

TEMPLE OF THE EXPLODING HEADS

OMNIBUS by Ren Garcia

EXCERPT

From Born in a Jar

The day before Kay was born was when she saw her first demon in the flesh. She had run out to the sea with a basket full of stuffing and thread. There, out in the sun, she was putting the finishing touches on a little stuffed animal she had been working on. Her basket was open and all her materials were carefully arranged in front of her. It was a gazelle made of a colorful patchwork of red, blue, green and gold fabrics. It had green buttons for eyes—just like his eyes will be. Her grandmother had gotten her all the components for its making, and she'd spent weeks working on it. Like all of her people, she had strong, dexterous hands and, though she had never made a stuffed animal before, it was quite accomplished; a master toy-maker couldn't have done better.

She was going to give it to Kay, as a gift from her to him. It was a modest gift. He was a Great Elder Lord with money and power and technological items that she could only wonder over. But, she had made this little gazelle all on her own and had poured every bit of care and love she had in its making. She hoped one day that it might mean something to him. She dreamed of talking to him about it one day: “Kay, I made that little gazelle for you before you were born. I made it just for you.”

I hope you come to love it, Arin-Dan. Just like I love you...

She was restless and impatient. She wanted Kay. She wanted him born. She wanted him out in the world ... with her.

And then, she could feel eyes all over her. Watching, laughing.

Demons. There they were, staring at her from behind a tree: leering, bleeding, skinless.

“Hi, ya, Sam,” they hissed. “What're you doing?”

Frightened, she dropped everything and turned to run home.

Wait! The gazelle! She left it there. She turned to grab it and then run away as fast as she could.

A demon stood there holding the gazelle by the neck, squeezing it in her bloody fist. The demon was female, miserably thin, and dripping half-clotted blood. She was horribly bent at the torso.

She stank, as she heard demons always do.

“You forget this?” the demon said in a callow voice holding up the stuffed gazelle.

Sammidoran stood there powerful but helpless before the demon who could not be fought.

She’d worked so hard on that little gazelle.

That was for Kay. She hated the demon! She hated them all!

Moving like an uncoiling serpent, she tore off across the grassland leaving the demons behind in a hurry.

“HAHAHAHAHA! Run! Run, Sam!” they called to her. *“Run all you want ... we’ve got plans for you ... All in good time!”*