
Heron

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IN THE Goddess's temple she was known as Heron. No one bowed or curtsied to her. No handmaid brought her bowls of rose water to wash her hands. No minstrels composed ballads about the beauty of her jet-black hair.

She had first arrived one winter morning when she was seven years old. The king's aide marched her to the temple's East Gate. He smirked at the elderly priestess that came to meet them. The combination of advanced age and over-plumpness left the priestess waddling like a self-important duck.

The king's aide gestured at the temple with its echoing stone corridors, the elderly priestess in her coarse

brown gown. "This is your last chance to change your mind, Princess. If you do not consent to your betrothal, you must stay within the temple for one full year. Well? Will you marry Lord Perniquet?"

"Never, never, never." She stomped her foot and pulled her face into a most undignified scowl.
"Never."

But when the priestess took her by the hand, and the gate closed behind them with the king's aide outside, her bottom lip quivered. The temple was cold and strange. The priestess's hand was a soft clammy lump, steering her along the corridor.

The priestess stopped suddenly. With awkward slowness, she crouched down on the stone floor until her eyes were level with the princess's. "What's wrong, child? Are you frightened?"

"I'm not frightened." The princess tilted her chin up. "I'm never frightened."

The priestess looked sad for a moment, but she smiled as she said, "That's commendable, my little heron."

The princess frowned. "What's a heron?"

"A kind of bird with long thin legs and a long thin neck. I saw one once, wading through the water. It moved its head just like you." The priestess clambered to her feet. She laid her hand on Heron's shoulder and led her to the novices' dormitory.

All that year, Heron slept in the dormitory with the other children. Her mattress was no softer than theirs. Her tunic was no finer. She shared the same lessons as the other children and did the same work—scrubbing the stone flags of the temple courtyard, trimming candles, polishing the brasswork.

In the beginning the work exhausted Heron. Her knees bled from kneeling on the stone. Her hands grew red and chapped. Even her skin itched from the coarse yellow fabric of the tunic.

When the priestesses asked if Heron needed to rest, she raised her chin and said "No." She was a princess. She could do anything the other girls could.

Only at night, after she pulled the sheet over her face so no one could see her, did Heron admit that she missed the palace. She would try to visualize her bedroom: the bright tapestries on three walls, the wide bay windows, the marble dragons that guarded the fireplace. And sometimes her mouth watered as she remembered hot raspberry tarts or chocolate mousses. But when she thought of her father, she always ended up crying. She muffled her head in her pillow, everything confused together: the way he used to hold her in his lap, his beard tickling against her cheek; the way his voice had hardened when she refused the betrothal.

One morning, a year after Heron came to the temple, the elderly priestess interrupted their lessons. She motioned Heron out of the classroom. The priestess was as plump as ever; she still waddled like a duck and her hands were sweat-clammy whatever the temperature. But she let the novices call her Aunt Tessa, and never once shouted at them nor rapped their hands with a rod.

Now Tessa led Heron to the temple's East Gate. Outside, the king's aide stood waiting, flanked by six soldiers. The king's aide was resplendent in the royal colors, gold and amethyst woven into the collar of his fur coat.

Heron looked at the man steadily, then lowered her head and gazed at the path where he stood. An icing of frost coated the blades of grass bordering the pathway. Tiny rainbows shifted in the frost. Heron had played in the temple's inner garden often enough, yet all year long she had been forbidden to leave the temple. She inched her shoe across the threshold?there, her foot was outside?and wriggled her toes.

Tessa laid her damp hand on Heron's arm and drew her back from the entrance.

The king's aide bowed to Heron, but his expression was disdainful. ?His Majesty has sent me to ask if you are willing to accept your betrothal. How do you answer??

?No,? said Heron.

The king's aide bowed again. ?Then the king commands that you stay within the temple grounds for another full year.?

Heron lifted her chin and gazed up at the man. Trying to make her voice as steady as the Mother Priestess pronouncing the rites, she said, ?Tell Papa I miss him?ask him to visit me.?

The king's aide smiled thinly. ?Why should His Majesty wish to visit a recalcitrant girl-child? The new Queen has given him a son. Good day, Princess.?

He turned his back on her and walked away down the path.

?Oh,? said Heron in a very small voice. She watched Tessa pull the gate closed with unnecessary force, iron clanging against iron.

?Little heron,? said Tessa, crouching down beside her. ?The king's aide is a learned man. He is fluent in four languages and a master of history. Yet if he opened his mind to the Goddess, he would surely learn that she judges us not by whether we are man or woman, girl or boy. Here,? she rummaged in her pocket and pressed something cold into Heron's hand.

Heron opened her palm: a green glass marble, bright as spring grass. Her eyes widened. ?Thank you.?

?The peddler said that came from Tacatal, a city built on rafts in the middle of a lake. I always wanted to see that for myself.? There was a wistfulness to Tessa's voice. She stood up and brushed the skirts of her gown clean. ?Now we'd better hurry, or you'll miss all your lessons.?

Heron nodded and tugged at Tessa to go faster. They were doing numbers, Heron's favorite subject. She had memorized her multiplication tables before anyone else in the class.

By the time the king's aide visited the next year, Heron had learned how to do long division and fractions. She was taller and thinner than any of the other nine-year-olds. The king's aide seemed startled by her height, but he didn't comment on it, just looked her up and down several times, his face pulled into a sneer. Heron told him she still refused the betrothal.

That night she couldn't sleep. The memory of the king's aide kept coming back to her, his dismissive contempt as he looked at her. At the palace, no one had treated her that way. Everyone had strived to please her, from the handmaid who brushed her hair to the visiting nobles. And every night, just before she went to sleep, her father used to come to her door. He never walked over to her bed, just stood in the doorway and nodded once, his expression as satisfied as when he inspected his horses. Remembering how that brief nod had rounded out each day, Heron's eyes stung. For the first time in

months, she had to pull the sheet over her head so that none of the novices would see her cry.

When Heron was ten, she handed the king's aide a picture and a letter for her father. The painting had taken her six attempts to get right, but finally she thought she had successfully captured the king's favorite stallion. The aide sneered at her effort as he took the painting. For a few days after that, Heron kept expecting a messenger to arrive—or even her father himself—to thank her. But no one came.

By the time Heron turned eleven, she'd decided that the king's aide had probably deliberately mislaid her painting before he returned to the palace.

At twelve, Heron didn't want to see her father anyway. If he had loved her, he would never have sent her to the temple. Now that they were old enough, the novices were allowed out into the city on the last day of every month, but by the king's command, Heron always stayed inside the temple. On those days, Tessa used to spend the afternoon with Heron. Tessa always brought some treat with her, crumbled pieces of lemon cake or a book of drawings, and then Tessa would tell Heron about places she'd been to years ago, traveling as a missionary in the Goddess's service. Heron listened wide-eyed, her head bobbing unconsciously as Tessa talked. Once, when Tessa described a desert, Heron's mind filled with a vision of a limitless world of sand cupped beneath the blue bowl of the sky; for a moment, the scene was so vivid that Heron could feel the dry heat baking her skin, the desert stretching out around her to infinity.

That winter the temple seemed to be closing in on her. Some days her chest was so tight she could hardly breathe. At first she thought she might be sick with pleurisy, but she had no fever and no cough. In lessons, the priestesses spoke about politics and geography, all the different lands where the Goddess had temples. Heron scowled and filled the corners of her notebook with sketches: isosceles triangles trapped in weird geometrical shapes, sharp-peaked mountains that she'd never be allowed to see.

Now that she was twelve, she shared a bedroom with only one other novice. One night when Alissa was sound asleep, Heron tiptoed out of the room. She stole along the corridors to a narrow window.

Heron pushed the shutters open, shivering at the chill night air. There was no one in sight, but the temple grounds ended only a few dozen yards away. Beyond, she could make out the silhouettes of houses and two tall pine trees. Heron squeezed out of the window. She pulled her cloak tighter about her and ran across the lawn.

A shadow moved against the background, separated into a hooded figure.

Heron peered into the darkness, trying to make out the person's face. All she could see was a darker hole within the shadow. Spirit-demons had no faces. Tessa said that demons were only myths, but still Heron edged away from the shadow figure.

The figure spoke. "A thing once broken cannot always be mended. Would you forsake your vows?"

Heron froze, half-relieved and half-appalled. That was the Mother Priestess's voice.

"Speak, child."

"What vows?" asked Heron, hating the way her voice trembled. "I, I haven't taken the novitiate vows yet."

"The vow that you would stay here till the King granted you permission to leave."

"But I didn't? I never agreed to stay.?"

"Mother Tessa took such a vow in your name on the day you first entered the temple. Had she not been willing to guarantee your custody, the King would have thrown you in a dungeon. If you leave now, what do you imagine the King will do??"

An image burst inside Heron: a skeleton in a coffin, remnants of hair and leathery skin tattered over the bones. The bones of both hands and feet were crushed. A green glass marble nestled in one eye socket. The image dissolved to a pauper's burial, Heron standing over the grave, dry-eyed, laying the green marble into Tessa's open coffin.

Abruptly the image vanished. A curious warmth flooded through Heron, sweet as honey, and yet she felt sick to the point of vomiting. Someone was steadying her, holding her so close that Heron smelled soap and the faint underlying smell of the other person's body. She mumbled into that warmth, "I saw a skeleton.?"

"Hush now. It's all right. It's only one seeing; it doesn't have to happen that way.?"

Heron pulled away at the sound of the Mother Priestess's voice. She had been clinging to the priestess like an infant, like a babe in arms. No one touched the Mother Priestess. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean, I didn't think??"

"It's all right. Seeing is a great gift, but a hard one.?" She took Heron's hand gently and walked her back to the temple.

Over the next year, visions came to Heron once or twice every day. The seeing grabbed her without warning, while she bathed, or sat at lessons, or did the chores. Once she had a vision of a soldier running his sword through another man, heard the scrape of the sword meeting bone, tasted the metallic tang of blood in the air. When the vision cleared, she was on her knees in the hallway, retching. The honeyed warmth rose inside her, and to her shame Heron welcomed it, luxuriating in the sensation.

The Mother Priestess took her aside for an hour a day, together with one of the older novices who also had the Sight. Slowly Heron gained more control, enough to tell approximately where and when each vision was set.

Sometimes she could summon visions of her choosing. In a land far to the west, she saw a long building that was a cross between a barn and a house. Inside a family lay sleeping on high beds tucked neatly against one end of the room, a hearth in the middle, and at the other end four cattle lay on the earth floor. To the north, she saw a forest with trees twenty times the height of a man and wider than a chariot. To the south, she saw a desert, its surface rising and falling in strange hills. Odd spiky plants jutted out of the ground. In the minutes after dawn the sand had a thousand shades, a vast unspeaking beauty.

These images pulled her back again and again. She found herself sketching places she'd only seen in visions, but afterward there was an emptiness inside her that she couldn't name. She would never be able to see these lands directly, never be free to leave the temple.

One winter's day in her fifteenth year, she walked to the East Gate two hours after dawn. She pulled the gate open just as the king's aide came into view. "Tell my father I refuse the betrothal,?" said Heron and closed the gate before the king's aide had said a word.

She stood alone in the corridor, her hands clenching and unclenching. It struck her piercingly then, with no need of vision to help her. The king's aide didn't have to speak. The answer had always been there in his face; she just hadn't known how to read it. When he looked at her, he saw something less than a person. A thing, a piece in a game, meant to move at the king's behest.

That evening Heron asked to speak to Tessa alone. They went to the inner garden, and Tessa sat down heavily on a bench in the shelter of the cloistered walkway. Heron walked up and down, her breath pluming out in front of her in the lantern-light. 'I want to leave the temple?to travel, to learn how to ride a horse?a hundred things.?'

'I know that,?' said Tessa. 'We all know.?'

'I had hoped that you might come with me.?'

Tessa sighed. 'I am too old for running, little heron. But you go. It hurts me to see you trapped here.?'

The breath sighed out of Heron. She stared at the older woman's plump face, so familiar it was easy to underestimate her. Tessa would encourage Heron to leave without even mentioning the vow she'd taken on Heron's behalf.

Heron wanted to say that she'd never go if it would bring harm upon Tessa, that she had only stayed so long because of Tessa's vow. But her throat clogged on the words, and all she said was, 'I think I know how to get permission to leave freely. It came to me after I saw the king's aide this morning. Why do I matter to the king? Answer: because my marriage can be used as a bargaining counter to forge alliances. But if I'd lost my honor, say if I had lain with a stable hand, then I would have no value.?'

Tessa flushed so red that Heron saw the color even in the lantern-light. At first Heron thought the older woman was embarrassed, but then she realized Tessa was angry.

'You would lie with a man for nothing but to trick the king?not even for a fleeting passion?but just as a trick. That is a cold and ugly thing.?'

'I would,?' said Heron. 'Gladly. But the King would blame you and the temple for letting it happen. So instead I thought of another trick. It's widely known that I have the Sight. If we let it be rumored that I had a shadow lover, a demon-spirit, then no man would dare to marry me, nor even to touch me. And the King could not blame you for the movements of a spirit.?'

Heron sat down beside Tessa on the bench. 'Well? What do you think??'

Tessa said nothing for a long time. Heron bit her lip but stayed quiet, too. Finally Tessa laid one damp hand over Heron's. 'It might work, this idea of yours. The Mother Priestess could stage a rite to drive the demon-spirit away, but you would be considered permanently contaminated by the experience. You would have to leave the temple for good.?'

Heron smiled. 'That's all right. I've been ready to leave for years.?'

* * * *

In her seventeenth year, Heron came to Tacatal, the city floating in the center of a lake. Tessa stood beside her, eyes wide as a child's, and stared ahead without speaking a single word as the ferry carried them toward the cluster of rafts. Heron stole her hand into Tessa's. The air was hotter than any summer's day she'd known before, relieved only by an occasional breeze. Slowly she made out the individual rafts,

tied together by rope. On the rafts squatted the huts common to this region, built of branches and clay with windows that were always open.

And so Heron and Tessa traveled from town to town. The further south they went, the more easily Tessa moved, her muscles eased by the warm air. They earned what money they needed by a few days work in each town. Tessa would sew, and Heron would work as a cleaner or washerwoman or, discreetly, offer her services as a seer.

In her eighteenth year, Heron reached the desert lands she had seen in vision. Their guide humphed impatiently while Heron twitched her camel's bridle to bring the animal down on its knees. She clambered from the saddle. Taking off her sandals, she curled her toes in the hot, gritty sand. Around her the dunes swept up and down in rhythmic curves sculpted by the wind. Heron stretched out her hands, wide as a promise.

Anything was possible.

The End

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