

Shimmer

by Gary V. Powell

Tara slept naked, her slender dancer's body stretched over damp and wrinkled sheets. On their balcony, stripped to his cut-offs, Will fought the New Orleans heat and humidity with a cigarette and cold beer. He'd been here two months, never expecting to stay this long. After two tours in Afghanistan, he'd had a job lined up in Shreveport.

But that was before Tara.

Two stories below, a man—likely a conventioneer separated from his companions—shuffled along Rue Dauphine. Two younger men in jeans and t-shirts crossed the empty street in the shimmer of a 2 AM street lamp. They appeared to ignore the lone reveler, apparently lost in their own conversation, but then pounced when they came even. They pushed the man against the door of the store-front holy-roller church. He thrashed and elbowed to no avail. One assailant punched him in the gut. The other struck him in the face. Their victim sagged to his hands and knees, and in the end ceased to resist the pilfering of his watch, ring, and wallet.

Will re-entered the apartment, intent on going out and offering help. He was nearly to the door when Tara opened an eye. “Where you goin’?”

“There was a robbery.”

She rose to one elbow, brown breasts lolling in the shadows. “I tell you when you go.”

That wasn't exactly their arrangement. He could leave anytime. If he really wanted to, she wouldn't stop him. “I should check on that man.”

Her lips parted, and her tongue, two-pronged and serpentine, slithered forth and across the room, over articles of clothing—thongs, bras, tops, and skirts—left to lay where they'd fallen. Without moving her body, eyes unblinking, she unzipped him and slipped inside. She wrapped around and gave a tug. Then, that quick, her tongue snapped back into her mouth.

This was no new trick, but it left him rattled every time.
She grinned when he steadied himself against the sofa.
“Boy, I know you.”

Partly, he hated himself for it. Partly, he no longer gave a shit. “No, really, that man could be hurt.”

She stood on muscular legs. six-pack belly shiny with perspiration in the pale light. Then she did that thing where she shimmered before separating into two identical Taras. One of them said, “Come on back to bed. I ain't done wit you yet.” The tongue of the other lashed out and flicked his ear.

In the Korengal Valley, desperate men edged among ancient stones. Out on the street, a voice called for help.

Will closed his eyes and exhaled, shutting out the Valley and the voice. He focused his mind on a single point like she'd instructed. After a few seconds, he shimmered and divided, too.

