for the benefit of your tutelage. Have you understood yet, emerald-child? It is in Madame Pele's primal purpose to shape you, to forge you, to set you in your place, and if she must teach you while she works, if she must bring the entirety of her mass to bear upon your stubborn little frame, she will, because by the Earth-Mother, Sky-Father and her own mortal bones, she shall do whatever it takes to bring you to righteousness!”

“Nnn-ahh! Nnn-ahh! *Itsnotright! Itsnotreal! Itsnot* – MMNNNPPFFFF!!!”

And Dari's legs kicked in the air, kick-kick-kick – then all she knew was a hot, dense crush of tubular tissue, stifling her squirms and her cries as it muscled her up, up and away into the magma-baked mother of all pelvic vises...

...as the glowering Madame Pele, with an irritated grunt, smoothed her robe back in place, took up her staff and strode from the crater.



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Pele worked.

The Shaper of the Sacred Land strolled the great lava fields: left, right, left, right...

(“Mmmphh! Mmmnn-nnnhh-mmmnffff!”)

...stopping at each molten pool, assessing its needs with an accomplished gaze. Occasionally she would dip her staff in the viscous magma and stir it loose, round and round, leaning in to apply her shoulder to those motions...

(“M-n-n-n-n-n-nphh...m-n-n-n-n-n-nphh...”)

...till after perhaps a hundred such rounds, she'd walked out to where worn-out rocks gasped for renewal.

Here she carefully selected her spot. Then: she raised the staff high in both hands; and with muscles firmed, drove it down hard into the earth. She raised it once more, flipped it now to hold it from beneath, like a shovel – then dug, knees bent, thrusting her waist to pile her full awesome power into stroke after stroke...

(“Nnnnnnnnnnffff! Nnnnnn...nnnnnnnnnnffff!” Nnnnnn...nnnnnnnnnnffff!)

...till a jet of fresh lava burst from the crack, slaking the land in its spray of mineral nourishment.

The goddess stood back, pleased, catching her breath as she waited. Then the flow eased, and she dabbed its globs off her arms with her robe and went back to digging, gentler this time, tapping and loosening the earth round the fissure till it was just wide enough...

(“Nnhh.....nnhh, nnhh.....”)

...to lower the staff almost all the way in, then draw it out, coated in the mantle's liquid riches.

And now the volcano-matron breathed deep. She focused her will, feeling it resonate through the planetary matter of all the circles and spaces to which it extended. And then! With an explosive roar she swung the staff high, level in both hands, and commenced, not the famed Pele *Hula* of her children, but the Supreme Pele *Hula*: that dance of creation and destruction she'd arranged herself, could only carry out herself, for its muscular conflagration of sweat and sinew, its cataracts of bursting flame, its shattering stomps and blasting swings, its chants, ionising the air, that cried not so much victory as the sheer conceptual impossibility of making war on such power as to which all other power is as a flake off her skin...

(“Mmmmmmmmmnh, mmmmmmmn, mmmmmnnhh, mmmmmnnffff!!! Mmmn-nnhh-MNNNNNNNGHH!!! Mnhh ny gnndd...”)

...were too overpowering to behold, let alone imitate, for anyone short of the primal rippling strength of land-as-Woman.

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As the paste-drenched staff whirled and struck to her moves, it hurled its magma in rains that laid waste to armies, torrents that cleared out spoiled or cluttered land or spread it aggressively against her bitter rival the sea, and in meteors that hammered the waves in calamities of hissing steam, which, as they thinned, drew back their veil on new islands and landmasses: fertile, fresh from the baking depths, ready to nurture new lives, cultures and stories.

The work was arduous, but fulfilling. Still, even the volcano goddess needed rest when it was done. So she lay herself on the land, facing the sky, her arms draped over mountains: relaxed at first, but naturally tightening into protective embraces...

(“Mnnghh.....”)

...but not for long, she had too much to do, ever the Shaper’s responsibilities crowded in on her. Already she’d spotted a tectonic plate slipping out of its proper place; so with an exasperated grumble she climbed to her feet, marched to its edge, and there, placing both hands upon it, *heaved* the weighty troublemaker as though it were an oversized crate of ore: walking it forth, back slanting, shoulders tight, growling, straining...

(“Nnnnnhh...nnnnnnmmnngghh!!!...”)

...till at last, it clicked back into its righteous position.

In this steadfast manner she went about her day, till at last, the sun sank low in the sky. It was time for her to ascend the Long Mountain, taking the long way round to stay out of sight of her insufferable sister, the snow goddess Poli’ahu, who’d taken to peeping at her through these invasive gadgets she seemed to have gathered on her snow-capped summit of late; then once clear, taking great strides up the mountain’s long slopes...

(“Mmnh, mmnh, mmnh, mmnh, mmnh, mmnh...”)

...to deliver her report to her ancient mentor and dear friend the sun. Naturally, she also made use of the summit’s vantage to survey her domains for tomorrow’s likeliest trouble spots, and to take fresh recordings of atmospheric composition and weather patterns.

And with that, another long day of toil was complete, and the Shaper of the Sacred Land, hair glimmering like glass in the evening lustre, strolled home to take her rest on the throne of fire.

She set her staff in its notch, against the rim. She stretched her limbs: stretching, stretching out the stiffness, stretching till her fingers brushed the stars. And then, with a last great spin of the hips and roll of the shoulders to relieve tension, she eased herself into the lake of lava: sitting, then shifting till her great shape settled comfortably in the curve of the slope.

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The stars were splendid tonight, sparkling through her crater's curtains of smoke. Madame Pele relaxed, perusing a sample of the day's offerings. There were the usual flowers and berries, but also – this irked her – rocks that should not have been purloined in the first place, and more of those recklessly donated bottles of gin (because it just had to strike somebody as a bright idea, to try and get a volcano goddess drunk). If they kept this up, she thought, she might just try it sometime in the vicinity of their resorts or car parks. The best offerings, at any rate, were those of the heart: the words of love and appreciation that, like music in her ears, told her there were those who understood her power and strove for their righteous places in relation to it.

Which brought her, in due course, to her final unfinished task of the day.

She shut her eyes.

Listened, just listened, to the rhythms of earth and fire made flesh.

...and for the first time, permitted herself the faintest hint of a smile on behalf of the muddled little wanderer in her custody.

“It is well I took her in hand,” she said. “At last she learns.”



Madame Pele wasn't the only one having a long day.

“N-Not real! Not – *real!* Not – *rmffnffmmphh...!*”

Lifting, shifting, flexing, sliding...

How long now? Would it ever end?

A glimpse of Dari's face in there – theoretically, of course – might have suggested the young lady, at this significant juncture in her life, was struggling to carry the very weight of the globe. In fact it was more like the weight of the globe was carrying her; a more relaxing proposition, perhaps, if not for the other one undertaking it from the opposite direction.

“I can't...*nnghhh...just...c-can't...!!*”

Once more she'd found herself all-consumed, mentally as much as physically. It was just like her recent such southerly immersions, only...*larger*, in just about every conceivable way.

Not real? This time is was as if reality itself, that is, absolutely everything, had condensed into the structures now rubbing her like, well...

...that was the thing, wasn't it. Like a *voluptuous pair of goddess-buttocks rubs a shrunken Dari shoved up between them.*

LESSONS IN LAVA

A reality as stranded as she was, with no analogies left, no metaphors remaining, no points of comparison whatsoever to come to its aid; no option, really, but to take it as literally as literal gets.

“Mnnnnnhh...hahh, hahh – no! N-No, no, no...”

No is powerful, in its righteous place. But it doesn't change the final score, or take runs off the board, or put the card back in the referee's pocket, or set the toppled king standing on the board again. This was epistemological checkmate.

Unless she pretended, of course.

Not so easy, in the event.

Or held out hope in some abstract, transcendental alternative; say, that all existence was but a simulation, or that we would all wake up and find we were actually butterflies.

Yeah. Not much space for abstracts in an environment like this one.

“It's r-really happening, isn't it? I'm in a...ngghh...this is...this is...ohhh...”

She couldn't hear herself think. The turmoil of the sunken earth, the convective churn of molten stuff bubbling through miles and miles of sub-gluteal bedrock which *never – stopped – moving...*

...and it was *hot!* So ridiculously hot, though identifying the line between the external temperature and that of her own cringing embarrassment would have been beyond even the most sensitive of state-of-the-art instruments.

And this slippery stuff, lubricating her limbs, causing her to jiggle in the muscular squash of this tube: that felt hot, too. Hot enough to glow.

Hot enough to see.

To see the pulpy tissue bulging into her face, her shoulders...

She squealed. The sight only poured cream into the bursting sugar-pot of her mortification.

And that was to say nothing of the scent! How to – well, let's call it the scent of a tunnel through the igneous crust, all the way down to where the metamorphic substrata overflow with mineral riches – precious gemstones, rare earths, all that kind of thing – in profusions unimaginable to those who live on the surface. How about that?

It wasn't unpleasant, by any means. If anything it was kind of fragrant. It was just that Dari's poor terrestrial brain was completely at a loss for what to do with it.

“Nnnffff...nnnnnnnnnffff!!!”

Cry, maybe?

What else was there to do? It was surreal, it was humiliating, and what's more she was utterly stuck in it, arms pinned to her sides, legs clasped together, and it was literally rubbing it in, over and over, *all over...*

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But it doesn't hurt, does it?

"Nngghh...th-that's not the...p-point..."

She just had to have that one brain cell, didn't she?

Yes. That one.

It's a...

"No Dari! D-Don't!" she cut herself off. "Nmmm, ngmphh...bad! Bad Dari! Very, very bad! H-How could you even...?"

Well, suit yourself, she could even. Didn't sound like she was letting you out any time soon, did it? How long do you think you'll manage, insisting to yourself it's all so weird and terrible and...?

"Mnnrrgghh..."

This slick of fluid: it was coming from these tiny glands in the walls. They'd so squashed her around so as to put one in sight right by her eye.

She winced, as it squirted some onto her cheek.

Magma?

Magma. The thinnest of films. Well, that'd explain the light in here.

Shouldn't that hurt?

Perhaps the real question is why *that* question – quite an important one, by some standards – didn't register.

Dari was smart enough, after all. Educated. Literate. Thirsty for knowledge.

If nothing else, perceptive.

But she was also Dari, and therein lay the answer. Namely, by the time she *did* identify it as magma, it had just about finished melting off her clothes, thus overloading the part of her brain that might – perhaps, ought – to consider it, with much higher-priority messages from her back, her chest, her waist...

"...MMMMMNNPPHHH! Mnnnhh, mnhh....nnnhhhnnn..."

Squashing, throbbing, compressing, undulating...

...because maybe you are not lost, when put into storage in a Woman's basement?

"Ohhh, g-god, no! I m-mustn't – mmmphh..."

No. It was absurd enough, getting shrunk out of her life and installed into every giant woman who came across her. Unimaginable, even if real. But the moment she started, not even *liking* it, merely entertaining a fraction of a thought that she could somehow *be okay* in places like these; well, what would that make her? What bottomless (in some senses), irredeemable path would she be on once that happened?

"Nnnnghh...mmmmnnnphh!! Nnnaaaaahh-hh-hh...!!"

Poor Dari.

Well, would you have done better? If anything it said much for her basic fortitude that these were her first substantial tears since it'd all kicked off.

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Tears which straight away mixed fizzingly into magma.

Well, that didn't happen to everybody. Wouldn't Dari the Explorer – the one she'd *used to* imagine – be proud?

When had she last cried?

When it came to it, crying wasn't really Dari's thing. Making off for the mountains or forests tended to relieve her of the need.

The mountains. The forests. The *caves*. Oh, and wasn't there a certain volcano in there somewhere?

She realised the tears weren't flowing as hard as she'd thought. Part of her felt sure they should be, but they weren't.

High in the branches...deep in the darkness...caught in the river's flow...

That feeling: of being so tiny, so helpless in the midst of powers so far beyond her. Awesome power; indeed, dangerous power; but power with no intent to hurt her, which couldn't have cared less about trying to make her what she was not; and – this was important – power so much vaster than those that did...

She does not punish. She does as she does, and you, child: you learn.

Belonging. That was it. Beneath the absurdity, beneath the molten ground, a foothold of familiarity. Of stability. *Her* stability. Dari the Explorer's place in the universe, set down and built up over her young lifetime.

...well why the hell was she feeling it *here*?

That would be the tricky part, then. If she *belonged* in those places, and this was in some sense one of those places, and this was *also*, well, a goddess's rear...

Come on, said Dari the evidence-based historian. Logic.

"...nnnnahh! Nnnn, nnnn...ahh! Ahhhnn...!"

Perhaps what was happening in Dari was the sort of thing only possible in the extreme temperatures and pressures of depths like these. An intermingling between the sources of comfort she'd ever carried within her, even across the rifts; and the present tightness, the compression, the chorus of subcutaneous noise and living scents, that combination of stimuli so remote from any she'd ever known, and so many orders of magnitude more intense...

"D-Don't be...nnnghhh...stupid, Dari! Don't..."

And perhaps she had a point there. Perhaps it really was only the tiniest, stupidest, most shameless little brain cell that was gleefully weaving those sets of axons together...

"Nnnn-ahh! Uuuhh, uuuhhh..."

...but it was also, without a doubt, the horniest, and with that, perhaps, it rested its case.

It's impossible to say for sure of course. She'll blush and change the subject if you ask.

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Belonging. Just a spark. No, not even that: a quark. Half a quark. One tenth. You just try suggesting to her that's not allowed.

It was still something.

Something steady in a *real life* that had spun off its hinges.

Well...it was better than going mad.

The rest of her didn't even have to agree with it. Heck, its effect was so much the greater if she didn't acknowledge it.

After all...

It was still so embarrassing!!!

Stimulated to the pinnacles of her flustery limits, she squirmed, and squirmed, and squirmed...

"Look at you," she heard that voice within: that unflappable bastard, Dari the evidence-based historian. "Are you squirming because you want to get out? Or because it gives you such a *thrill*, such a sense of your *place*, to know that you can't get out no matter how you struggle? That you're *stuck in her*, for as long as she decides to keep you here?"

But plainly, by this stage – "Nnnnn, nnnn, nnnnnaaaahhhnn...!!!" – Dari was too otherwise occupied to argue anymore.



"Urrrghhh..."

Change was afoot.

She'd twisted for hours under gluteal pressure, so when it eased Dari sensed it at once. The tubular flesh-walls' grip was relaxing. And then, a vibration: not just the walls, but the space within them too.

"Uhhh...wh-wha..."

Something was happening. Something different – *anything* different, she'd take it at this stage, and thank fuck for that.

Although...

It did feel a little ominous. Tremoring, gurgling, like the simultaneous discharge of ten thousand glands far above...

Or maybe not that far –

"Gyaaah!" she yelped. "Wha, what the heck...!"

Magma. Of course it was.

A new variety, too. Not the glossy, slippery stuff that had stopped her getting too tightly embedded; no, this was a thick continuous flow, strong, smooth,

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noticeably cool – or so Dari felt, as it picked her up and oozed down the tunnel with her.

Life couldn't just be simple, could it?

The magma forked where it met her body, backing up into an arch of ropy ripples round her shoulders. Then she squeaked, as the divided current hefted round her in front, swelling into the available space till it'd grown into a pair of bulbous lobes, one on each side, pinning her fast between them for the ride...

“Nnnnghh. Aren't these...kind of like...”

Toes?

“Nnnaahh...wh-why?! Why did you have to th-think of...silly, you silly, silly Dari...”

And it was okay that she felt too tired to keep this up, because her brain chirped on on her behalf:

Seriously? Are you alright? It's – you know – lava. Not everything has to –

“Aagh! Goodness...sake...c-can't take much more of...”

Then a gasp, an explosion of white light, a stop – and immediately a shuffle of massive structures, grasping, clutching, lifting, a rush, rush, rush of loose air, a simmering red sea, a black ocean of stars overhead...

A Woman's face.

The volcano goddess's weighty countenance. Filling her view, as it did.

No doubt assessing her for whether she'd learnt.

“Urrghh...”

Dari squirmed, just once; then let her naked body fall slack. She rested her arms on the enormous thumb, pinning her in Madame Pele's raised fingers.

“You begin to understand,” the voice enshrouded her: firm, but calmer now, and with compassion. “It is well enough, my burrowing beetle. At least, for now.”

Dari was too exhausted to reply. Could barely lift her arm to rub her eyes. Everything smelled of, well, volcano stuff. Her hair felt heavy with ash. From what she could see of herself, she was reddened all over.

She sighed, listening to the churn of lava and watching the smoke plumes billow into the night.

The great thumb stroked her. Pressed into her face; then slid, brushing the dust from her hair.

“A troublesome grasshopper-girl. But a sincere one. So curious to learn that she resists her lessons to prolong them.”

“Nnnnnn...”

“I share a secret. I was once like you. Dari.”

“.....!”

That woke her up.

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“A mortal youth. Setting forth. Loosed from a rough quarry. Wandering lost on the open sea.”

Dari blinked up at that rugged face, shimmering raw in the lava’s glow. She couldn’t decide which dazed her more: that Pele would confide something like that in her, or that she could have anything remotely in common with this titanic phenomenon.

“If your removal of my rocks was worth the lesson, then it is well.”

Well? Was it Dari? Was it?

“Nnnghh...”

“As for the rocks themselves, I shall recover them in time. But you must still make up for what they stood to contribute in the short term.”

Dari groaned.

“Do not be stingy. They were a fraction of your present mass. I shall obtain their exact compositional match from you while keeping you structurally sound. Your body is organic, after all. In constant renewal.”

Then, after a pause: “More than most, it seems.”

Too drained to work through the implications of these words, Dari shut her eyes. After what she’d been through, nothing would count as crazy anymore. If it happened, it happened.

Then she loosed a muffled wail – “*mmnn.....!!!*” as the volcano-goddess’s lips – plush, heavy, *enormous* – clamped her in her entirety, once, twice...

“...nnnnnahh! Haahh...haahh...wh-wha...”

“Your composition, little greenstone. Considering...your...”

Pele frowned.

Appeared to think a while, clearly unimpressed.

“Salt imbalances. Mineral deficiencies. Excesses of sugars, starches, lipids. Grasshopper, you are poorly instructed as to a righteous diet.”

Dari twitched in her palm. The flush in her cheeks was a different shade of red this time. It looked like she *really* had something to say about this one.

Would have, if she’d felt up to it. Volcano goddess or not.

Whatever. She could listen. Just this once.

“What am I to do with this heap of carbohydrates? Do you expect Madame Pele to wear out her arm, splitting and smashing their cores into more useful materials?”

“Mmnhh...”

“Well, it cannot be helped. My most stubborn child, you are.”

Another lift, a rearrangement of pressure, and Dari found herself dangled before those lips. Skin prickling, hair fluttering in the goddess’s breaths of mineral plenty.

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She'd worked out what was coming. But for the first time, and last in some while, she allowed herself to acquiesce. This was different somehow.

Too tired to worry either way.

Go on then – she thought, as the lips heaved open. *Get it over with. I just want to sleep.*

Unless...couldn't she...?

Actually, no. No, not yet. She had to ask. Right now. If *she* couldn't tell her, no-one could.

She muttered: "M-Madame Pele..."

"You speak, child." The volcanic gale swung her back and forth.

"Are you – I m-mean, is this...*real*...? Should I...*b*-believe..."

"Hmph," the goddess answered. "Why ask Madame Pele? She only is. She cannot help you with *belief*."

Nghh...damn it...

...as once more, Dari felt herself land with a splat onto a most hulkingly believable tongue; which launched her, in a single toss, to the back of the volcanic throat; and as she slipped down, down, on down the thundering vent, the great fire-matron's voice resounded:

"...Hmph. *Real*. What is that, child? What does that mean when all things, at all times, are ever created, ever destroyed? Constant change is the way of the circles and spaces and all things in them. So of all my children, and so of you. What alone does not change is that they all have power in their righteous places. If you remember yours, then you, too, Dari: you shall *be*."

The walls gave way, and Dari fell, and fell, till she landed with a *plop!*...

Magma.

It would be, wouldn't it?

"Urghh..."

So hot. Really, really hot.

Was this pain?

Strange. It wasn't pain as she knew it. More like...

Nah. She gave up trying to work it out. She only knew that, whatever it was, she hadn't felt it before.

She was getting a little too much of that of late.

Well, all things considered, it didn't feel too bad.

It was fine, she decided. She could live with it.

With some struggle – this stuff was heavy – she managed to get her hand above the surface.

She strained her eyes. It was hard to focus through the fumes and the heat-haze. Still, there it was.

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She flexed her fingers, weakly. They – she – looked real enough.

Her consciousness wavered. Maybe it was a little too hot in here after all.

Good. After a day like that, she needed rest.

“Nnnhh...D-Dari...you’re...f-forgetting something, you silly...”

No, she thought. Let me sleep.

It was up to her nose now. Bursting, bubbling, with wavy pillars of smoke and these crisp black floating patches. Now what did that remind her of...?

Yes. Of course.

Pizza.

A shiver of disappointment. She was thinking all about pizza now, but this stuff in her mouth didn’t taste nearly as good.

Would she ever get to eat pizza again?

Properly, she meant. Off a table, or at least out of a box. Not pizza she was eaten with. That didn’t count.

Urgh...how am I already thinking like this? I can’t believe...

No. Wait. There was something more important.

But what?

Fading out now. There wasn’t much time. It was crucial, she had to –

“.....ohh!”

Yes, something she was supposed to look out for! Something the perceptive, observant Dari the Explorer, or evidence-based historian, or unbearable pillock or whatever had said she *must* look out for, right now, because she’d noticed it happening in these moments, *only* in these moments, even if she’d been too busy floundering about in stomach juice to pay attention...

There, somewhere inside her. It had started to glint.

What was it? She’d never sensed it before. At least, not before she’d...

And you’d know, wouldn’t you? What with the number of times you’ve keeled over at your desk, on the sofa, on your bed without bothering to undress...

The glint: it was growing...growing – *there, right there*, blink and she’d miss it! – like the green flash of the setting sun the instant it sinks below the horizon.



“So. It has taken over. A perfect barrier even to my power.”

The Shaper of the Sacred Land sat up in her crater. Her great fingers settled on the rim.

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“It seems you have secrets of your own, little grasshopper. Secrets with their own ideas of how to protect you. Unknown even to you, I expect. Well. So long as they are effective as mine –”

She arched her brow.

“It seeks...material, in exchange? Ohh, your mischief has layers, you rash little... Hmph. Very well. A pinch of elemental cores, I will allow. But no saccharides. You have enough. No. Here, iron instead.”

Pele’s eyes flashed in concentration.

She won. Of course she did.

“And you may keep what heat resistance you can retain. It will help you in the places you are inclined to wander, you burrowing beetle.”

She sighed, low.

A complicated child. Doubtless one who’d need further interventions. More perhaps than any goddess alone could supply.

But...worth it. Absolutely. That pure, simple crystal; the sheer concentration...

The little one needed looking out for. At any cost, Pele decided. Now that she knew, too much was at stake.

She sat awhile, brooding on the implications.

Then she scrunched up her nose as she felt the lava cooling.

“What do you want, sister?” she grunted, not bothering to look.

“Why, the mortal, of course! Isn’t it my turn yet? She looks adorable!” sang the woman in a stunning sky-blue robe, elbows on the rim and chin in her hands. Her mantle of snow was melting aggravatingly into the lake.

“She went. If you want her, find her yourself.”

The lady giggled. Stood up and ran an arm through her hair, sending snowflakes streaming. Tall, dark and sturdily built, she otherwise appeared unlike Pele in every way: lithe, athletic, and with a temperament cool as the winter sky.

She pouted, exaggeratedly. “She didn’t take *my* rocks though. Why don’t the cute ones ever climb *my* mountain?”

“Too cold,” Pele said brusquely.

“Hmmm. It’s not so much fun if I gather her without a pretext, is it? Well...you did drop her in my spring. Maybe I could tell her she splashed around irreverently in my sacred waters or something. Ooh, yes! Then as punishment – sorry, *instruction* – I could have her swim in my –”

“Pretext,” Pele repeated. “Look, Poli’ahu –”

“Aaww come on, you know as well as I do it wasn’t about the rocks. So, why this one? Why does Big Cuddly Madame Pele just have to give her kind, caring, *personal* attention to this one in particular? Was she just that irresistible? Don’t think I didn’t see how much she squirmed.” And before Pele could react, the snow

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goddess lifted a hulking great telescope in one arm and bunged it over to her. Taken by surprise, the volcano goddess opened her arms to catch it just in time, then set it upright, irritably, on a dry patch of caldera.

Poli'ahu giggled. "No idea why they keep offering me these, but they're starting to come with amazing angular resolution."

Keep this up and I'll give you angular resolution, Pele didn't say.

"Or..." Poli'ahu goaded her on. "Was it because the little creature reminded you of – you know – a certain someone, all those ages ago? Driven from home, huddling frightened in her little canoe..."

"That's enough," said Pele. "She did as she does, and I did as she needed. That is all."

Poli'ahu leapt up and sat on the rim, crossing her legs such that the tail of her robe splashed into the lava lake with an obnoxious gush of steam. "So she *wasn't* just acting out, then?" she said. "Taking your rocks on purpose because she was subconsciously fascinated at the possibility a big, strong goddess like you might be out there; wondering in the corner of her mind how it might feel to get picked up by the strong, firm hand of –"

Strong, firm hands, both of them, thrashed the lava in disbelief. "By the blazing rays of the four ancestors, sister, do you not have better things to do? I have spoken to you about trailing your slush in here to question my conduct. If you have nothing important to tell me, go home."

The snow goddess stood. "Oh. Okay then. I guess you don't want your older sister's advice on the tiny one's *mana*."

Suddenly Pele was standing too.

"You felt it. Wait. Poli'ahu."

The snow goddess laughed, shaking her hair out again in that exasperating way of hers. "Dear sister. Our entire family will have felt it by now. My three snow-sisters, for a start. *Mana* crystallised into a solid core. Doesn't come around every other era, does it? How did that happen, I wonder? Could that be the reason you were so interested in her? *Hmmm?*"

"Sit. Now."

"Ooh, so serious all of a sudden. By the fluffy clouds, Pele, you're so predictable."

"That's enough. If you sensed it, you should know better than to treat it so flippantly."

"Why?" She shrugged. "I mean, sure, if she settles into her righteous place her power will be enormous. Maybe on a par with ours, in a way. So? She'll still fit down my dress, and I bet she'll still be flustery and squeaky and..."

"Has the slush piled up in your head too, Poli'ahu? Surely you see how extraordinary this situation is? With *mana* like that, the magnitude of her impact

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– well, it might be enough to dig the buried realm out of its predicament, for a start! But think! What if she is not the child we know by that time? All is in change, all is in flux; think how alone she is, how arduous the journey before her, the support she must find if she is to –”

“Aaww, always in such a rush. When will you lighten up, sister? There’ll be time. Let’s gather the others for a discussion soon, alright? Well, once you’ve called a truce with at least three quarters of them, I suppose.”

A seethe built up in Pele’s chest; only to subside, with great strain, as she checked her temper and returned to the hotter side of the lava. She wasn’t in the mood to erupt tonight. That sweet little creature’s motions had so eased her stress over the course of the day. Wasteful to let it all go for her bait-blizzard of a sister.

Anyway, she was already walking off.

“Oh, and…” – Poli’ahu pointed over her shoulder. “You can keep the scope. Might help you keep track of the little cutie, if you can work out how to use it. Your hands might be a bit big for it though. And the lenses are expensive, do try not to melt those.”

She’s going, Pele committed to think. She’s going. Don’t bother. She’s going.

“Ooh, I can’t wait to get little Dari into my fingers,” Poli’ahu’s voice came echoing up the valley. “I wonder if she likes sledding? I’ll introduce her to all my best slopes.”

“Poli’ahu?” Pele called after her.

“Hmm?” the snow goddess sang back, voice crisp as frost.

“I would have collected her even if not for her solidified *mana*. She needed to learn.”

“I know, sister,” came the reply. “I know.”

“She knows nothing,” grumbled Pele.

火

Mlem.

“Ngghh. Too early.”

Mlem mlem.

“Nnnhh. No. Lemme sleep.”

Mlemlemlemlemlem-

“Ahh!”

LESSONS IN LAVA

Dari scrunched up her eyelids soon as opening them. That dog, the annoying one who always bothered her on the exercise machines in the park: it was right there licking her face.

It yipped.

“Urgh. How did you get in...here...”

This wasn’t her room. Ceiling too green. Air too fresh. Scent of wet soil.

She sat up.

Yeah. She remembered this place. Huge plants. A giant tangle of comfy roots. How’d she wound up back here? Awake...refreshed...

The dog shuffled in her lap. Getting its fluffy white fur all over her skirt.

“That...no. Oh no. No, no, no. Of all things, of *all things* that could have made it through with me, how the heck did it turn out to be you?”

“Arf!”

“It could have been my phone, my Swiss Army knife, a pack of cookies, but no, it would be you, it just *had* to be –”

“Rawrf! Raf! Raf”

It seemed that was the only reply she’d be getting.

“Hey. How are you my size, anyway?”

Sniffing her midriff now. Licking. *Mlem. Mlem.*

“D-Don’t do that! Nnngh.”

She patted it. Just because.

“Come to think of it...whose are you, anyway? I don’t think I ever saw you with...”

A bark, a jump, a lick on the cheek; then off it scampered, disappearing into the giant foliage.

Dari half-groaned, half-sighed as she stood and brushed the fluff off her skirt. Its paws had tracked this peculiar yellow powder over it too.

Never mind. The little ruffian was the least of the cracks in the plate of her life right now.

She sat back down, on her special spot. There was a Dari-shaped imprint in the roots where she’d slept.

She remembered something. Glanced up, like a startled mouse.

Snapped to her feet and hurtled round to the other side of the plant, where she scrambled into what she hoped was a giant-finger-proof root den.

After catching her breath, she flopped into the corner and crossed her arms.

Stayed like that a while, sulking. About this, about that.

It helped.

“Okay Dari,” she said at last. “Time to pull yourself together.”

Or die trying, she thought. It was bewildering, outrageous, still made no sense, but no, if she went on as she had, she’d go nuts. That would be far more dangerous,

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she now figured, than any physical hazard, however ludicrous, she'd encountered so far.

Are you sure it's real? - a tiny part of her still felt the need to ask.

"Right. Right. Let's get that one sorted once and for all. I *don't know* if it's real, alright? I mean, look at this." She rapped her fist on the root-wall. "Feels real, doesn't it? And all the...rest of it since that day. Yeah. You can't deny it any more Dari. It felt real too. All of it."

She winced. Still so heavy. How long could her ceiling hold up those great big...nouns?

"Yeah. It's beyond belief. That's fair enough. But you know, at this stage...maybe *belief* isn't what matters, Dari. Real or not, it's where you are. You're in it. You didn't choose it, you don't understand it, but it's real *for you, right now*, and if you're going to get out of it, going to get anywhere at all for that matter, you're gonna have to take it on its own terms. Just like those trips that didn't go as you expected, or you know, school, or college life, or that stupid exam paper last term, or..."

Alright: maybe not *just* like those. Admittedly this was different by some distance.

Same principle though.

"Remember, you're a historian," she added. "An historian. It's okay to have your own feelings and opinions about it. Important to, even. Don't forget what matters to you. But at the end of the day you've got to go on the evidence, and for that, right now, your senses are all you've got."

Much more quietly, and with the faintest of reluctant grins, she added: "And you have to admit, Dari: they're working hard for you out here. *Eep*. W-Working well, I mean."

She took a deep breath. This stuff wasn't trivial. It was important to give it the time it needed.

Another deep breath.

Well, it was the furthest she'd got since all this started.

She had to admit, it felt an accomplishment.

"Alright. So. What do you know?" She counted off her fingers: "One: you're tiny, and stuck that way. Two: since it happened you've been finding these *openings* that seem like, I dunno, shortcuts between completely different places. Three..."

By the look of her forehead, she was really having to force this one.

"Three: since it happened, every...woman you meet seems to think you look like...*nnggh*. Like a snack. Yeah. Or, uh...a toy. And sometimes, when they eat you and stuff..."

She looked down at her chest.

Felt it, with both hands.

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Wondered whether the green flash happened at sunrise too, and if so, whether there was any means to catch it.

“That means...”

She’d come this far. The time for hedging was past.

“You died – or, something. You passed out in their stomachs, of that much you’re certain. You know what stomachs do, Dari.” She paused. “You know what *magma* does. I think. Nngh. Anyway: whatever happens, you keep coming back, just like you did now. No mess, no injuries. Clothes and all. And I’m certain now, every time just before you succumb, there’s this...thing...”

That was as far as words could go for that one. Of all these *changes*, this was the most challenging to wrap her head around. The one that’d done most to screw around with her senses in their own right, what with the gaps between *sunset* and *sunrise* as it were, and the way it refreshed her as if after a good night’s sleep, giving whatever turbulence preceded it the semblance of a dream...

An image came to her mind: a little green shoot, buried beneath lava flow after lava flow, only to keep re-surfacing through its fresh carpet of volcanically-enriched soil.

Well, they’d always called her stubborn.

“Let’s leave that one for now, Dari. In fact, let’s leave aside everything you can’t answer right this minute. How that crazy scientist even did it, for one. How *real* it is. How you can see those rifts. How you’ll get home. I mean, do you even *want* to get home till you’ve found some way to reverse...this...?”

She shuddered. It was occurring to her what it might be like if someone she actually knew found her at this size.

Hell no. It wasn’t going to happen, she decided. Not even worth imagining. Conversation over.

“And then there’s...why all these women – gaah.”

Now this was a different challenge. Oh, she could probably get her head around it eventually. There had to be some reason, right? But whatever it might be, she somehow knew that there were other parts of her – she knew their names – that would never get round it even in a million years.

She huffed, frustrated at herself. Stuck her finger in one of the pudgy roots and drew circles for a while.

“Look at you Dari. You’re a hamster. A hopeless, nervous, fidgety little hamster. You know that, right? I mean, just look at you. No wonder they all want to smush you away.”

She glanced about.

Giggled, awkwardly.

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Fell back and roared with laughter, in that rolling, kicking, gut-clenching way that in more familiar settings would have made the other customers raise worried eyebrows at her and maybe beckon the manager for an urgent word.

Of course, that was one thing she *didn't* have to worry about now.

“Haah, haah...! Whew.”

She'd needed that. How she'd needed that.

“Right. Come on. Focus, Dari. What else? What *can* you do stuff about?”

She checked off her fingers again. Scavenge – keep herself fed and watered as well as she could. Sleep, when she needed. Watch out for giant insects. And of course, that pillar of wayfaring sense in any unfamiliar territory: empty your bladder every reasonable chance you get, because you never know when the next one might come.

Yeah. So long as she could secure the basics there was no need to panic. And beyond that...

“Hmm. I guess you just...well, keep going, don't you? Look around for help, or for information. Look out for these...”

Interdimensional shortcuts.

“...yeah. Guess that is kind of special, when you think about it. I mean, d'you think they're natural? Hmm. Maybe you'd better start – you know – actually remembering where you're finding them, and where they lead, before you get yourself irredeemably lost like you always do.”

It was as good a plan as any. From what she'd seen so far, they could lead anywhere. Perhaps she might wind up somewhere she knew, or start picking up patterns in how these places linked. If nothing else, they were certainly fascinating, no?

Exciting, even.

“Heh. Look at you, Dari the Explorer,” she chuckled to herself. “All competent and raring to go. How're you in such a good mood, all of a sudden?”

A fair question, she pondered, given how all over the place she'd been until now.

“I mean, it's not like your situation's fundamentally changed. You're still up a bug-sized creek without a...hmm.”

Well, yes: she still wanted for the proverbial paddle. But for the first time since her ground had liquefied, her boat wasn't pitching and rolling out of control.

That felt significant.

Even if it wouldn't be long, she somehow guessed, till it was soaring upside-down through the air again.

It was like a tiny rock, or maybe two, on the deck. A smidge of mass, carefully positioned – righteously positioned, one might say – so as to give gravity something to stick around for.

LESSONS IN LAVA

Minuscule, they might be. Almost unnoticeable.

But when there's nothing else to hold onto, the smallest stabilising force can make all the difference.

"You'll be okay Dari," she told herself, squeezing her arms through her wristbands. "If you keep going, things'll work out. That's all."

But her train of thought just had to trundle on: *Aaww, come on, aren't you curious? Really, where's it coming from? Shouldn't you wonder?*

"No. It's not important, I don't need -"

What are you forgetting? What else did you recently learn about your situation?

What had she learned? Well...

In a universe swirling uncontrollably, in a reality-outside-reality where everything was far too large and nothing made sense; what was this familiar little anchor of her own? It had rattled about all this time, but only now had she started to feel its tug again.

Rooting her to...what?

Whatever it was, she'd felt it. Yes. Those hooks in something far greater than she or anyone else for that matter could comprehend: reality, the universe, some cosmic scheme, whatever you wanted to call it. She'd always had her own tethers: the ones that might fray with the maddening irrationality of certain people or social situations, but which always returned, so tangible, so *real*, when she sought them in the mountains, the forests, the ruins, the caves...

The - ahem - buttes...

"Gnnnaahhh...! N-No! I *told* you you shouldn't think about it Dari! Aahh, look what you've done!"

But that was the long and short of it, wasn't it? That even if she was lost, and didn't know what to do, with nowhere to turn, and everything coming apart...

Oh it's better than that. What else do have you learned about your situation? Facts, Dari. Facts.

Well - yeah. Facts were important. She had to follow the evidence. She'd said it herself.

Why keep searching, after all? Why not just sit around and wait?

"Because...gkkk!"

Because there were also women, *goddesses* even, with the demonstrated ability - *and* interest, don't forget - to grab her through rifts by themselves...

...and if it could happen once, well, that implied a non-zero chance of it happening again...

...wherever she was...

...at any moment...

"N-No! Stop thinking like that, Dari! Aack...after all the trouble you went to..."

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Another go, then?

Even if she was lost, with no clue what to do, and nowhere to turn, and everything falling apart; she'd still...

"You'll still...be okay, yeah. Wh-Whatever they do...it'll all be okay..."

...still be in reach of some huge deity or other who'll stuff you into her flesh and keep you tucked away...safe and snug...where you belong...

Outside her shelter, some of those odd spherical birds lost their footing and rolled randomly about as an almighty shout shook up the thicket. It wasn't really an angry shout, nor even a particularly anguished one, and it certainly wasn't threatening in any great sense of the word. If anything, it was simply a noise that really, *really* needed to be let out.

Dari emerged from the roots and shook herself loose. "Whew. That's better. Well, I guess I'd...better have a look around then. Yeah."

She strolled past where she'd slept, making a conscious effort not to re-see what had happened afterwards.

Being conscious, it wasn't terribly effective.

"Gah. But, after all..." she reproached herself. "You do know why it happened, don't you Dari? It's because you were a daft little thing who didn't know what was good for you and just *had* to grab those bits of lava when you knew, you *knew* – I mean, come on, you were just asking for it weren't you? That's the only reason!"

And now that she thought about it...

That wasn't the only time, was it?

She'd kept meaning to sort out her pile of stuff in that basement, she remembered. Sooner or later. Only she never did, because the longer she left it, the more daunting the clutter monster grew.

What other incriminating bits and pieces might have ended up in there?

Her provocative letters to those Norse giantesses she'd read about in the library's mythology books, for instance? The ones she felt too guilty to be seen reading for some reason, and blushed furiously when they asked her why she was borrowing them...

"...oh no."

What about that ancient figurine thing she'd found in that riverbank on that German trip? That one she'd thought she should tell the police or a museum about, only she completely forgot, and found it in her rucksack when she got back. Yeah, the HUGE one, with the absolutely enormous –

"...nnnnnnnnh!"

And then there was the time that priest pissed her off in India with his incorrect opinions, and she might have...*rearranged* the offerings on the altar before that

LESSONS IN LAVA

statue of that huge goddess, with all the arms...and swords...and, erm, severed body parts of people she disagreed with...

Dari began to run.

...but come to think of it, didn't that goddess have another manifestation? Yeah! She remembered now! In her other aspect she was a goddess of lust, sexual ecstasy, unbound desire -

"Eeeeeeeek!" Dari ran as fast as her legs could carry her.

Oh yes, and then there was Peru!

"No, no, no! Ahh...ahh...gotta - get - out of.."

There! A crack in space, shimmering through the grass. Thank goodness. Let it lead wherever it wanted, what mattered right now was that the more of them she leapt through, the better it'd shake off the trails, surely, of any more hands that might be following her from the other side of somewhere, just waiting for their opportunity, she knew they were out there, she just *knew* it!

In each crossing, was there a fraction of a moment where she stood in both realities? Or did she pass clean from one to the next?

Liquid rock beneath her feet. With each step, no knowledge of where in the universe it might land...

But as a mouse through a mousehole, a squirrel across branches, a canoe from island to island: Dari crossed the worlds.

