

# Psych

by  
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A Short Story Prequel to *Under Twin Suns*  
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Psych  
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Poetry

*These Burning Stones*  
*Lions in the Closet*

Co-Authored

*Breathe I, II, III, and IV*

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## PSYCH

“You are not hired?” a thick voice slurred in Terran from behind Ketorai.

Ket looked up into the sallow face of a tall, thick-boned Lacoهران, one of the settlers of Firone. He watched her with a piercing gaze. A single, black bonding-cuff curled loosely around one side of his protruding jaw. Behind him, more Lacoهران milled throughout the hashinkovel, past the bar, seeking unoccupied tables and chairs made of pressed fungus. They stared at Ket’s silver Idyan skin and pale hair. Artificial smokes from various planets trickled from tiny vents at the base of the bar, filling the room with a haze.

Ket said, “I’m available.”

“I sit.” He smiled and, walking around the table, pulled out the chair opposite Ket.

Two tables away, sat a pair of Offworlders from Ippith, blue wraps over their dark brown fur. They passed documents back and forth between themselves. At a far corner, near a set of imported chromium windows, waited a red-skinned Offworlder, one of a species she didn’t know. He tapped long manicured fingernails together and stared at the fluted glass in front of him.

When her Lacoهران client settled, he spoke. “I am named Z’nis. I meet with someone. Business. You...” He pointed to his temple.

“I’m Ketorai. I’ll read his emotions, but I can’t read his thoughts.”

“Emotions.” Z’nis frowned.

Ket said, “I can tell you if he’s lying, if he doesn’t like what you say, if he wants more, if—”

He waved his hand back and forth. “Is enough. Is good.” He nodded and sat in silence, staring at the table.

Ket frowned. What was going on? She lowered her consciousness partway into the spiritual realm of the Jadoua. It surrounded her, like a lover’s intimate, soft sigh, drawing her into its depths with gentle caresses. She stretched her mental energy through it, across the distance between her and the Lacoهران, touching on his mind, drawing his energy toward her.

His emotions drifted around her, taking shapes of soft, puffy clouds, some drifting peacefully, some spinning in circles. The first didn’t concern her, lazy emotions rarely had anything to do with current events, but those busy ones could be crucial. She touched one. It wrapped around her, sparking into her with curiosity and excitement.

Another cloud scooted past. Devout duty, loyalty. Yet another cloud, dull red this time, filled her with an ancient unnamed rage. A giant cloud, of thunderstorm proportions, dropped down from above, covering her with religious fervor.

Ket felt no sense of betrayal or malice. She drifted out of Z’nis’s mind. He seemed to be just thinking. But this was taking too long. Turning to him, Ket opened her mouth to broach the topic of payment, but he cut her off before she began.

“You sit here. You show me here.” Her client pointed to their two chairs, and then turned around and pointed to another table behind him. “I sit there.”

“You want me to project an illusion of you here, speaking to your business contact?”

A relieved smile crossed Z’nis’s face. The black, double-twist bonding cuff swung back and forth on his jaw with his nod. “Yes. Illusion.”

Ket shook her head. “I can’t make an illusion and read emotions at the same time.”

The red Offworlder in the corner rose from his table to meet a Lacoهران woman. No more Offworlders had entered the hashinkovel. This was supposed to be an interplanetary

spaceport. That's what the propaganda she'd read had said. Most of the mercantiles she'd seen lining the long halls were nothing more than hollow spaces. They should have been filled with goods and customers. How was she supposed to make any money here? A niggling burr of disquiet formed in the pit of her stomach.

Z'nis's face clouded over. "Not at same time."

"No."

Again, they sat in silence. If she'd felt anger in her client's mind, or suspicion, trickery, or betrayal, she would have walked out of the transaction. That was her rule. It was what kept her alive. But she felt nothing, so she stared out the silver-sheened window beside her table.

The giant planet, Aschomi, hadn't yet made its debut over Firone, its moon, for the evening. Both suns scorched the ground and anything else outside. Black, treeless mountains stretched in a bowl around the town. Ash clouds plumed above no less than a dozen volcanoes.

Up in those mountains, so Ket understood, molten lava flowed in rivers, and earthquakes heaved giant slabs of rock into the air to crash downwards onto whatever unlucky thing was in the way. She'd been told that not much lived up there, just a few small animals and the strange fungus that made the galaxy-famous Firone whiskey, along with her favorite sweet nectar.

Z'nis shifted in his seat, the movement jerking her back to the business at hand. He pointed, once again, to the far table. "I meet this man. You read emotions. Then I sit there. You show me walk here, talk to this man." He tapped his finger on the table between them.

"Yes." Ket nodded.

He smiled in triumph. "I pay you three thousand Lacoهران dollars."

"That's too low. This is more than a simple reading. Five thousand."

"Five?" The Lacoهران's face clouded again, but then cleared. He reached into his pouch and pulled out a fistful of coins. Dropping them onto the table, he slid five blue colored coins toward her. "Five thousand."

"When is this man coming?" She picked up the coins. They felt warm, as if alive, as Lacoهران coins should. She slipped them into her pocket.

Z'nis pointed to the bar. "He is just here."

Ket pivoted in her chair to view the man approaching from the bar. His thin face and pear-shaped body marked him as a Bragnon. He tipped back and forth, waddling toward them on stump-like legs, not spilling a drop from his overfilled glass. Tiny black eyes flicked their gaze back and forth across the room. Ket had met Bragnons before. Their bodies were deceiving; they could be lightening quick, both mentally and physically. She'd have to be very careful with her illusion.

She moved into the Jadoua, and it cocooned around her, warm and friendly. The Bragnon's emotions were hardened, disciplined, as if militarized. Steely wants rubbed against hard-edged determination. When his eyes lit on her, he stopped walking. His anger bored into the Jadoua and suspicion cemented itself in his mind.

He spoke in Lacoهران, his voice harsh and guttural. Pointing jerkily toward Ket, his voice gained in volume as he spoke. Liquor from his glass sloshed over the side and splatted on the floor.

Ket didn't know Lacoهران, but the fury in the Bragnon's mind left little doubt as to the meaning of the words.

Jumping to his feet, Z'nis rushed to the Bragnon making placating nods and patting the Bragnon's arms and face.

Shouts from the gangway just outside the hashinkovel paused the argument as everyone within the room faced the noise. People near the door, including the red-skinned Offworlder, stood and walked out into the hall, peering to see the cause of the ruckus. Before Ket could stand, they ran back into the lounge, seeking refuge behind tables and against the walls of the room.

Black- and gray-robed Lacoهران erupted into the lounge, shouting and pointing. “Dammachel! Dammachel!”

They shoved aside the Lacoهران in their way and swarmed around every Offworlder, striking with fists and chairs. Robes, bottles, and sallow-skinned bodies seemed to be moving everywhere.

Ket didn't like the sound of 'Dammachel', and she certainly didn't like how they targeted the Offworlders. She reached out in the Jadoua, trying to read one of the robed Lacoهران. Just as she touched his mind, the table beside her lurched and one of the Ippith businessmen fell at her feet, dark red blood pumping in a fountain from a deep slice across his throat.

Ket's heartbeat pounded in her ears, deafening all other sound. Her mouth dried. Jerking out of the Jadoua, she backed away from the mass of rustling robes and angry shouts. Tables and chairs flew across the floor or splintered under falling bodies. Flames licked across the ceiling behind the bar. Acrid smoke mixed with the fake smoke, stinging her nose. A sea of writhing, fighting people lay between her and the exit.

“You help!” Z'nis grabbed her arm. He pointed at the Bragnon. “Help!”

The Bragnon was surrounded by a swarm of robes. He flailed his arms and kicked his feet. A jagged gash on his brow pumped blood into his eyes. With a throaty bellow, he threw one attacker against the base of the bar. Another, he clouted in the temple. Both Lacoهران dropped to the floor as if dead. More robed attackers joined the melee and, like a wild pack of animals, pulled the Bragnon to the ground.

In slow motion, it seemed, two black-robed Lacoهران simultaneously turned their heads Ket's direction. They left the Bragnon and took long strides toward her, stepping over broken chairs and bodies. Another Lacoهران joined them. And then another. Behind them, the Bragnon stopped moving on the floor.

Z'nis let go of her and lunged backwards, out of the way.

His movement broke Ket's panic. She threw herself to the side, falling to the floor and rolling behind Z'nis as he moved. Flinging herself deep into the Jadoua, she sucked the endless energy into her spirit. Could she form an illusion for this many people?

Reaching her mind out into the room, Ket pricked into every person, every consciousness, showing them a tiny, white light. She held this, focusing herself. Then, with a deep breath, she super-charged the light, exploding it in the Lacoهران minds with a deafening boom, and violent, crackling flames. The illusion showed charring, splintering bones that protruded from under bloody robes.

Terrified screams filled the lounge around Ket, and many of those standing fell backwards to writhe on the ground, grasping at solid and whole limbs as if maimed. Ket lunged to her feet. Waves of nausea rolled over her. She lurched toward the exit.

Thick Lacoهران hands grabbed her foot. Ket spun around to face her robed captor. She worked to form another illusion in the Jadoua.

Nothing happened.

She tried again, but still nothing happened. The energies within the Jadoua were immeasurable, but Ket had reached the end of her own reserves.

Another black-robed Lacoهران struggled upright beside Ket. In a daze he looked around. Locking his gaze with hers, he latched onto her wrist.

Ket jerked away and stomped on the first Lacoهران's hand. With a howl, he loosened his grip. Squirming loose, she lunged and drove her elbow into the second Lacoهران's face. When he dropped her wrist, Ket bolted for the door, clutching her rolling stomach.

Passed the Bragnon, she kicked him in the side. If that didn't get him moving, nothing would. She kicked the remaining Ippith Offworlder and the red manicured man as well.

By the time she reached the lounge door, the man from Ippith had scrambled and was following her. The Bragnon was busy kicking and smashing his fists into every robed body he found. The red-skinned man didn't move at all.

Once out into the main gangway, Ket headed straight for the launch pad doors. When those robed Lacoهران figured out she was behind the illusion, they'd be ready to kill. It wouldn't take long for someone to question Z'nis. He'd shown he was no hero; he'd give up everything he knew about her.

Charging out onto the tarmac, she cringed at the heat rolling up from the black asphalt. It seemed to be twice as hot beneath her feet than coming from above. By the time she reached the first drifter, her clothes were soaked through, plastered to her skin. Her nausea disappeared with the heat, but weariness climbed throughout her body.

The ship was locked. As Ket pried on the door, a loud buzz came from the DNA lock just beneath the door handle. She ran to the second and third drifters, but the results were the same.

Shading her eyes with her hand, she turned around and around, looking for a ship that was likely to be unlocked. Movement in the terminal windows caught her attention. Four black-robed Lacoهران were clustered there. One pointed in her direction. It was just a matter of time before they came after her.

Ket spun around and started running toward the far end of the tarmac. She had to get away. As she reached the last row of ships, she saw a large maintenance skimmer near the edge of the field. She changed direction. How many employees were conscientious enough to lock maintenance ships?

Reaching the skimmer, she jerked open the door. Dark stains of grease and grime covered everything. The stench of hot asphalt filled the cabin.

The ship started at her first try, the soft chug-chug of the warming drives filling the cabin. A quick glance at the spaceport building showed her tall, dark columns of smoke coming from where the lounge used to be. Six or seven robed Lacoهران were crossing the tarmac toward her, their faces dark with wrath. She jammed the skimmer into gear and lifted it into the air. The drives could warm on the way.

Ket turned the ship toward the center of the city, and punched it into high speed. She craned her neck, looking behind her for pursuit. Seeing none, she turned back forward. In the city below, clusters of Lacoهران everywhere fought with each other and with Offworlders. The further into the city she flew, the more the little groups became crowds, and then those grew into massive mobs.

Ket shook her head and took a deep breath that ended in a sudden yawn. Trust her to land in the middle of a city-wide riot. She turned the skimmer away from the city, punched in the code for her next nearest spaceport. Ket squirmed deep into her seat to take a nap. Maybe the next planet would be kinder.