

The Pull

By Nicholas Stillman

A sample chapter

© 2015 Nicholas Stillman

Get free short stories monthly at stillmanscifi.com

The sun finished baking the town of Mallawah, taking its daily handful of dust from the bricks grain by grain. The white buildings and brown people could endure, though, probably for centuries or until Mallawah's river dried. Ned and Alan waited in the riverside drinking lounge below the inn where they stayed the past three nights. Later, when the blue sky turned a little bluer, they'd embark for the ruins in the surrounding desert. But for now, the sand and dusk needed to cool. Their rented horses boarded up next door might drink a little extra themselves.

Ned took the dinged, grubby glass and sipped the sour wine. His tongue wrestled with it. He still wanted to order another for loitering here, to respect the wiry old barkeep. But too much liquor on the desert would make the night rougher than those ancient cots upstairs. One drink. And only for celebration.

He and Alan had gathered enough footage here and interviewed plenty of townsfolk, prominent and humble alike. Humbleness. This place rained it if it rained nothing else. Even the deepest-lined faces chatted candidly about the siren's call. Mallawah people treated tourists like visiting relatives, and treated their urban myth about the siren like a war story.

"Nice wine cellar they've got down here," Ned said, glancing at the soleras. The walls hid behind casks. "And I mean it. The coolness feels like a normal sunny day compared to that oven."

He glanced roofward. Alan just said, "Mmmm" across their little etched table. Someone made it from four planks and a barrel lid. Rectangular nailheads stuck out.

"Jeez," Ned mumbled, "they must have built this before World War One, whatever happened before that."

Alan's face sweated out the things he ate months ago. It probably did him good. The weight loss would help, even if their documentary turned out bad, or worse, boring. Alan needed a few months of Mallawah life and its gritty river water to really slim down, though.

Alan picked up his full glass and swiveled it, futility stirring the bits of dead grapes. Bad idea. Moving caused more heat. Down here, that meant more stickiness for everyone.

"Did those women laborers add anything new to the story?" Alan asked. He usually said more, but only at 5 am when his rolling sweat flattened to a sheen.

"Yeah, actually." Ned gazed at a dark corner to help him remember. He mostly recalled sunlight. "Everyone's got their own little spin. Everyone's heard a different whisper. They all agree the siren...eh, showed up, about eight years ago. They all know a handful of victims. It

helps with the scientific explanation so many townsfolk gave us. Eight years won't ruin a woman's looks, even out here. Age can even help a little, down below.”

Alan looked puzzled. He should have interviewed the women, like Ned suggested.

“What about the new information?” Alan asked. He looked at his drink. A housefly wanted to party there.

“Ah, let's see. They each say they knew men who returned, searchers who fled the ruins and escaped the siren's call. These guys abandoned their friends who refused to leave. Their friends died.”

“Did they say how?” Alan asked. “I suppose no one knows, because the victims died alone.” He sounded abashed by his snappy question.

“Well, they *did* say how,” Ned said. “It sounds dubious, though. The men who 'escaped' claimed they failed to hear the siren's voice. But their friends did hear it. So their friends go crazy and sit patiently in the scorching sun or march into the desert. The siren says, 'wait for me' or 'come to me' according to the survivors who make it back to town. But of course they just presume their friends heard something along those lines.”

The two of them played a reverse drinking game to see who could sip alcohol the slowest. Ned forfeited and downed half his glass. You've got to do that whenever men die in a story. You just have to.

“Hm!” Alan's sappy eyebrows jolted. “Do the survivors tell these women why one man hears the siren and the other man doesn't?”

“Magic. God sent the wind to stifle the siren's call. They plugged their ears in time or prayed really loud. Things like that. I got the women talking all about it on video. Of course, when a guy hurries back from the blistering desert, leaves his friend to die, can't subdue him or drag him to safety, then he understandably has a religious experience.”

Ned took a drink and left only a film in his glass.

“Shouldn't you take that a little slower so you don't dehydrate?” Alan asked.

“Men died, Alan. Besides, my lightning bolt metabolism will destroy it. I get hangover the next hour, not the next day. That may explain why I hardly drink anymore.”

Ned looked at the purple shavings in his glass. The hangover started already.

“We'll probably leave around then, one hour,” Alan said. He took a baby sip and squinted.

“We may as well shoot something before leaving,” Ned said. He unslung his camera and pointed it at Alan. The strap smelled of old and new sweat. The barkeep wobbled in and out of the shot. “Alan. Thirty-five. Filmmaker. Openly gay. Preparing to search the desert near

Mallawah for the siren. A dirty drink in hand, possibly his last.”

“Oh yeah?” Alan snickered. He unclipped his camera from a black fanny pack and pointed it at Ned. “Ned. Thirty-six. Graphics artist. Openly straight. Can't derive pleasure from alcohol.”

“Hey now,” Ned said. “Graphics artist *and* video editor.”

“Well, I'll save my battery for the ruins,” Alan said, putting away his camera.

Ned kept his camera on Alan. Some of this might make the final cut.

“What did the Mallawah elders say about the siren,” Ned asked monotonically, “and does it support the town's medical theory?”

“The town elders speak of the siren's many victims, all male, ranging in age from teen to late adulthood,” Alan said, staring into the camera. “The men venture to an abandoned desert town where they seek a woman they call the siren. The Mallawah townsfolk claim she has medical enhancements developed by black market cosmetologists and plastic surgeons. This grants her enticing facial features, a perfect seductive voice, sun-resistant skin, and so forth. Their medical explanation, though strange for such remote people, suggests that the male explorers go mad with lust and loneliness. But we still need evidence to rule out simple urban legend. God, I got dry already.”

Alan took another sip and winced. He put it down.

“Well, it sounded good,” Ned said, slinging the camera over his shoulder. “People want grit and suffering. Look at that skinny bartender. He'll have people recommending this all over YouTube.”

“The bartender?” Alan laughed.

“The background matters more than the foreground. Listening to people talk takes effort. Video works more passively. Then you have reading which most people hate now because, well, they have to mentally construct images and concepts, and put sentences and ideas together. So much work. In another decade, we'll have simple taps on the forehead.”

Ned sighed. He wished the city life would stop infiltrating all his conversations. The wine worked. It tasted like dirt and clung to the esophagus, but it worked.

“Do you notice anything bad about the wine?” Alan asked.

“Yeah. Dracula's grandfather made it.”

“Speaking of Dracula, do you find it odd that most of the town believes the medical siren explanation? You'd think they would go with something mythical, like sirens from folklore.”

“Well,” Ned began, “even the superstitious survivors, with their prayers and providence,

have mobile devices out here. So they do hear about all the fashion crazes, celebrities, and cosmetic procedures flooding the internet. We've...polluted them. The talk about God sparing them seems instinctual or impulsive, like swearing when you stub your toe. Background stuff.

“They probably came to this cellar afterward and realized that heat and horny don't mix. Their friends just suffered heat stroke and disorientation. They freaked out in the desert with some fight-or-flight stress response. So did the survivors. As for the medical siren, people hate to admit that they got scared and left their delusional friends to die. So blaming the hottest woman possible rationalizes their misadventures. Jeez, I wouldn't even confess to looking for love in some giant sandbox of death. So I'd make up the magic siren first, then the medical one later for more plausibility.”

“Hmm. Well at least I have immunity to both kinds of siren,” Alan mused. “My homosexuality will let me resist her and drag you to safety.”

“But wait,” Ned said, pointing across the table. “If she does seduce you, I have immunity too because of my fast metabolism. So any hormones that cause lust will burn off quickly. Think of the negative feedback loops working ten times faster. I'll quickly overcome seduction and drag *you* to safety.”

“Ok, that settles it.” Alan rolled his eyes. “Let's go check the horses.”

With a chuckle, Alan abandoned the full glass of wine and headed for the steps. His ancient chair creaked with relief. Ned took Alan's drink and chugged it while no one looked. He would at least have a recent memory of tranquilizing himself, dulling all nerves, before they learned just how many men died in the neighboring ruins.