

BLOOD FORGED

By Kathryn Meyer Griffith

(Originally a Leisure mass market paperback book titled Blood Forge)

For my husband, Russell...always and forever.

Other books by Kathryn Meyer Griffith:

Evil Stalks the Night

The Heart of the Rose

Blood Forge

Vampire Blood

The Last Vampire (2012 Epic EBook Awards Finalist)

Witches

The Calling

Scraps of Paper-

The First Spookie Town Murder Mystery

All Things Slip Away-

The Second Spookie Town Murder Mystery

Ghosts Beneath Us-

The Third Spookie Town Murder Mystery

Egyptian Heart

Winter's Journey

The Ice Bridge

Don't Look Back, Agnes

A Time of Demons and Angels

The Woman in Crimson

Four Spooky Short Stories

Human No Longer

Night Carnival

Forever and Always Novella

The Nameless One erotic horror short story

Dinosaur Lake (2014 Epic EBook Awards Finalist)

Dinosaur Lake II: Dinosaurs Arising

Dinosaur Lake III: Infestation

***All Kathryn Meyer Griffith's books can be found here:**

<http://tinyurl.com/ld4jlow>

***All her Audible.com audio books here:**

<http://tinyurl.com/oz7c4or>

Prologue

Peru 1530

The sun was setting in a tawny blaze of light, turning the cool mountain mist into dark patches of gray and blue. The mists swirled and eddied about the sharp rocks and paths of the mountain and clung lovingly to the slim brown ankles of the Inca maidens as they trod carefully along the stone pathway up, up toward the ominous temple.

The temple of the Beast, from which no one was ever known to return...alive.

The young women, seven in all, walked slowly with heads bowed, as if they were merely children sent on an innocent errand. But their faces were blank, trancelike, and their eyes were full of terror, their hearts dead even though they'd partaken of the special drink that their priests had given them before their journey up the long mountain. The priests were compassionate, not altogether unfeeling, and they were but girls after all. Their hair, dark as ravens' wings, hung loose and flowing in the breeze, stark against the white ceremonial robes that swished against their bare feet. They wore delicate golden chains about their throats with a tiny, dangling charm, the sign of the God they were going to meet, a coiled snake.

Theirs was a necessary sacrifice if the great snake God was to be appeased and peace kept in their valley. Their precious young lives, their sweet blood shed on its evil and stained altar; given for the lives of all their people. It was a high price to pay but one that had been paid since the High Priest, Kuru, had summoned the great snake God from hell for power and then not been able to control Him. This was the punishment they must now accept to keep him behind the temple walls, not loose among the people. He demanded blood sacrifices and would only take those pure of heart and soul or He'd ravage them all without mercy.

Soon it would be night and He would come.

Before them now, across the rope bridge, the entrance to His temple loomed like the blackened pit of hell, protected by towering stone snakes poised to strike, red jewels glittering as full of malice as their reptilian eyes. They watched from their great height, two fiends from hell. When the women looked up, the layered and polished stones on the temple walls circled before them as far as their frightened eyes could see.

For the last time they gazed sorrowfully upon the terraced farms of their beloved people, then walked the remaining steps toward the temple. They would never see them or their people again.

It was said that sometimes when a sacrifice pleased Him, He would take form in the darkened shadows above the dais behind his bloodied altar and watch the sacrifices with fierce yellow eyes. As the blade rose and fell and the screams rose to a fever pitch of agony, He could take any form He wished.

So they said in whispers as they huddled below in the valley and watched the temple above. No one really knew but the priests, and they never loosened their tongues; fear of their God's terrible wrath kept them silent.

As the priests completed the last stage of their journey and the coming night was full of the soft, haunting sounds of miniature bronze and copper bells and the cries of the shell trumpets, the maidens were hurried through the entrance. With terror freezing their hearts, they heard the grating of the heavy wooden doors as they shut slowly behind them. Some of them cried softly then, their hands trembling against their faces.

Now they belonged to the Beast. Forever. There was no escape; they were doomed.

Outside the temple, in the valley beneath, in the dusk of the falling mountain night the people waited and watched. The night torches were lit along the temple's walls and an eerie green glow pulsed from deep within the stone enclosure. The priests' chanting grew louder as the night claimed the mountain, and there were the screams of such terror and agony that there were those who hid their faces in their hands and wept in helplessness. For a long time the screams echoed across the valley, and not one of those below didn't realize that next time they could be the screams of a loved one or of themselves.

When the night fell silent once again the people sighed with relief and turned away from the evil towering above them and slowly trudged toward their homes, grateful that the Beast was behind strong stone walls.

A terrible price to pay, yes, for their safety and the power the Beast bestowed, once appeased, upon the people. They were feared and respected for their great powers in battle—the Beast could give a man great strength and cunning. He could give prosperity or he could create such havoc, there would be no end to it.

An awful price and there were some who were weary of it, and believed the Beast's gifts were not worth it. *There must be a way, they schemed, there must be a way they could rid themselves of the evil parasite that had come into*

*their lives. The priests must be wrong. There must be a way...*and they were determined to find it even if they must die trying...someday.

Someday.

Centuries later

deep in the bowels of a mine in a place called Cerro de Pasco, northeast of Lima, Peru....

The filthy, ragged-looking Indians huddled at the mouth of the last cave deep in the earth under the mountain. They were frightened and refused with whimpers and garbled entreaties that made absolutely no sense to the angry overseer standing above them, his whip poised over their heads as a warning to obey him. Now. Yet still they would not enter.

“Why the bloody hell not?” the overseer, a fat, surly fellow sent by the Company a few weeks before when the trouble had begun, roared. *“Get your worthless flea-bitten brown bodies down that shaft now, or you’ll be whipped. Twenty lashes each! Get moving!”* The overseer glared at the trembling Indians, and when he saw they weren’t going to listen, no matter what he threatened, he threw his dirty hands up in the air in a gesture of hopelessness.

What the hell was wrong with them lately? Ever since they’d found those damn statues of the snakes a ways back in the outer chamber the whole mess of ’em had acted as if the place was full of ghosts or something. It was utterly ridiculous, wasn’t it, what they whispered late at night over their crackling campfires as they ate their beans and drank their strange concoctions, wasn’t it?

That the statues were the guardians of the old Inca Temple of the Beast—the temple in the legends that housed a terrible Snake God that actually existed and was given human sacrifices to keep it from wreaking untold damage on their people. A heinous and insatiable God that it was said created a reign of such terror over the ancient Incas until one day they found a way to collapse the Beast and his hideous temple beneath the mountain it sat upon, thus freeing them from its bloody curse and its evil, voracious appetites.

Ridiculous! The man with the whip shook his head as he eyed the pitiful excuse for a crew cringing before him in the dark cave.

He threw down his whip and hefted the sputtering torch above their heads and peered into the yawning crevice that the earthquake the night before had spawned. In the feeble light he could see the ore crisscrossing the far wall glimpsed through the crack. There was ore in there and, by God, they were going in to get it!

Snake God. Buried temples and bloodied altars...curses...what rubbish. Of course these savages would swallow that nonsense. They were too stupid not to believe.

How to make them get off their lazy asses and get that ore out? How? He snarled at them, waving the whip at their terror-filled faces and uttering a string of vile curses and promises of dire punishment if they didn’t get moving. Nothing worked. Some of them stirred to weep and wail like old women and scurried back up the tunnels of the cave.

“Get the hell back here!” he screamed at them, licking the flesh of a few of them with his whip; shoving a couple to the hard floor, where they continued to cry and beg and whimper like beaten puppies. They disgusted him! Finally he stalked after the ones who’d fled, into the light far above. He could hear the rest of them scampering after him in the dark. They didn’t want to be left alone so close to the buried ruins they feared.

The overseer knew he’d have to make do with the men he had. There was some working now in another section of the cave, mining the precious ore that was fetching a steep price on the world markets. They weren’t afraid of anything, not even ancient curses. Hard men seasoned to this kind of work who spent their lives like moles laboring in the bowels of the earth. He’d round up a bunch of them first thing tomorrow morning and get them down there with their picks and carts. He’d get that ore no matter what he had to offer them to do it. *No ancient Snake God was going to keep him from that rich vein down there, no sir.*

God, he wished he were home in England and not in this hell hole with these filthy Indians. Bah, their ancestors might have once been a great race, but look at the poor creatures now, afraid of their own shadows, for heaven’s sake. What a useless bunch they were.

But that night there was growing unrest around the campfires. There was praying and ugly silences, stealthy glances as he rounded up the select crew to descend into the forbidden area with the dawn’s first light. He was surprised when all but a few accepted the offer of higher wages to go down and mine in the narrow cave.

In the middle of the night half of his Indians crept away into the hot jungles, never to be heard of again. Or so he believed. Though there was some of the more superstitious who told him that the Snake-God himself, released from his grave, had come in the night and stolen them away.

“You bloody fools,” his voice sounding like a snarl. *“Nothing will keep me from my job. I have quotas to fill.”* Or his bosses would replace him quick enough. So far the site hadn’t been nearly as profitable as they thought it should have been. He had to have that rich vein he’d seen down there.

With a mangy crew of twelve men he entered the lower cave the following morning and began the digging. Inside the narrow chamber, he noticed the strange flat stone half buried in the far wall. It must have once been huge, but most of it had crumbled away. His men were frightened of it, and the more they saw of the chamber the worse their fear became, until he was sure they, too, were going to abandon him. Growing short-tempered, he used the whip to keep them in line. What had come over them? Why were they terrified of some bloody rocks and artifacts they found buried in the rubble?

When one of them began screaming in a dark corner about a monstrous snake coming to get them, he'd had enough and called the digging off for the day. Perhaps, he thought, as he leaned against the cold stone of the cave's wall, he should telegram the home office in the States and tell them of the find?

Wouldn't the archaeologists of the world have a field day with this ancient Inca Temple and Snake God legend malarkey? He chuckled out loud. Yes, he'd telegram the Company and ask them what he should do now; with most of his men hiding like scared rabbits in the jungle rather than be near the cursed place. Let *them* have the headaches.

Maybe they'd scrap the whole project and send him to another mine. Let the archaeologists have the site to chalk up and dissect into tiny grids. Or maybe, he thought gleefully, they'd send him some real men to dig out the ore. Real men not afraid of spooks.

As the first of the carts were loaded, as if defying the Gods himself, he chipped off a large hunk of the strange stone while the Indians watched with wide eyes and whispered like angry bees behind him in the shadows. He tossed it defiantly into the cart before it was lugged to the surface.

Now there was a full shipment ready to transport to Lima. He saw to it that the raw ore was on its way before he went back into the mine that day.

A good thing, because he, and his men, were never seen again.

Up above those men who'd remained to guard the camp heard the vengeful rumbling of the earth long before the big quake hit. The trees in the jungle, the tents, everything, began to jump and quiver as the full force of the earthquake came upon them.

Screaming, the survivors fled into the jungle until it was over.

Later when they returned to camp there was nothing left but rubble and a mound of fresh earth where the cave entrance had been.

The earth had taken back its own, the cave had collapsed and disappeared as it must have done centuries before, swallowing up the mine and the men in it. Everything and everyone lost. There was nothing salvageable or so it was decided by the Company, who after a half-hearted investigation, decreed that surely no one was left alive down there.

It was just a shame that only one load of ore had been taken from the new mine before the earthquake, when the site had seemed so promising.

Yes, what a shame.
