



Regenerated
A Short Story by Carolyn Kephart
First published in *Quantum Muse*

No one ever really got to know a rashak, and Cela had never made an attempt. She patched them up and they paid her if they had money, giving exactly what her services were worth, neither more nor less. However much agony they might be in, they never showed it. Their flat wide-mouthed saurian faces remained stonily impassive even when the pain ebbed, and their gratitude was equally effusive.

Irksome though the rashaka were, Cela could not help being impressed by at least some their traits. True, they were almost pathologically inscrutable. Vowed to stern and unforgiving gods, they lived in continual self-denial. They had no written language, little if any spirit of inquiry, and more than a few disgusting habits. But none were better fighters, formed for war and the hunt, tireless in strength and highly resistant to wounds thanks to their massive, manlike physiques and scaly hide; their uncannily keen senses and formidable stamina were legendary. Their loyalty, when they chose to bestow it, was beyond question or reproach. They were also never violent unless goaded, a trait which was not generally known nor entirely believed by humankind, most of whom made every effort to avoid them. Cela's lack of prejudice was atypical, and thus she and Koth had met.

She had been out in the far hills one day, foraging for rare herbs and enjoying the last of hot high summer, when she discovered a rashak male finishing up a battle with a rout of drabbs, the vicious near-men who roamed that lawless part of the land. Stupid and weak, drabbs never hunted save in packs; yet for even four of them to consider themselves the match for a rashak was a foolish, fatal error. Still, by the time the last drabb fell, the rashak was covered in blood—the almost black blood of his race. As Cela watched, he dropped to his knees without a sound save a slight hiss, and shut his eyes, his head bent, his great shoulders drooping, his thick tapering tail motionlessly curled behind him. Cela realized that he was either calling on his gods for strength, or resigning himself to death. When she approached, he barely seemed to notice her, save for a momentary flaring of his nostril-slits that in a single breath determined that she was human and female—and a healer, from the aromatic herbs she carried. But then he drew another breath and caught it, and his shoulders straightened and his eyes opened very fast, fixing on hers. Startled by the stare, Cela controlled her dislike of his reptilian features, looking away as she reached for her satchel's clasp.

"I intend no harm. Permit me to aid you," she said to him, speaking the formal tongue that united all the rashak tribes. She knew only a few phrases, and spoke them badly—there were gutturals and clicks that she would never get right—but still he understood, and shook his head as he looked away.

"You should leave. Just go." He had replied in the common tongue, rasping and hoarse but almost without accent, quite as if that were his native language—unusual, since rashaka usually bothered to learn only the rudiments, and let gestures and grunts fill in for the rest.

"Payment isn't necessary," Cela said with a touch of impatience, knowing it could only be lack of money that made him refuse her help. Warriors of his kind spent every copper they had on their gear, and his was, she noted, of the highest quality, and rather more showy than rashaka tended to favor. She did not say more, since it would be a waste of words.

He hesitated yet again. "I need water. And food."

Cela was provided with both, and gave him what she had. As she set about healing him, he ate and drank with undisguised greed that made clear how long he had gone without, and why the drabbs had managed to inflict such damage. Taking a little jar of salve from her satchel, Cela anointed the rashak's lacerated skin—or rather his scaly hard hide, rough and cold under her fingers. Soon he was close to whole again, and his powers of regrowth would do the rest.

"Good work," he said, glancing at his arm, that had been cut to the bone. "I've seen few better."

"I thank my teachers," Cela replied, a little startled by the extravagance of the compliment.

His opaque eyes scanned her with an attention that rashaka seldom deigned to confer upon a mere human. "It hasn't made you rich."

Cela glanced down at her mannish near-rags with a shrug. It had been a very long time since she had cared about her looks, but to hear a rashak comment on them was...strange. "That salve costs a fortune to make," she said, staring at the now-empty little jar.

The information didn't seem to impress him. "I'm called Koth."

Rashaka never gave their names away lightly either, and at least initially used the first four of them. "Greetings, Koth," Cela replied, looking hard at him now.

"Greetings, Lady Celandra. And thank you." At her wide-eyed shock he gave the closest thing a rashak had to a smile. "You don't recognize me." Standing with only a little difficulty now, moving from corpse to corpse, with practiced brutality he wrenched off their long greasy scalps, which were worth money. One of the drabbs wore a jewel that had probably cost its original owner her life; this Koth appropriated with a hard tug, snapping the chain. For some time the rashak stared at the sunlit blue spark in his hard razor-nailed palm. "Take it," he finally rasped, holding the gem out to Cela. "You always said these were your favorites."

Cela's fingers closed around the jewel as her attention fixed on Koth's flat face, and its stare so widely spaced that it seemed to look clear past her.

"You used to tell me that my eyes were brighter," she replied, fighting to keep her voice calm.

He inclined his head in a way she remembered from someplace far, someplace deep in the past. "Yes. I said that."

She felt her grip on the gem loosen. "But—I had thought Transformation was a fraud."

"It exists." His opaque gaze flicked. "Hard to find, costly to buy, and not easy to survive."

Cela remembered the rest of the hearsay, and spoke it dry-mouthed. "Nor is there any going back. It cannot be reversed."

His broad, thick-muscled shoulders barely shrugged, and he made no answer.

For a long time she could only stare at him, stunned by the change, trying and failing to find the man she had loved. "But Jorgen ... why?"

"The name is Koth." His thick-lidded eyes flashed coldly. "Human flesh is weak in too many ways. I knew I could be stronger. Much stronger."

Ah, but he was ugly—that toad's head with its recessive planes and mottled scales and wide, lipless mouth. Unable to make any form of reply, Cela turned her full attention to putting her healing items away, and finding a bit of leather lacing to hang the gem around her neck. After a very long silence Koth spoke again.

"This place isn't safe for you." Another hesitation. "You are alone."

Cela wanted to say that she had been alone since he had left her, that she never dreamed they would meet again; that she was overjoyed, furious, and appalled to the depths of her soul. But far too much had changed, and she merely nodded a reply. For Koth, it was enough.

Since that time on they had been together, and from a strictly survival viewpoint it worked very well. Koth put himself in continual danger, and Cela coped with the consequences, across endless reaches of lucrative terrain. Cela's memories merged into the present and momentarily fixed on Koth, who continued to sit in the meditative trance that prefaced every fight, communing with his adopted gods. She sighed, inwardly as always. Over the month they had spent together, she had realized hour by hour that whatever she once loved in Jorgen had burned to dust. The present moment found them in yet another breathtaking landscape they would only hunt in and hurry through, where in another time they would have lain down in the sweet grass and...she bit her lip lest the sigh escape her as she turned away again, locking her attention elsewhere until the murmur of Koth's reptilian blur startled her more than a scream.

"I'm sorry."

Her attention never wavered from the mists now hovering up from the meadow beneath their safe spur of rock. She was required to keep watch, sitting absolutely immobile, during Koth's period of meditation. Silence was also expected, but this time she had to reply, whispering through frozen lips.

"Sorry for what, Koth?"

She fought to keep her voice calm, and to quiet her heart that was beating all but audibly. What she had waited so long to hear might be on the point of being said.

He hissed faint irritated regret. "That dagger was a bargain. I should have bought it."

Cela's emotions silently collapsed within her. Focusing again on the lovely curling tendrils of opalescent mist in the gold-grassed, pond-dotted valley below them, she noted those spirals that were most likely to jet suddenly upward and twist themselves into translucent, delicate, appallingly murderous gloamrippers. Night was coming on and several of the monsters were now taking shape, elegantly slim and feral, seeking to feed on whatever they might find, with a ravenous preference for flesh. Once they were killed, which would take some time and considerable risk, their hearts would fetch a high price. Automatically Cela forgot how beautiful the creatures were.

"There," she whispered, barely indicating the now fully-formed 'rippers as she spoke. Koth stared where she pointed, blinked acknowledgment, then rose and made his soundless half-slithering way down the hill to the ponds without a single word or backward look.

Life was all about death, anymore.

"Seven hearts. Not bad."

To Koth's flat sibilant observation Cela nodded. Koth had been badly damaged during the fight—wounded almost to death, something Cela never really got used to despite its frequency. Nevertheless, she had yet again managed with all her skill to heal him, save this time for a missing part of his tail; but it would grow back within a few days and look the same

as ever. The two were now camped and finishing the evening meal. Koth was feeding on some fish that might have been fresh a few days before, a chance find on the lake's margin. As Cela sat across from him prudently upwind, washing her dried rations down with lukewarm pond water and celebratory last swigs of sour wine, she once again reflected, too tired for rancor, on the luxury that used to be a regular part of her life, and how sweet that life had been once Jorgen had found his way into it. But all fires died eventually. They blazed, they devoured, they were satisfied and they died. What was left never looked anything close to what it had been in life.

"Cold?"

Koth was actually looking at her. He seldom did, unless it was to express the only emotion he seemed to possess in any degree, irritation. Usually they sat well apart from each other, and Koth's gaze focused someplace too distant for Cela to ever hope to find. His flat hooded eyes in his lizard face were unreadable, as always, but he threw a handful of branches on the fire and the flames leapt to warmer life.

"You were shivering. Can't have you catching a chill."

No, they could definitely not have that. If Cela fell sick, it would decrease her effectiveness. With a half-shrug of thanks she finished her meal, and then reassessed the days earnings with greater, less gain-related attention. Gloamripper hearts were like jewels; once taken from the body, they hardened and shone. Crowded in the palm of Cela's hand they shimmered within, changing color from green to dawn-orange to gold. She would have liked to keep one for its beauty, but that was out of the question; they were simply too valuable. Koth would insist on an even split of the proceeds of the sale, but Cela's wants were few and she would inevitably give Koth most of her share, which he would accept without protest, thanking her with his usual word or two.

Cela felt a small ironic smile lift her mouth-corners as she studied the shimmering little lumps, dead flesh animated by a semblance of life. Fires might blaze and die, but the light of the gems would never go out; they were in their own way immortal.

She heard Koth's voice, a warning rasp. "Don't lose them."

Without replying, she returned the hearts to the pouch, and the pouch to her inner pocket, and looked over to her companion, now re-settling into meditation. Watching him, knowing she could do so completely unnoticed, she permitted herself the futile indulgence of recalling the past.

It had been a very short time to her, that single year with Jorgen, so sweet it had seemed as if all of existence was light caught in a prism and refined to its purest. It had begun in the dead of winter, a spark floating amid the snowflakes. The wars had just ended, and he was a wounded hero; out of charity she had taken him into her house and made him well again. Everything about them seemed to balance: a lord's untimely widow, and the younger son of nobody; she studious and retiring, he brash and heedless, brimming with charm. It was only natural that she should fall deeply in love with him, and to her amazement he had seemed to reciprocate in full. Never during their seeming infinity of bliss had it ever occurred to Cela that she was part of Jorgen's life only as an hour is to a day, and that she might be for the moment noontide in all its warmth, but there had been a dawn before her, and sunset was to come, and then another day, with fresh pleasures and adventures. For her, time had stalled at a brilliant height, and the only things that changed were her emotions, that shifted from shock, to rage, to agony as Jorgen gradually sought fresh distractions, both carnal and combative. When he had suddenly become fascinated with the sternly ascetic way of the rashaka, Cela had almost been relieved. Never could she have envisaged how far he would take that admiration.

He at last left entirely, and time for Cela became a long weary walk down a blank corridor filled with fog. She had not been rich despite her rank, and the gifts she had heaped on Jorgen, garnering the less thanks the more she gave, had impoverished her. Forsaking the home that now seemed unbearably empty, she wandered as an itinerant healer, aiding and learning as she sought word of Jorgen. Although often in need, she never asked payment, accepting whatever was given no matter how small the amount; and unlike many healers she willingly helped all races, from human as she was, to rashak, which was far from that. Thus she and Jorgen had met again, only he wasn't Jorgen anymore. He was Koth, whose blood would run cold until the day he died.

Perhaps the thing she missed most was the laughter. During the time of fire, she and Jorgen had always joked, teased, traded wits, and so often their play had led to passion. Made bold by the drink, she decided to coax a spark. Reaching as his back was turned, she put her hand on Koth's shoulder, lightly moving up his neck. He no longer had ears, but she tickled the place one of them would have been, and called him a few of the hundred little names she had once used with him.

He shook her off instantly, his voice a snapped hiss. "Stop it."

The shock amazed her. The suddenness of it, the clear implication that if she ever tried anything like that again, all would be over between them...she moved back to her place, staring into the faltering fire, feeling her features stiffening to a mask as if she had thrust her face into the flames. Rashaka only mated in a once-yearly obedience to instinct, vent to vent. She'd been stupid yet again.

Wordlessly turning away, she began her usual preparations for sleep. She knew that as she undressed and washed and performed her other necessary tasks, Koth would be looking on with complete indifference if he bothered to look at all. Her beauty, which she had taken pains to revive for his sake, made no more impression on him than the sight of a corpse many days dead. "Good night," she said once she had lain down, her face to the stars, feeling the little sparks torment her eyes until they blurred.

Usually Koth replied more or less at once, with no particular interest, to Cela's words that always ended the day, but this time he was silent awhile before his voice hissed in its hoarse undertone.

"Celandra. Just because I do not choose to remember never means that I forget."

Had he struck her or said something tender, Cela could not have been more shocked; yet as almost always, Koth's flat black eyes held no emotion that she could read. The reflection of the campfire gleamed in them, but they had no light of their own. Once again, he was merely making a statement, and clearly neither wished nor expected an answer; and he got none.

Sleepless, Cela at last looked across the waning flames at the immobile form outlined by the darkness. Koth lay with his back to her, asleep on the bare stone, his rasping breath slow and regular. His big manlike body was perfectly muscled, its symmetries striking, and it would stay that way long past the limit of a human lifetime, its vigor undiminished. But what did Koth live for? The hunt and the kill and the loot; money and weaponry and the honing of his fighting skills. He had allies, but no friends, and no real kinship with his foster race. No beauty moved him, nor horror. He ate the most loathsome refuse and the rarest delicacies with equal indifference. It was not a life for a being fully human, with warm deep feelings and gifts to give the world, capacities for joy and wonder, and few years left to savor them. Since their reunion, she had followed Koth wherever he led, trying to find any trace of Jorgen; tonight she had given up the search. The night air's chill seemed to emanate from her soul, and she trembled in her meager blanket.

Finally, she had told herself the truth. Tomorrow, after she and Koth returned to the settlement and sold the gloamripper hearts, she would quietly depart and find her way back

to the city she had called her home. He would perhaps search for her a day or so, maybe even make inquiries, but that would be the extent of his concern. They would never see each other again.

Reaching for the pouch that held the gloamripper hearts, Cela once again poured them into her palm and watched their shifting exquisite glow. Returning the hearts to the pouch all save one, she leaned to the fire and dropped it into the center of the blaze, as a sacrifice to several gods who so far had ignored her. Never before had she been so rash and wasteful, but she was at last beyond caring. Then she quietly got up and circled the waning flames that separated her from Koth, lying down next to him as close as she dared, studying the rise and fall of his broad muscle-laden shoulders and back in the last of the light.

"Goodbye, Jorgen," she whispered soundlessly. Emotions of every kind mixed within her, canceling each other out, forming a flat, numb weariness. Lightly she ran her hand over his unconscious outline, tracing but not daring to touch...

With a movement too fast to even startle her, Koth rolled over and caught her in his arms. He was still asleep, his eyes shut, but his breath came fast. He clutched her body to his, grinding her tender flesh against his stone-sharp scales.

All he wanted was her warmth. She knew that, and she gave him what she had, fighting not to shiver as he drained her heat and made it his. The only thing that mattered was that she was in his embrace for the first time since he had left her as a human. Jorgen may have become Koth, but when Cela shut her eyes and willed away the pain she felt herself transmogrified, returned to a joy thought forever lost; and as she thrilled with the heat of remembrance, Koth wrapped her ever closer, exactly as Jorgen had once done with his goddess, his adored, his diamond star.

I will leave you, she thought. But not yet, for reasons he chose not to remember. Turning her head, she took a last look at the ashes of the fire where the gloamripper heart gleamed and shimmered like the miracle it was, and fell asleep.



Other works by Carolyn Kephart:

WYSARD and LORD BROTHER: Parts One and Two of the Ryel Saga, acclaimed epic fantasy

THE RYEL SAGA: A TALE OF LOVE AND MAGIC (WYSARD and LORD BROTHER complete in one volume)

QUEEN OF TIME – Contemporary magic realism

PENTANGLE: FIVE POINTED FABLES – Short fiction previously published in ezines, plus a bonus tale