

# Spellcaster's Hands

By Jonathan Lyster

Her hands are what I remember most. Shaping our future with curving palms and long graceful fingers. They were clenched as Thom and my father dragged her into our village. When they bound her, she stood tall, back pressed to the iron stake, feet buried in cinders and ashes. Her tunic fringe danced in the breeze that pushed dust devils across the parched dirt, but her hands were still. They looked soft, deceptively helpless against rough hempen cords that hot spring day.

Her gaze flitted like a bird seeking a nest, hopping from one face to another as we gathered around. I saw her focus on Chief as he strode toward us in the embroidered robes of his station. He stepped to the side of the rusted post and turned to face a mass of sweating bodies. We had come in from the wasted fields to witness the latest burning. I stood with my mother, away from the eagerest. Each time a sacrifice was brought forth, Mother warned me of the unruliness of otherwise kind people.

Chief lifted his arms. We hushed. He had the gift of magic when he spoke.

“The gods are displeased,” he declared in his rich voice. “We shall, we *must*, sacrifice again. I call upon the gods to accept our gift. Bless our fields. Fill the bellies of our children. Send the rain down upon us as you do for the folk of the mountains.”

At mention of the mountains, our faces turned north. We could see the foothills and the long, rising slopes ending in their sun-drenched peaks. Between those dry hills and the craggy

gray stone was a rich green band. We all knew tales of its abundance. The mountain folk were fat with blessings. But the gods turned their backs on us.

“We must give them the sacred flames they demand.” He pointed at the bound woman. “Let each of us bring wood for the gods’ fire.”

“I’m your sacrifice?” the woman said, astonished, her voice carrying as Chief’s did. Then she did a strange thing. She laughed.

The clot of people before me shared a sharply-drawn breath. I remembered the last few sacrifices. They had begged and wept and wailed before the fires were even lit.

The woman’s shoulder moved. She stepped from the stake, bindings falling away like chaff. Light glinted on a strip of jagged metal dropping into the cinders.

My father and Thom stepped forward, arrows drawn. Chief jumped back.

“How can I be *your* sacrifice?” the woman asked. Her hands bent as if the wind blew them toward Chief. “I am of the mountains. Rain falls when we need it. Our fields feed us well. I only come to the lowlands to gather seeds and roots of plants that once refused to grow in our mountains. Now they grow richly for us.”

Chief scowled. “Bind her again.”

Thom lowered his bow, glancing at my father before advancing on the woman.

“My people feast while yours starve,” the woman called out to the crowd. “We thank you for the sacrifices you have made on our behalf.”

Thom stopped, confused. He looked at Chief.

The woman turned to Chief in his fine robes of office, reaching toward him. “Great lord of the lowlands, you have given us such wealth. Our children grow strong in the mountains. Let me thank you for your generosity. I will gladly burn, knowing my smoke will make the gods

smile even more upon my people.” She made that gathering gesture again, a sweep of her fingers that took in Chief and Chief alone.

I did not see the spell for what it was at the time. A murmur traveled through the crowd, uncertainty taking hold.

“You have taken others from the road and brought them here to burn.” Another motion in Chief’s direction, hands splayed as though embracing him. “You have sacrificed my people. Likely those of the western plains. Even coastal traders traveling the low road past the bones of the metal beasts. You have greatly pleased the gods of others. Only now do I understand why the mountains grow rich. We harvest the gods’ blessings for those of our people whose flesh you have cast to the heavens.”

Silence fell over the crowd. Eyes swiveled toward the mountains again. I saw the faces of those beside Mother. Yearning and envy filled them. A long hunger.

“But answer this,” the woman said, her voice smooth, landing like sweet rain. “Why do you not make sacrifices for your own well-being?” As she uttered that word ‘sacrifice’, her hands seemed to caress Chief from a distance.

I sometimes wonder if Chief recognized the altered tide of thought among our people at that moment. He tried to laugh. “*You* are our sacrifice.”

“I am no sacrifice for you. A sacrifice costs. A sacrifice fills you with pain and loss. It means something to you. In my mountains there are families who ache each night wondering what fate befell husbands, wives, sons, and daughters who took the road into the low country. They sacrificed. What did those deaths cost you? You watched them burn with dry eyes and went back to your dry fields. When nothing grew, you burnt another stranger and turned back to tilling and seeding and hoping. But you never gave up a life of your own.” Her hands followed

an arc like the crescent moon, ending with palms pointing at Chief. “Who are you prepared to sacrifice? A child, perhaps?”

My mother clutched me to her, calloused fingers gripping my shoulders. Others in the crowd reached for their own boys and girls. I stepped away from her grasp, too proud of my years to be treated like a weanling.

“If not a child,” the woman said, “then who? Who means so much to all of you that you wince at the thought of losing them?” Once more, expressive hands unfolded toward Chief. “What will you give to the gods that you may please them? Long ago, children burned. Later, kings. Now you take my people. You burn us, but make no sacrifice of your own.”

From where I stood, I could see the shift among my people. They gazed at Chief with the intentness of a fox spying its prey. I watched him finally understand. Chief raised his voice to master us, but uncertainty had already crept into his words.

“You are the sacrifice. You will please the gods.” He stepped back. “Take hold of her. Bind her better this time.”

My father and Thom stood near. Neither moved.

“What are you waiting for? Bind her!”

A growl swept through the crowd.

“Why should we help the mountain folk again?” a woman in the crowd called out, “They are rich enough.” A man bellowed, “My fields are dying. We need rain.”

My father moved first. He cast his bow aside and grabbed Chief, pinning his arms. Chief yelped in terror. Then Thom was on him also, dragging him to the iron stake as the stranger flitted aside.

“Wood,” someone shouted. “Each one, bring wood for the gods’ blessing!”

It was Thom who insisted on taking the robe from Chief before they lashed his struggling form to the stake. Chief cried and swore in his underthings.

“For the gods!” someone screamed. “For our crops!”

Thom addressed the crowd as my father arranged the wood.

“The gods will be pleased at last,” he roared. “Bring a torch.”

I watched the woman slip away as fire licked the heavens. Chief began to shriek, surrounded by faces full of hope.

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Thom became Chief. Our seedlings continued to wither. No rain came. Two weeks later he called for a new sacrifice. It was my father they dragged to the stake, my father who howled into the night as he burned.

I fled beyond the village into the yellowing forest, away from my father's screams. Slowing, my feet took me to where the bones of the ancient bird lay. My father used to bring me here back when we hunted, before the deer herds moved too far for us to find.

Father told me stories at the start of our hunts, tales of these huge iron birds.

“These creatures swallowed whole villages,” he told me. “Spat them out in distant lands, unharmed but far, far away. But we are safe. The great birds are all dead, like the beasts on the low road.” He grinned, shouldering his bow. “We are the hunters now.”

When I returned, long after moonrise, the coals still glowed. A stench clung to the air. My father had gone up to the gods in smoke.

In the coming days there were whispers among my mother's sisters as they gathered in our house. My father had been the only man in the village who might challenge Thom as our new Chief. They wondered if my father was no real sacrifice at all. Not for Thom.

Only days later, Chief ordered two children brought forth. They screamed together, but not for long. Again I had to flee to the village's edge, away from the sounds. When the rain clouds passed over us again to darken the mountain slopes, the villagers brought the old healer-woman to the stake. She had the sturdiest house in the village. This time I stayed and watched with the rest. Chief moved in while her bones cooled.

Early the next morning my mother led me through the yellow forest to the road. She gave me a pack full of what food we still had. And my father's bow, with five arrows.

"Go," she said. "You must live."

"Come with me."

"My sisters are here. Even Thom is kin. These are my people and I am too old to change. Find a new people."

I found the path to the foothills. It followed the line of huge skeletons that marked the route. Father's tales told of war fought against beasts of metal. These ones had been standing guard, menacing the people before they were struck down by lightning cast forth by the gods. I climbed past the conquered into the mountains. Rain fell upon me on the thirteenth day. On the eighteenth, I came to the timber and stone walls of a mountain village.

Others followed me that summer, children I had known. The mountain people gave us shelter and tasks. We stuck together a little while, comforted as we learned our new world. As the seasons turned, those I had known scattered.

At first I told anyone willing to hear me my tale of the woman whose lovely hands worked magic, a magic that bent minds. Some listened intently. Others laughed and said there are no such things as spells. None knew her. No one could help me find her.

The voices of other women are harsh on my ears. Their hands are coarse, good for nothing but work. The years have curved my back and carved lines into my face. I have lived fifty summers on these slopes, though my feet yearn for the killing plains. These people, for all that they profess to care for strangers, for all that they cast their eyes down at mention of my lost, dead village in the land-become-desert below, do not hold my heart.

In all my time in these mountains, moving from village to village, I have found no sign of the witch-woman. I know now that I never will. I no longer tell my tale. I no longer carry the strip of metal she used to sever her bonds. Her face has faded from my memory, but I will always dream of the hands that ended my people. I imagine them closing my eyes when my sunset comes. They will be gentle. Graceful. Soft.