

Blade Ta'var

Competition: What have we here?-Rollmaster Monthly Topic Jan 2016-Fiction

The room was dingy and small, and it looked depressingly neglected. A layer of dirt caked the floor, not swept for ages. If you looked for a broom you wouldn't find one, much less a cleaning implement. More distressing than the dirt was what looked like blood stains on the plaster walls. Everything in the room was broken or damaged to some degree, even the bed. It was the sort of place that you ran away from but didn't quite know why. All you knew was that you didn't want to be there and at the same time you would ask yourself "Why would anyone live here?" This is where our story begins.

A young woman, Emma, was soundly asleep in that hovel. Her appearance fit in with the general decor of the room and that wasn't saying much. Moreover her tattered and generally beige appearance didn't encourage visitors. She lived on a planet full of colors yet she had none. This was generally known as the "Dirt District" and as such it generated some nasty comments. Very few visitors came to call besides the local foremen who wake you up for your shift. It was thus a shock to see one this dreary night. An Older Woman resplendent in all the colors under the sun walked among the hovels. There was a purpose in her stride as she checked the addresses on them. If anyone was awake her appearance would have caused a riot but the Older Woman had planned this carefully and found the sad little hovel that was her target. Knocking crisply on the door she waited impatiently.

Emma awoke with a start. She was accustomed to doing so for work but this was far too early. She wished she could have stayed asleep. Getting up unwillingly she went to the door, swearing at the foreman internally, and wrenched open the door. Her jaw dropped and she didn't know what to say. Who was this woman in front of her? What was she doing here with all of her colors? The Older Woman passed her a small box in plain packaging. It could have been part of the daily mail yet the Older Woman had clearly gone to lengths to deliver it personally. Emma tentatively asked "For me?" "Yes, and may it bring you good fortune. Good luck." replied the Older Woman. Emma wasn't sure if she could take it and her hands trembled as she reached for the package. The Older Woman placed the gift in Emma's hands and gripped them caringly. "Don't be scared Emma and keep it hidden." the Older Woman said reassuringly. Emma was left wordless, wondering how the Older Woman knew her name. She watched as the Older Woman walked away and disappeared into the night.

Gaining her composure she quietly shut her door and walked over to her bed. Tearing open the box she found a heavy black ball that fit snugly in her hand. It had four circles of raised green dots that created a symmetric pattern and broke up the black ball into 8 equal sized panels. Moving the ball to her other hand she noticed that the other side of the ball had its dots lit. Pressing the panels did nothing but curiously pressing a green dot made it light up. What was this thing? Why did she have to keep it secret? All she could think of is that there was something hidden inside. She rubbed her eyes and thought about sleep for a moment. Her shift

would start in 4 hours and it was going to be a grueling day of work. She couldn't fall asleep though. She wanted to figure out what this unknown gift was and this was the only time she had. She laid down in her bed and spent the rest of the night left to her pressing the dots at random. Pressing one or sometimes many at once would turn on or off others but that was sadly as far as she got. Before she knew it she heard a second knock. She quickly hid her ball where she hid her other stuff and went to go to work.

The next few weeks were much the same. She would go to work each day, eat her evening meal, work on what she now dubbed her "puzzle ball", and then squeeze in at least 4 hours of sleep. She often wondered what people would think of her peculiar behavior, if she had a roommate. The blood on the walls might look bad but it guaranteed her privacy. Privacy was what she needed right now. As the weeks stretched on she was starting to grow impatient. At this point she had worked on the ball so much she had memorized most of the patterns and their subsequent effects. Those she forgot often she wrote on the floor. As she possessed no pencil or paper the blessed dirt served as an excellent writing implement. It also hid her work as it didn't show up very well in the early light of day. She didn't think her foreman would appreciate her work. Very soon most of floor was full of notes, with an exception being a path that led to her front door. There was one problem though, what pattern did the ball need to open?

A month had passed and life for Emma had taken a downturn. She no longer made progress with the puzzle ball. She had found all the patterns but which order did they need to go in? Before the puzzle ball entered her life she had no hope so her dreary existence wasn't too bad. She slept to escape reality. Now she had hope that was always in her hand or hidden close by. This hope could kill her sometimes as sleep was no longer an option for escape. Recently she had taken to speaking to the ball like it was alive. Was she going crazy? She would plead for it to help her but it would stay silent. At work, her lack of sleep had caught up with her and the foremen had taken to watching her more closely. They even started checking in on her at night. They would watch her hovel to make sure she wasn't going out. Where would she go anyways? Her obsession with the puzzle ball was all consuming, much to the frustration of the foremen who saw her work declining but didn't know why.

----One month later at Midnight----

Life had returned to normal to some degree for Emma and she had been dedicating more time to sleep lately. She still worked on her puzzle ball but the novelty had worn off and most of the time she just tried a random order of patterns. Sometimes she just talked it for a while before putting it away. It may be frustrating but it was all she had going for her. One night she dozed off and left it on the floor. As she slept the ball started to do something odd. It rolled to a pattern on the floor. Two lights turned on and watched Emma while she slept... Emma woke up earlier than usual and saw two green lights in the distance. She looked unbelievably at the ball, wondering how it got there. Nothing before had rolled to that side of the room by itself. She didn't light those dots up. She walked over to the puzzle ball and made a mental note of the pattern nearby. Thinking herself slightly crazy she asked "Are you alive? Can you help me? I'll do

anything!” Wordlessly, the ball oriented itself to stare into her eyes. For a moment it seemed to judge her. After a few tense moments it started to move again, heading towards another pattern. She quickly brushed a one by the pattern near her and followed the ball’s progress, marking the order of the patterns it visited. Eventually it stopped, blinked its “eyes” twice and turned off.

Excitement rushed through her body. This could be the solution to the puzzle! She walked hastily towards the puzzle ball and inputted the patterns in the order she had received. All the dots on the ball flashed at once, a frenzy of colors. She intently stared at the ball, waiting for it to open. Instead a small pin protruded from the ball. “Verify Identification” the puzzle ball ordered. Last time she had to verify her Identification they just scanned her ID. What did it want? “Place your finger on the pin” the puzzle ball demanded. Unsure but willing to trust the puzzle ball she did as she was told. The puzzle ball jabbed her finger, sucking up a portion of her blood. Her body tensed for a second but it didn’t hurt too much. “Identity Verified. Listen carefully” ordered the puzzle ball. A digital figure rose from the puzzle ball and spoke. It was her beloved! But how? He was dead. He had a radiant smile as he addressed her, “Emma, you’re almost there. All that is left is a final test. Gather your courage and be strong. Good Luck, I love you.”

The puzzle ball went back to its original form and stared at her. “Prepare yourself, I have initiated your final test. I have reported your neighbors to the authorities for turning in a foreman. They are sending another foreman to deal with them. You have always been able to protect yourself but now you must prove you can protect others. Return with proof.” the puzzle ball ordered. Emma panicked. Last time another person was attacked she had done nothing for fear of her life. Did she have the courage to save her neighbor when she couldn’t even save her lover? She wanted to prove herself worthy and she didn’t even know what the puzzle ball would give her. She got up and accessed her secret cache. Inside it was a sharp shard from a broken mirror, the remnants of that fateful night. It would have to do as a weapon. She wrapped a bit of cloth around it and snuck over to her neighbor’s hovel. There was shouting inside and the cry of a mother and child.

Quietly opening the door she saw the figure of a foreman brandishing a whip, his back to her. Gathering her resolve and her desire for revenge she snuck behind him and plunged the sharp shard of glass as deep as she could into his neck. The man screamed in pain and fear as he saw the blood coming out of his neck. Stunned, the man pulled out the shard and turned on her. He took a swing at her in his violent rage but missed by several feet. He attempted several wild swings before he collapsed on the ground. She must have hit a major artery given the copious amounts now pooling on the floor. Her neighbors stared in shock until she urged them forward. “Help me move him to my room. You can wash the blood off and tell them I did it. Hurry!” ordered Emma. They complied readily and together they dragged the foreman’s body over to her hovel. Her neighbors expressed their thanks with a tinge of fear and then fled away quickly, shutting the door behind them. Was it the room or her appearance? No matter.

Emma turned back to the puzzle ball and presented her proof. "I have done what you asked. Please save me!" pleaded Emma. "You have saved yourself. Prepare yourself for your journey. You will leave in 2 minutes." stated the puzzle ball. Emma couldn't believe it but prepared to leave. All she had left to care for was an old picture. She pulled it out from her secret cache and put it on top of her bed. It was a picture of a happy couple, Emma and John. John had appeared out of the puzzle ball, but how? She stared at it for a moment and then walked back over to the puzzle ball. The ball split into 8 pieces and formed an oval. An oval full of dark currents. "Step into destiny." ordered the puzzle ball. Emma glanced around her room one last time: the picture of happiness, the alive but dying foreman on the floor, and the stains from her past on the walls. "I am no longer a slave, never again." she told herself. She looked into the dark swirls of current and walked into the unknown, ready for a new life....