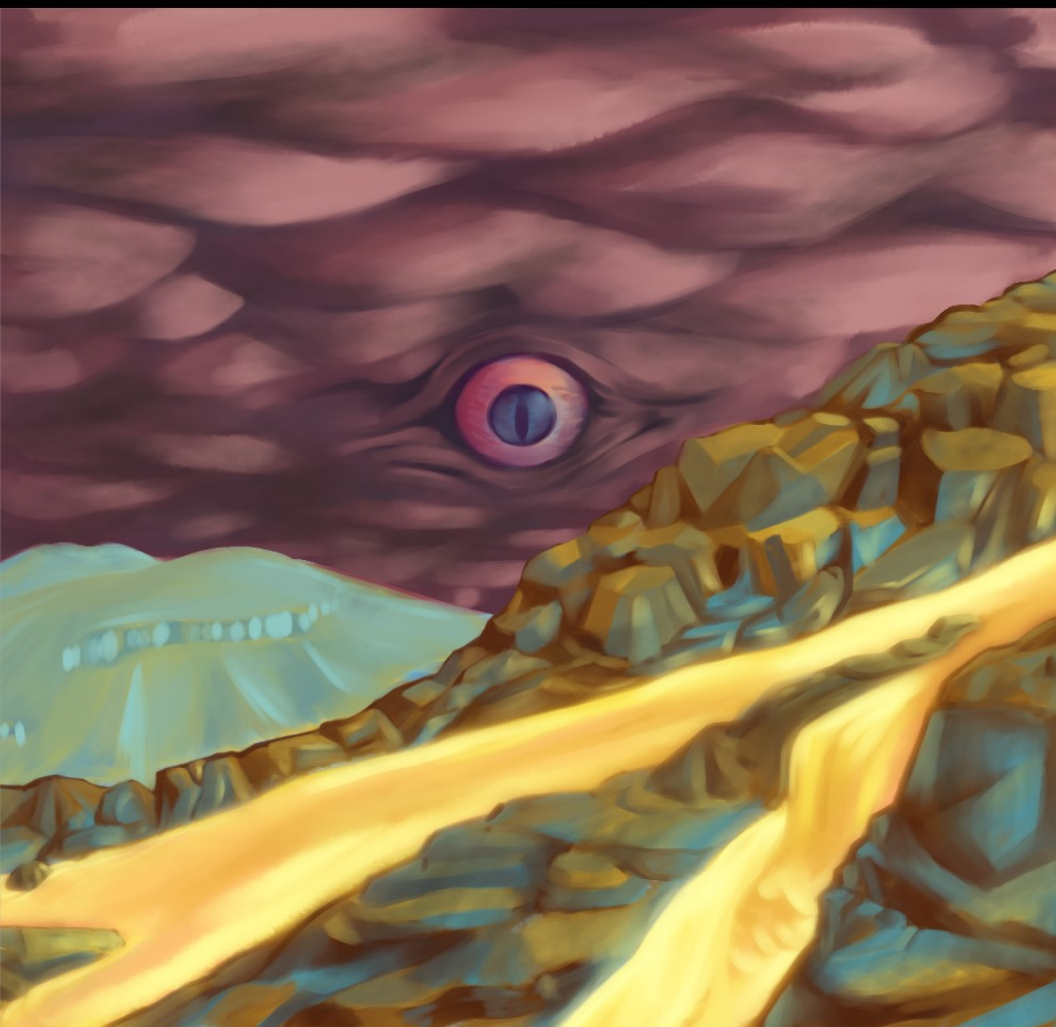


THE FORTUNA GIVERS' FESTIVAL

A Short Story



ALEX SCOTT

THE FORTUNA GIVERS' FESTIVAL

By Alex Scott

I was a kid, about six or seven, the last time Mount Me erupted. I'd sit at my window, watching the plumes spread across the sky from the top of the mountain, as it did about every thirty years or so. I'd see the ash falling, and take a moment to remember it wasn't snow. My whole life, I thought Mount Me was just doing what volcanoes do. Ours just happened to do so on a somewhat regular basis, at a safe enough distance that my hometown of Fortuna didn't risk becoming another Pompeii.

Then Mount Me erupted thirty years later, as scheduled, but didn't let up, even after a month. Smoke and molten rock still spewed from the top, with Fortuna right downwind. The snowfall from my childhood had become a seemingly endless blizzard, killing the crops normally fed by the fertile soil the previous eruptions left behind. A stream of lava destroyed a section of the Interstate heading west, leaving us with only a narrower highway going south. Some people worried that the lava would creep

toward the town itself. To make matters worse, I lost my mother. She was experiencing chest pains, and thanks to the ash obscuring the roads, the ambulance never made it in time. We wore masks to the funeral like we were in a pandemic. Only my wife Wanda and I attended the burial.

In all my life, I'd never thought of living anywhere else, but now I began to think it was perhaps time to take root elsewhere. When Wanda told me she was pregnant, that sealed the deal. I had to get us all out of here.

I told her my decision the morning after she gave me the news, and we talked it over, after which she placed a call to her parents out near Chicago. They had a nice house overlooking Lake Michigan, with plenty of room for the two of us, and the baby if we were still staying there by then. They were, of course, overjoyed at the news, and said we could come over and stay as long as we liked.

Not that it would be easy. We weren't the only ones who were abandoning ship, so we'd have to

endure the traffic going out of town for a little while. And we couldn't take everything. We were going to have to leave behind the furniture, many of the art supplies we'd collected, most of the tools in the basement. And the way Fortuna was going, we'd never be able to sell the house. But it was a small price to pay for health and security, especially for our baby.

I had just shut the trunk on our suitcases when a black Honda rolled up to the house. Somehow it still looked sleek and polished even with all the smoke in the air. A man with a shaved head and a woman with a bob cut, both wearing masks and goggles, hopped out. "Mr. Garland?" the man said.

"That's me. How can I help you?"

"I'm Carmody," he said, "and this is Traister." The woman nodded her head. "And we're with the Fortuna Parks Department. Going on a trip?"

"My wife and I are going to Chicago." And I was holding the car door open while she got in. "We're having a baby, and we can't stay here."

"I see. That's too bad. A lot of people seem to be making that decision lately. Hard to say I blame them. The volcano's never gone this long. But what if I told you that, with your help, we could make it so nobody has to leave? We can bring the whole town back from the dead."

I leaned down and told Wanda, "Let me see where this is going," then shut the door so she could take her mask off and breathe. I asked

Carmody what he meant.

"Why don't we go inside?" Traister said. "It's awfully hard to talk with these masks on, isn't it?"

It was. For weeks I'd had to constantly ask people to repeat themselves, and vice versa, thanks to the masks muffling our voices so much. There was no ash falling today, but there was an endless red haze all around us, and oppressive heat. I knocked on the car window and ran it by Wanda. She rolled her eyes and said "Fine," and got out.

Once we were all inside and seated around the coffee table, and our masks were off, I saw the mole near Carmody's eye, and realized I knew him from somewhere. He'd been in all the mayor's press conferences since this whole crisis started. Somehow I hadn't pegged the name. "You're the actual head of the Parks Department?"

"Yes, and Traister is my deputy."

"It's been an honor and a privilege to serve this community," she said.

"Okay, but what are you doing here?" I said. "We're both just artists. What can we do?"

"It's just you, actually," Carmody said, taking a seat in my easy chair. "How familiar are you with the history of this town?"

"About as familiar as everybody else. It started out as a Spanish mission, then the U.S. government chased them and the Natives out, and Fortuna expanded from there."

"Not bad," Traister said. "But you're familiar with the old Givers' Festival, right?"

"Oh, I loved that when I was a kid," Wanda said. "My friends and I would go to the fairgrounds, then spend the night together and exchange gifts we'd all gotten each other."

"My whole class did that," I said. "We'd put all the gifts together, then everybody took turns picking them out. Everybody got one chance to steal a gift from someone else." The Givers' Festival always began whenever the volcano finished erupting. Wanda and I had been looking forward to enjoying our first together this year.

"My school never did that," Wanda said. "Lucky. But what does that have to do with us? What does that have to do with Harold?"

"You see," Traister said, "the Givers' Festival is actually a very old practice in Fortuna, going back to the original Spanish mission. But back then, The gifts weren't for your friends or family; they were for Mount Me."

I let out a little laugh. "What, like a sacrifice?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Traister was completely stone-faced. Suddenly it wasn't so funny anymore. "To an extent, the Town of Fortuna has always relied on Mount Me for its prosperity. The eruptions renew the soil, which helps us grow some of the finest wheat fields and apple orchards

in North America. But that comes at some cost. Mount Me is not an ordinary volcano. Mr. Carmody?"

Carmody showed me a tablet displaying a graph labeled as seismic readings, but which resembled something more like an electrocardiogram. There were regular pulses all across the image. "What is this?" I asked.

"That, if you can believe it," Carmody said, "is the heartbeat of the mountain. Something is *alive* in there."

"Alive? You're kidding. Nothing could live in an active volcano."

"Well, there are creatures that live next to deep sea vents," Wanda said.

"But those creatures don't themselves cause the eruptions," Traister said. "We don't have definitive proof, but over the last several decades, as technology has improved, we've managed to gather some very suggestive evidence of a living presence inside Mount Me. We've code-named it Typhon, after the monster sealed under Mount Etna by Zeus. Those pulses? A few years ago they started beating faster. Right before the eruption last month, they were so fast they almost resembled a panic attack. And it hasn't let up since then. Typhon, or whatever's in there isn't just alive, it's upset. And we're worried that this town is to blame."

"How so?" Wanda said. "Was the Givers' Festival supposed to calm it

down or something?"

"Something like that," Carmody said. "The old Givers' Festivals came about to get the whole town involved, and possibly obscure what was really going on. In the old days, while the volcano erupted, the mayor would select a citizen of Fortuna—completely at random, so no partiality—to ascend Mount Me. There's a platform near the crater built explicitly for that purpose. Whatever happened to the citizen would happen, then the eruption would stop."

I stood up. "Hold on. You're telling me that festival we all enjoyed when we were kids was actually part of some human sacrifice ritual? That's insane!"

"As it happens," Carmody said, "that's exactly what the city council thought. This is a town of God-fearing Christians, after all, and the whole thing smacks of appeasing some pagan fire god. In the eruption of 1901, the town began sending cattle up the mountain instead. They still had the lottery, and the one chosen would still go up the mountain to deliver the cattle, but he'd be able to come back."

"Wait," Wanda said, "you're not talking about—"

"The King of the Festival? Of course."

"Good Lord," I said. "My best friend's uncle was the last one. He was the emcee for the whole festival. I

never heard anything about him going up Mount Me!"

"You were probably never meant to. Then we get to our next problem. After the '91 eruption, the city council decided the ritual was too superstitious and inhumane to continue. So they voted to make the King a purely ceremonial role in the next festival."

"And I think I see where this is going," I said. "I'm the new King, aren't I?"

"Your name came up as soon as Mount Me blew its top," Carmody said. "The longer it erupts, and the more people leave, the more we're forced to confront the possibility that this old ritual may have had some truth to it. That we do need to appease Typhon. Reyansky Farms is contributing five cows and a truck to load them in. You just need to drive it, let the cattle out, say a few ceremonial words, and then drive back down. By the time you make it to town, the eruption should end."

"We're sure about that? How do we know it'll work?"

"We don't. But it's our last option left. At the rate people are leaving, we estimate that Fortuna will be a ghost town by the end of the month. And who knows what Typhon or Mount Me will do with no one around to offer anything?"

I had to sit down again. Wanda put her arms around me, and opened her mouth to say something, but

couldn't seem to get anything out. Finally she leaned her head on my shoulder.

"During a volcanic eruption?" I said.

"The platform in question is far enough from the crater that none of the lava, smoke, or fumes should reach you."

I began to feel like I had sludge in my stomach. "When would I have to do this?"

"Ideally tomorrow," Traister said. "Then if it works, the Festival can begin, we can invite people back into town, and begin our recovery. And you, of course, will be the most beloved man in town."

I gazed at Wanda's worried eyes. "But if it doesn't work... Or if anything happens to me..." One thing I suddenly remembered about the last Givers' Festival was how, in spite of all the praise lavished on him, my friend's uncle never quite seemed to share the joy around him. His smile always seemed strained, and he had this look in his eyes, a haunted look, like a soldier who's seen too much combat. He died only a few years later. If I go up there, will I still be able to be here for Wanda and the baby? "What'll you—"

"We'll make sure your family is well provided for. I understand this is asking a lot, but please consider it. If you come back and the volcano is still erupting, you can move wherever you want." Carmody passed me a business

card. "Just call me at that number when you've decided."

I stared at the card as Carmody and Traister put their masks back on and headed out. Wanda and I sat in each other's arms, each pondering the proposal in front of us. On one hand, an opportunity to save the town, to save the time, effort, and struggle needed to move to Illinois. On the other, walking into a natural disaster and potentially leaving my wife without a husband and my child without a father.

"What do you think?" I asked Wanda as we shared a meal from the freezer.

"If it were up to me, we'd be on the road by now. Harold, you have to say no. They can always just do the lottery again and pick somebody else! Or better yet, Carmody or Traister can do it their own damn selves!"

I let out a long, soft sigh. "I was thinking the same thing." I took my phone out of my pocket, but before I could make the call, Wanda put her hand on mine.

"I have a better idea. Let's just go. Right now. We'll wait until we're out of town to call them. You don't owe those two anything."

I gave her a kiss. "And that is why I married you."

We got up, put our masks back on, and locked the door behind us, only to find that all that talk about letting me decide was just that. All talk.

My car now had only two tires

where it originally had four. The front wheels had been taken off completely, with a heavy-duty jack left holding up the car. Carmody and Traister could have had it done at any point since we went back into the house. It had to be them. They'd settled on me as the King, and they were not going to take no for an answer.

Once inside, I gave Carmody a call. "You bastard. I just saw my car."

"Well, precautions have to be taken," he said. "Have you made a decision?"

"Since you want me that bad, I'll do it."

"Perfect. Your car will be fixed as soon as you get back."

Wanda and I spent one more night in our original bed, not that I could get much sleep. How could I relax when I still wanted to wring Carmody's neck until that hairless head of his popped? Or when I had a giant cauldron of fire to visit the next day, with some dread ancient thing waiting for me? At this point, I didn't even trust myself to handle the cows, much less the creature in the volcano they called Typhon.

Following Carmody's instructions, I drove out to city hall to meet with Mayor Sterko, Miss Traister, and Paul Reyansky. Sterko shook my hand outside his office. "I really appreciate what you're doing for Fortuna."

"Well," I said through gritted teeth, glaring at Traister, "I have to say, your aides made a very persuasive argument."

"Hope they didn't rough you up too hard." Mayor Sterko smiled, and a flash dazzled me for a moment. A photographer had been standing nearby, and I'd been too upset to notice. My picture—rather, my sacrifice—was going to be in the paper. Lucky me.

After a few more pleasantries, Reyansky led me to the parking garage where he'd left the cows. The garage had no windows, so little if any ash had gotten in. The cows waited inside a fully-enclosed trailer hitched to Reyansky's Chevy pickup, and he assured me it had perfect ventilation. No reason to make the cows' last few hours on Earth too uncomfortable, I supposed.

Reyansky gave me the keys, and I started the truck. "I'll make sure I get it back to you in one piece," I told him.

The route was pre-loaded into a GPS system mounted under the radio. It took me down Main Street, where I passed boarded-up stores, emptied-out restaurants, dying trees, and a pedestrian in a gas mask, like a lone wanderer in a plague. Mount Me had settled down a little—maybe Typhon knew I was coming—and I'd been telling myself all morning that there could still turn out to be nothing up there. I'd just have to play my part in this stupid game, then I could leave. Frankly, after what Carmody and Traister had pulled, I'd lost any sense of civic pride I had left. If they needed me for the festival, I could fly back once I dropped Wanda off at her

parents', then join her again when I was done. I am not raising my child in a town that treats its people as tribute to a monster that may not even exist.

The GPS directed me onto Wayne Highway, which led north and sloped up, away from town but toward Mount Me. After about ten minutes, the ash cloud began to clear. For the first time in weeks, what felt like eternity, I saw a blue sky and white clouds getting ready to send rain on a weary land. And there out of the edge of the windshield was Mount Me, blowing its smoke toward Fortuna like an obnoxious cigar smoker. And I couldn't shake the feeling that Typhon did it intentionally.

I took another turn, this time onto a dirt road that led around the edge of the mountain, directly toward the source of the smoke. I couldn't drive too fast, not just because of the weight I was hauling behind me, but also because of the twists and turns ahead of me. On one side, I had steep rock; on the other, a long, so very long drop. And I'd have to drive this same road on the way back.

The ground leveled off, and the road turned away from the edge, deeper into the mountain. At first I drove between the boulders and crags, but before long the road spread out, until there was hardly a road at all, just the bare earth. As far as the GPS was concerned, I'd already reached my destination. This was the closest I'd gotten to relaxing since I woke up.

Then the ground sloped up and around the column of smoke, toward a ledge that overlooked the crater. Even on the way I could glance over and see a little over the rim of the pit, and as the lava fountained and pooled on the outside, about to flow downhill, I realized just how close I was, not even a quarter of a mile away. My house wasn't even this close to the end of our street. Out on the other side of the crater was a scenic view intended for tourists. I'd taken some field trips there as a kid, when only thin fumes rose from the crater. This was even closer, and now I was driving by while the mountain itself was breathing fire. Somewhere within me was a young boy absolutely dying of disbelief. I almost wished Wanda were here so I could share this sight with her.

But that would have meant involving her in this mission.

I reached the top of the ledge, where a flat lot and a solid steel platform were waiting for me. From here I could see the smoke cloud expand and smother the horizon. On a better day I might have been able to see Fortuna. I steered the truck around and backed up toward the platform. At long last, I put the truck into Park. I took a moment to rub my eyes.

I'd finally made it. Now for the real ordeal to begin.

Before we had arrived at the parking garage, Reyansky had explained in detail what I would need to do when I got to the platform. So

now I went around to the back to lead the cattle out. The cows were bellowing and squealing and rattling the trailer. Either I'd driven more roughly than I'd thought, or they knew what was ahead of them. I worked the lock and lowered the trailer door onto the platform, staying to the side in case the cows wanted to stampede. But in spite of their agitation, none of them moved.

"Come on, let's get this over with." I hopped onto the ramp and grabbed the halter hanging from the muzzle closest to me, and she shook her head, jerking it out of my hand. "I don't like this any more than you do," I said, and grabbed it again, this time giving it a yank of my own. "Move."

But even when I moved further in, and put my whole body into pulling, the cow wouldn't budge. I was starting to think I'd need to go in through the back and apply the cattle prod.

First, I needed to sit down for a moment. Driving up here and pulling on these cows took a lot out of me, not to mention all this heat. I'd been here ten minutes and already I was soggy with sweat.

Leaning on the trailer, I took the note Mayor Sterko had given me, with the words I was supposed to say once I'd unloaded the cows. I whispered out the words. "On behalf of the town of Fortuna, to the unquestioned lord of this land on which we rest, we offer this fine feast." That was all I was supposed to say. Maybe that was

enough. Maybe I could just unhitch the trailer, get back in the truck, and head home... but Reyansky wanted both back. I'd just have to try again with the cows.

I reached in for the halter, and the ground shook. One of the cows wailed. I stood still as I waited for the shaking to end. As it did, a heavy churning sound came from the crater. I turned just as a huge geyser of lava spewed up from beyond the ledge.

Following the lava was a chilling screech, the cry of something unmistakably alive.

"Miiiiiiiiiiii."

While the cows backed up into each other, I crept toward the edge of the platform, looked down at the rim of the crater, and saw Typhon.

It crawled out of the crater, lava rolling off of its back. The creature resembled something like a tardigrade, its skin a series of bloated and smooth ridges, its body the size of a 737. The claws in its six stubby legs tore into the ground with each step. It crawled up an embankment at the bottom of the cliff below the platform, and opened its sphincter of a mouth.

Something squeezed out, as if the creature were giving violent birth to itself. A smaller, redder tardigrade emerged and fell against the cliff, still attached to the first one, then opened its mouth to excrete another one. My stomach rebelled against what I was seeing. I began to back away. With each successive telescoping generation,

Typhon was climbing up to the ledge.

Finally, I ran out of platform and fell, hitting my head on the ground as I rolled over my shoulder. Typhon squealed out another "Miiiiiiiiiiii," and the cows began to seriously scream. I struggled back to my feet. The last segment of Typhon reached the platform and opened its mouth.

This time, what came out was a disgusting beast that seemed to mostly be exposed muscle in a vaguely human shape. It had four arms, one eye, and teeth like a tyrannosaurus. It stank of fire and sulfur.

That eye took one look at the open trailer, and Typhon launched itself forward, plunging its head and first set of arms inside. The trailer rocked, and I heard the dying shrieks of Reyansky's cattle. Blood began to drip out of the trailer. Sometimes I can still hear their voices, and the splattering violence.

Had simply whispering those words caused all this? Was this what my friend's uncle had seen that had taken years off his life?

There was no time to grieve for the cattle. I needed to get out of here. I had a bad feeling that once Typhon was done, it'd decide I was dessert. While Typhon was busy in the trailer, I ran to the back of the truck to unhitch it, hoping Reyansky would forgive me for leaving it. Fortunately I'd worked with trailers just like this while working at a horse ranch as a kid. I turned the crank to lower the

jockey wheel to the ground, lifted the handle, and continued turning the crank so the wheel would jack the trailer up and lift the hitch. As soon as the truck came loose, I unhooked the safety chain, and went around to the driver's side.

By then Typhon had finished off the cows. It was propping itself on the platform with one set of hands, holding on to the trailer with another, and staring at me with its giant eye.

"Miiiiiiiiiiiiiii..."

I threw the door open and dived in, just as one of its hands reached out for me. A claw scraped the side of the truck. If I'd been a second too slow, it might have sliced me in half. I started the car and hit the gas.

I got halfway across the lot before the truck suddenly stopped. The rearview mirror showed Typhon's fingers clutching the tail gate. I was still pressing the pedal flat to the ground, the engine was whining, but all the wheels were doing was digging into the ground, throwing dust in the air. Typhon leaned over the platform, gazing at me. If I lifted my foot, he'd have me. It'd be just as good as surrendering.

The tail gate began to bend, but still held firm.

I saw the "R" on the gear shift, and I'm not sure what made it occur to me, but my hand started gravitating for the lever. I supposed if I'm going to die, I might as well die on something closer to my terms.

I gave the lever a shove.
The truck shot back.
The tail gate tore loose.

Typhon's fist rammmed into the back of the truck. The window exploded, throwing shards of glass all over the cab. And maybe it was the disorientation, or reflex, or the bounceback from the impact itself pushing my arm, but I was already back in Drive, barreling forward toward the ramp. The tailgate was still in Typhon's hand. Just as I was about to careen into a wall, I spun the steering wheel as far as it could go and drifted onto the ramp and headed down.

The beast watched me from the platform. As I descended, I could see the full extent of the telescoped worm body stretching from the embankment at the bottom to the ledge at the top. Typhon made as if to chase after me, but he seemed too ungainly to move too quickly. I'd outrun him easily. So instead he threw the tailgate at me, and missed.

I got back on the mountainside road. The truck rattled. The whole way down, I constantly checked the rearview—now cracked—for any sign that Typhon had come after me. It wasn't until I reached the highway that I could be sure Typhon had stayed on the mountain.

And as I got closer to town, I couldn't help but notice that the column of smoke on Mount Me had begun to die down.

The truck rattled more violently,

and I could no longer steer straight. I pulled over and got out. In addition to the massive dent Typhon had punched into the back, one of the tires had gone flat. Honestly, I was impressed that only one had done so. Also honestly, I was way too exhausted to even think about changing the tire.

I sent Reyansky a text apologizing for the truck—I even promised to pay him back—and telling him where he could find it, then called my wife. "Hey, Wanda. It's over. I'm done, and I'm off the mountain. Did they fix the car?"

"Let me check... Yes, they did. I can tell you did something. Mount Me's gone quiet. Once the smoke clears, the town might finally get back to normal."

"That's great, just great. Can you do me a favor and give me a lift?" I gave her the highway and the mile marker. "Then let's head out to Chicago." I noticed the blood trickling down my arm, staining my clothes. I ached all over. Some first aid would probably be in order as well.

"All right, but don't you want to go to City Hall first? Stay for the festival?"

"Absolutely not," I told her, thinking about the screams of the cows as they were torn apart, and the beast that had brutalized this truck—the beast that had haunted and dominated the town of Fortuna for so many years with most of its citizens never realizing it. "I never want to see this godforsaken town again.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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