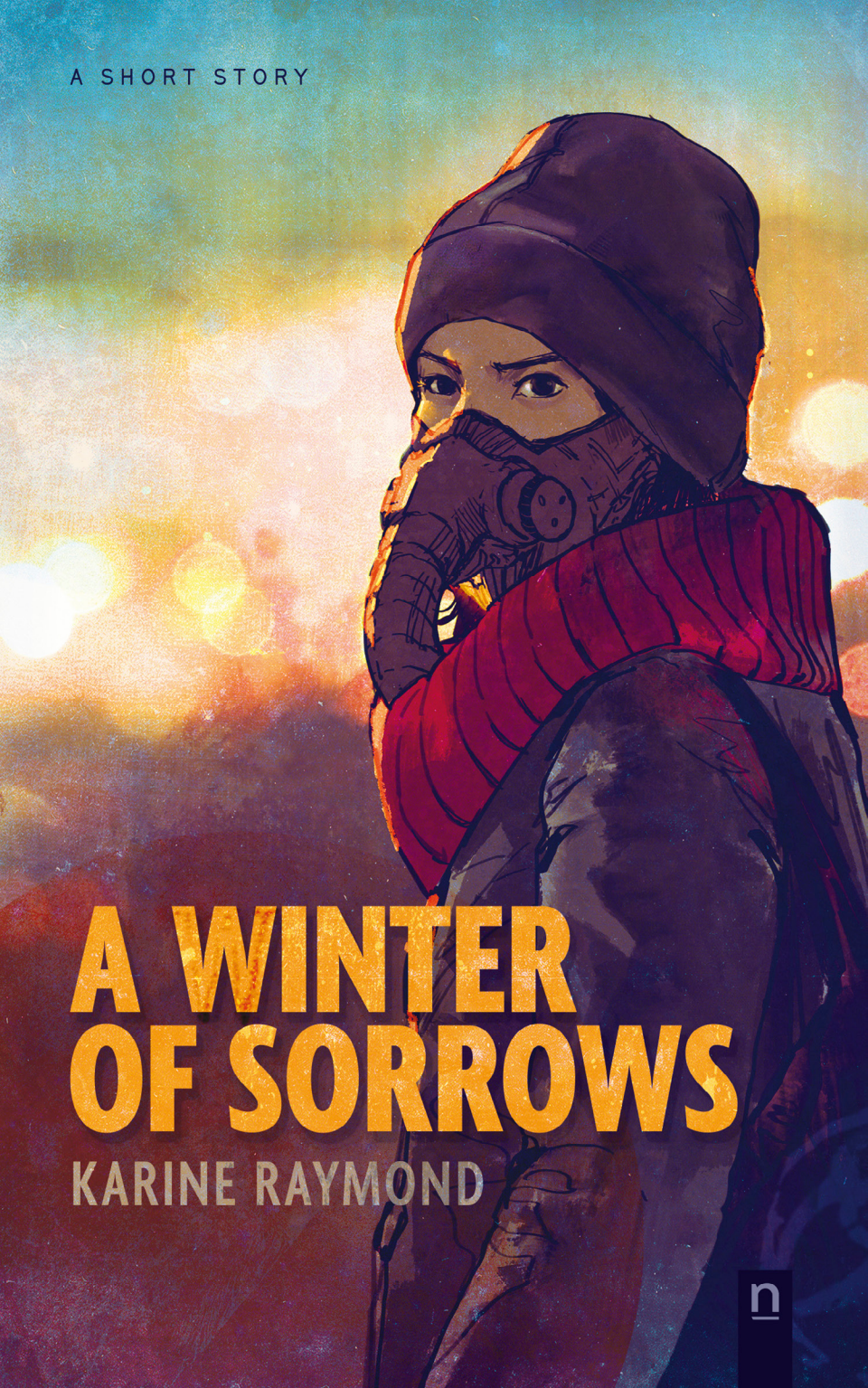


A SHORT STORY

An illustration of a person wearing a dark beanie, a red ribbed scarf, and a grey jacket. They are holding a small, round, grey object with a face on it near their mouth. The background is a warm, hazy orange and yellow, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The person's face is partially obscured by the scarf and the object.

A WINTER OF SORROWS

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Karine Raymond

A Winter of Sorrows

A short story

NOVEMBRE

*We destroyed the world we had been given
For inspiration, for life—
Each stone of jealousy, each stone
Of fear, greed, envy, and hatred, put out the light.
No one was without a stone in his or her hand.*

— Joy Harjo, *Once the World Was Perfect*

Hana stopped beside the volcanic column, as large and imposing as a human-made building. She crossed her arms and looked down at the mottled skin of a corpse lying forlornly at the entrance to a tunnel carved out of the yellowish rock. Nestled against her sides, her frozen fingers sent shivers through her spine, all the way down her good leg. She hesitated a moment, then adjusted the gloves of her radiation suit. In the dead man's trouser pockets, she found two ration tickets for potable water, a citizen's card for downtown Baskat, and a passport. Inside his coat, a laminated envelope protected a family photo and a short comic strip. Smiling ruefully, she read the sarcastic reflections of a black cat whiling away the hours on a veranda. Below the

strip, a signature in Korean preceded the date: January 9, twenty-six years ago. Just a few years after the massive wave of South Korean immigration that gave rise to Baskat's fashionable pedestrian district, a packed urban jungle where glaring neon signs competed with makeshift sidewalk businesses. It was outside a *soju*¹ bar that Osman, her father, had met her mother.

Before abandoning the remains, she snatched an old dosimeter attached to his belt. Never too safe. The man must have come to the surface to seek help, but the insidious fungus that flourished in these caves was unforgiving: By the time red patches appeared on your skin, it was already too late.

Hana drew a long breath through her protective mask and glanced down the dark corridor that plunged into the rock. The irony was unbearable. He'd been defeated in a matter of days, even though he had survived months in the hostile environment brought on by the nuclear winter: radioactive fallout, harmful ultraviolet

¹ Korean alcohol traditionally made from rice, though it is now mostly distilled from potatoes, sweet potatoes, or grains. Similar to vodka.

rays, acid rain, cold and hunger... Scientists had predicted how it would impact the world, mostly. They hadn't foreseen the emergence of these ruthless microorganisms. Or had they developed before the nukes exploded? Whatever the case, governments, overburdened by international conflicts, famine, oil shortages and pandemic threats, wouldn't prioritize informing intrepid survivalists about the dangers of unsanctioned expeditions. Hana had decided to take care of things. Salvaging the belongings of fallen explorers was how she survived, so she knew that warning them away would make it much harder to scrape a living.

However, her quest was not one of survival, but of vengeance.



Her father had always admired these giant columns. He'd visited Fairy Chimney National Park every week to "think and decompress." Which eventually meant getting drunk after his wife passed away and he lost his business. One morning before the outbreak of war, he'd