

Xirca: Episode One: The Mountain

Beth Woods

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The planet Xirca is a curious place—one side always turned toward the sun and the other always dark. Some of its people live on the dark side in caverns heated by volcanic activity and use the flaps of skin that stretch between their arms and torsos to glide on the air currents within the caverns. The people on the bright side use the sun to power their appliances and vehicles; they come and go freely in the light and fear the inhabitants of the dark. Then there are those who live in darkened villages just over the boundary drawn by the sun.

Brody a fifteen-year-old boy lives in one of the darkside caverns where people are told they are the only ones on the planet. They are forced to obey the dictates of their ruler Enox and their position in society and their occupations are determined by their class. Brody and his friend Zip are enjoying their last days of freedom before they are assigned to a lifelong job; they slide in one of the ice chutes testing each other to see how far and fast they can go.

But when Zip is murdered and Brody becomes a suspect he must run for his life—leaving his family behind to be executed—and make his own way on the frigid surface.

While there are some compelling ideas in this tale the first book in a series there are also serious problems. The most basic fault is a complete lack of explanation for how one race of people with no greater adaptation than clothing can endure the surface temperature extremes of both light and dark sides of the planet.

Another basic error repeated throughout the book is the author's habit of describing beings and artifacts on her alien planet by starting with an Earth being or artifact. Bearcats for example she says look like polar bears with faces like bulldogs and the gait of a cat. A hunter's cloak is explained by likening it to a parachute. Flying cats "resembled mountain lions from Earth." Exotic cultures can't be described in terms of the familiar without losing the reader. There are also multiple grammar and punctuation errors.

Characterization and plot have their own difficulties. The author explains far too much rather than letting the characters act to advance the plot—and when they do act it is far too contrived and arbitrary introducing inconsistencies. Skit a young man who helps Brody on the light side of the planet is declared a criminal and for long stretches of the book that is ignored as if forgotten by the other characters. Lance the prince of the light side of the planet first befriends Brody then betrays him then supports him again. Last but not least the most likeable character Aila who is responsible for Brody's rescue is killed with little reaction from her family and friends.

There are some inventive ideas here however. When the writer's skill catches up to her imagination the result will be worthwhile.

MARLENE SATTER (January 10, 2007)

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