

WHEN NAIN CAME TO SHIRIN'S DOOR

Stories from the stars.

BY FILIP WILTGREN

The first time Nain came to Shirin's door, he was a young man, full of promise. They dallied over green mint tea and the date-crumble cakes Shirin's mother had baked. The sun filtered through the grape leaves over the veranda.

"Come with me to the stars," Nain said. "With you at my side, there is nothing I can't do."

"What about my family?" Shirin said. "What about my dancing and my friends?"

Nain let a server refill his mug of tea. The leaves reflected from the server's chromed carapace, making the robot look like part of nature. Hand-beaten carapace, hand-driven clay mugs. Shirin's family was respected, their daughter young and comely.

"It will only be two years," Nain said.

"For you."

She didn't say 'for us'.

The second time Nain came to Shirin's door, he was a young man, full of stories. He ate Shirin's hand-baked date cakes, and told of paragliding in the volcanoes of Radhir, of floating in space among the moons of Nuova Sol, a billion stars shining before his faceplate.

Shirin listened politely, her rheumy hands folded in her lap, her children and grandchildren around her. In the short breaks when Nain stuffed his face with cake, she told of dancing in the festivals, of her choreography and her children. Nain listened, but his heart wasn't in it, and her children wanted more stories of faraway planets, so in the end she fell silent.

The third time Nain came to Shirin's door, he asked to speak with Riva. Riva was a lithe beauty, with hair the colour of midnight and eyes that sparkled like a billion stars.

Shirin let Nain into her house, and watched, worry lining her face. The two youths talked on the veranda, below the cover of the grape vines. Riva laughed, and flirted, and each laugh was a spear in Shirin's heart.

The children's talks grew animated, then heated, and in the end Riva stormed away,

while Nain bowed his way out.

"Did he ask you to go away with him?" Shirin asked. Her granddaughter nodded, a motion proud in its stiffness.

"Why did you decline?" asked Shirin.

"That boy's heart is a billion miles away," Riva said, and Shirin nodded.

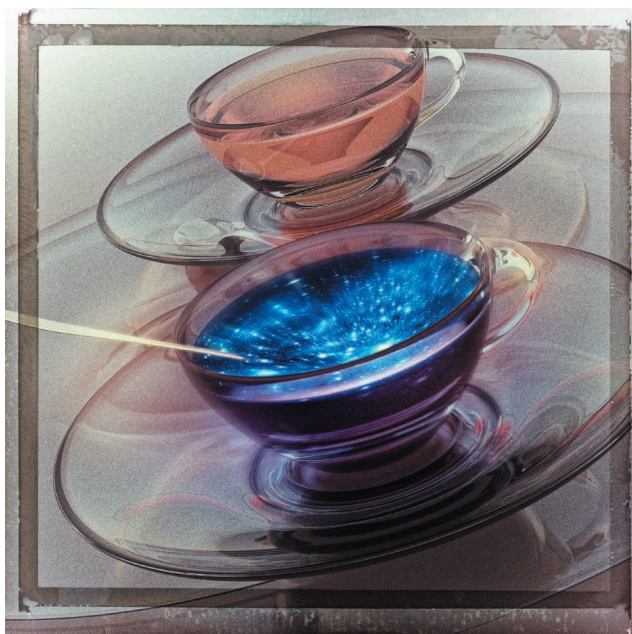


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a slave-collar around her neck.

"There was a family who lived here," he said. "Where are they now?"

"The master's family has always lived here, even before the wars," the servitor answered, bowing, and Nain invited himself in.

He looked at the frescoes on the walls, tall men in martial poses, tanks and walkers at their back.

"I knew your greatmother," he told the master of the house, a handsome man with an easy smile and friendly laugh. The man waved the information away.

"Ancient history," he said. "Come, tell us of the stars."

Nain bowed his head, and obliged, then went back whence he'd come.

The sixth time Nain came to Shirin's door, his steps were heavy and his hair was grey.

The armour on the door was gone, the house had gained an extra floor, and the veranda had been enclosed in glass. Apple trees grew in the courtyard, and a gaggle of young girls chased each other beneath them.

"Have you lost your way, grandfather?" one of them asked.

Nain sank down to her level, leaning an elbow on his knee and supporting himself with a hand on the grass.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Sahrin," the girl answered, and with the self-assurance of the truly young added, "Ma says its after one of our family's firstparents."

"Sahrin," Nain repeated, a crooked smile bisecting his face. "I think I may have known your greatmother, once upon a time."

"Will you tell me about her?"

Nain drew breath, but his answer was cut short. A man and a woman had come out on the porch.

"Don't bother the gentleman," chided the woman.

"No bother," said Nain. "I was just about to tell a story."

"Well then," said the man, "a story freely shared is a treasure to the heart. Would you come in and share it with all of us?"

And Nain entered, and told his story, and when it was time to leave, he stayed. ■

The fourth time Nain came to Shirin's door, he carried a force-shield on his hip, and a pair of nanoscale gun-bots riding on his shoulders. He found the house abandoned, holes blasted in its walls, grape vines burned stumps.

"Hey," he said, grabbing a nearby squatter. "The family who lived there, where did they go?"

The squatter shrugged, an elaborate gesture involving the rolling of his eyes and the wiggling of his fingers.

"Some went there," he said, pointing to the distant mountains. "Some went there —" the squatter pointed at the sky, "— and some went there." He pointed to a row of small mounds along one of the broken walls.

Nain went over to the graves, but all the stones were unmarked.

The fifth time Nain came to Shirin's door, he strode down a wide avenue, face lined, gold piping on his shoulders, gold braids across the midnight-blue of his uniform. He banged on the reinforced steel door, which slid aside to reveal a human servitor, a middle-aged woman, dressed wholly in white, with