



~ Part three of four ~

WORLD OF THE FIFTH SUN

a short story by Jeff Harrison ~ Illustration by Wade Shaw

Zack flicked his eyes open in alarm. The blazing sun in the cloudless cerulean sky above him seared his eyes, making him squint. A hot, steamy breeze wafted across his bare chest, making sweat immediately jump out on his skin, dampening the hair on his pecs, under his arms and across his brow. Shading his eyes with his right hand, he sat up. His head swam woozily and his vision blurred. He pressed his eyes shut trying to regain his equilibrium.

When he opened them again, he could see that he was in a grassy clearing. Tall verdant trees seemed to rush up and crowd him, making him feel like his perch near the cliff was precarious.

“Where the hell am I?”

He’d just been... What? What had he been doing? Drinking tea. It had been served to him by...that woman with skin the colour of chocolate. His mind was such a haze, like the humidity shimmering in the air around him.

A sibilant hiss behind him snapped his foggy mind to attention. Something was coming towards him in the grass and it was moving quickly. Zack crabbed backwards away from the unseen threat until his fingers grasped air, clumps of dirt and bits of grass falling off behind him into space. He glanced over his shoulder to see a pounding waterfall hundreds of feet below him. There was nowhere for him to go. Even as panic threatened to consume him, a small rational piece of his mind was nagging him that this place was familiar.

Unfortunately there was no time to consider this sense of déjà vu. A large arrow shaped head rose on a long sinuous neck to regard him, forked tongue flicking

in and out, scenting him. It was a giant snake, emerald scales, with obsidian blotches running the length of a massive body that disappeared into the grass. Lemon-yellow eyes set high on the narrow head regarded him, unblinking.

“We have no time for me to be gentle,” the serpent hissed, “but know I mean you no harm.”

Zack found it impossible to believe the creature as the muscled tail coiled around him firmly—although he had to admit not uncomfortably—and lifted him into the air. Then the creature snapped off into the jungle like a bolt of lightning. Glancing one final time behind him, his mind clicked with recognition. The clearing was the same one he’d seen his mysterious hostess spray-painting in the alley opposite the coffee shop. Another unsettling thought drifted through his mind as he and his captor...guide—whatever—spirited him away. Where was the jaguar?

As soon as they arrived at an enormous black stone ziggurat, the giant anaconda released him. The structure scintillated in the afternoon sun, even as it seemed to devour all the light around it, sucking the sunlight from the sky until it the day became blackest night, the pinprick light of a billion stars now the only illumination. Sharp, edges of volcanic glass seemed to tear at the air around it appearing more like a hole in its surroundings, than anything man-made.

“Where am I, exactly?” Zack asked. “And what the hell did you put in my tea,” he exclaimed making a sudden leap of logic. “You’re that crazy graffiti artist!”

“Yes. And no. My name is Aisha. I am the daughter of our Mother Earth. You are the Guardian and her future well-being is in your hands.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake! I’m not going to get a straight

answer out of you, am I? You're as loony as that crazy red-haired guy that appeared in my bathroom mirror warning me about the end of the world!"

His final words rushed out of his chest in a painful *whoosh* as the serpent snatched him up in her tail again and brought him within millimeters of her incessantly flicking forked tongue.

"Joaquim appeared to you? When?!"

"What happened to the part where you said you meant me no harm," he wheezed from crushed lungs.

"My apologies," she said and released him to fall on his ass in the jungle grass. "I *knew* she was cheating!"

"That's what Joaquim said, but he never said who the hell was cheating," Zack grumbled, as he stood, rubbing his bruised rear. Loincloths offered no padding whatsoever.

"*I'm cheating,*" snarled a deep feminine voice.

And *here's the jaguar*, Zack thought, watching the magnificent tawny and mottled black creature stalk sinuously out of the jungle to circle him and the ophidian.

"Your corrupting influence over the Guardian ends here!" the snake spat and launched herself like a javelin at the giant cat, who met her in the air mid leap. The two creatures slammed into the ground with enough impact to knock Zack off his feet again. This time he landed on the razor edged steps on the inky monolith. He gasped sharply as the volcanic glass drew blood, then yelped in fear as black tentacles of darkness wrapped his body more tightly than the snake had and dragged him up to perch precariously upon the zenith of its flat plateau. He could feel the inky appendages sucking hungrily at the wounds caused by his ascent, even as the two animals below drew blood and gave no quarter. Where his blood fell to the cold stone, it hissed and flames sprung up, quickly becoming a raging inferno with him trapped at its centre.

"This must to stop!" Joaquim's voice boomed across the night sky, shaking the stars from their fixed perch,

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sending them falling like spilled glitter, until nothing remained but his colossal form, carved from stone, looming over the two warring animals. "While you two fight for your prize, the world burns itself up, consuming Zack until there is nothing left. Is that what you would have? To fight until no one is the victor? To fight

until there is nothing left to fight over anymore? We all die—gods as well as humans—if that happens. Is that the ending you want, Aisha?"

The giant green anaconda released the jaguar from the crushing grip of her muscular coils, shimmered and was suddenly the cocoa-skinned woman who had given him the crazy tea. Zack knew for certain he was having one hell of a trip.

"I am sorry. I should know better." She let out a frustrated sigh and looked up at the hulking face, the mouth of which was large enough to swallow the ziggurat in one bite with Zack as the cherry on top. "But what is happening to the earth infuriates me so! You know I can feel it being violated every second, day and night—what would you do if your mother was being raped, desecrated, abused? I will tolerate it no longer!"

Zack caught a flash of movement to Aisha's right even as the spotted blur launched itself for a killing blow. Instead of scintillating green scales between its sharp teeth it got a mouthful of stone and a broken nose, as Joaquim's massive hand blocked the attack.

"And you!" He thundered at the cat, "You have been cheating since the game began. If it were in my power to terminate your claim in this battle, I would see it done."

The jaguar shimmered as the snake had and in its place was—

"Isabel?!" Zack was stunned.

Bringing her well-manicured hand up to her face, Isabel massaged her cracked and bleeding nose for a moment and when she took her hand away, the damage was gone.

"But you cannot interfere, Joaquim, so I suggest you go back to the sidelines and do what you do best—watch. You yourself break the rules by interfering now. As always your hypocrisy is pure hubris."

"Not so, Isabel. As the trickster, I may not be able to change the rules, but I am free to play within the rules created by others. As such, I merely use your own rules against you. Perfectly allowable."

"And yet you exercise them on behalf of Aisha, who is clearly losing. You cannot pick sides to sway the outcome and you clearly have. If anyone should forfeit, it should be you. Let me claim my victory!"

"It is not your victory to claim," Aisha hissed.

"Then let's settle this sister," Isabel growled, growing long knife-like claws from her hands.

"Gladly!" Aisha's balled fists transformed into rock, sharp crystal points erupting to create deadly spiked maces.

As the two women tore into each other with renewed hatred, Joaquim's gargantuan face turned to regard Zack, who struggled futilely at his tarry bonds. "You must wake up, Zack."

"Why me?"

"There's not really time to go into all the details, but you are what's known as an Avatar—a divine spirit reincarnated into a mortal body to restore a karmic injustice."

Zack felt the all too real heat of the spreading fire lick at his skin—this dream was getting way out of control. "To hell with them! Let them tear each other to pieces! I have more pressing matters of survival to be concerned about! Why should I care?"

"Because, just as Aisha is the daughter of Mother Earth, Isabel is the fiery heart of humanity—but both are horribly out of balance. If they destroy each other, you will have no world to go back to. It's up to you to restore the balance."

"I am just an ordinary guy who was given some doped up tea after a stressful few months. I have no clue about guardians, balance or cosmic world wars and

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as soon as I can shake off this bad dream, I'm outta here!"

With a snap Zack broke free of the tentacles strangling the life out of him and lunged free—sitting up on the cool tiled floor of Aisha's kitchen.

"Screw you and your damned mystical war!" he bellowed into his surprised hostess' face.

Scrambling to his feet he clambered back out the window he'd come in through and fled down the fire escape, knocking potted plants off their railing perches to smash like little dirt-filled clay bombs in the alley below.

"Zack, wait. Please!" Aisha called after him. "You're my mother's only hope! Earth's only hope!"

"Find yourself another freak to fight your war for you 'cuz I'm not buying into any of this hokey horseshit!" he yelled back up at Aisha's silhouette peeking over the balcony after him. "I'm outta here!"

He bolted out of the alley, dead set on storming over to Isabel's and demanding to know what her part was in all this fucked up mumbo jumbo.

As the speeding taxi slammed into him, sending him spiraling into the air, Zack had enough time to reflect on the absurdity of demanding anything from Isabel, before his skull came crashing down into the hard black pavement. A frantic siren wailed in the distance, as the asphalt greedily sucked up Zack's blood. Aisha emerged from the alley in time to see the EMTs tear Zack's shirt open and yell: "CLEAR!"

The ionized snap of electricity jolted her heart from where she stood. Looking up she spied Isabel standing in the spotlight of a street lamp opposite her.

This isn't over! Aisha's thought crackled across the space between them like summer lightning.

Isn't it? Isabel thought smugly back. *We shall see how resilient our little soldier is.* She turned her back on her rival and drifted away, leaving Aisha to stand helplessly amidst yet another natural disaster she could do nothing to prevent.

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