

Devil's Gold

by Chandra Fifield

Heaven was a word: hell was something he could trust. And this really was hell. The air, thick and fetid, made him gasp with each inward breath as he struggled under the weight of the humidity. It was like a thick blanket; suffocating, enveloping. Yet not at all comforting.

The sweat ran in fine rivulets down the sinews of his neck, droplets landing heavily on to his shoulders which were shuddering with the exertion of his task. Pausing for a minute, he loosened his bandana to mop the perspiration from his brow. He swallowed thickly, noticing how dry his mouth was.

He wiped the mucus from his nose, which had been dripping with a tangy saltiness on to his parched lips. His eyes were red raw and stinging with such ferocity it was a job to see clearly.

Again he rubbed them; calloused knuckles pressing into his eye sockets in a bid to stem the watering, which had been relentless. Squinting up at the white-hot sun in the midday sky, he calculated its position, watching for the shadows cast against the crater edge.

Four more hours. Four more hours of this back breaking, soul destroying work. It felt like a penance. For all of the wrongdoing he had wrought, witnessed, been party to.

Out here in this volcanic wasteland with nothing but his thoughts for company and the faces of fellow workers riven in misery, he'd had a lot of time to think. It's just what I deserve, people would say. But he hadn't had a choice. They just didn't understand.

From his crouched position on the floor, he pushed up from his knees, tensing his core to centre himself on the jagged terrain. He reluctantly rose to his feet, tired now. The weight of the filled wicker baskets joined by a pole across his upper back caused him to bend and bow, like a reed in the wind. He slowly began his descent, scars latticed across his back and etched deep into his skin. A lasting memory of this hellish place.