

THE HUNDREDTH KILL

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TEN-YEAR-OLD CHARLIE Mason had long watched the ships from his spot in Foochow's harbor, waiting for his chance to board one of the grand clippers. Along with his lordly father, Charlie had been on ships before, but now that steamers were taking over, he had never had a chance to board a real sailing vessel until heading for home. They had always seemed so beautiful to him, like big white eagles, but now, halfway through his three-month journey, Charlie was bored.

There were no other children his age or otherwise aboard the Cairngorm, and no one really for Charlie to talk to. His father was already home in England, and his governess Priscilla—who accompanied him everywhere—was nearly thirty. To Charlie's thinking, thirty was very nearly dead, and Priscilla had already worn him out with her stories. Most nights, Priscilla and Charlie ate with the rest of the passengers, listening to outdated gossip about the goings-on back home, where a man named Disraeli was struggling as Prime Minister, or to the troubles of the Spanish Queen Isabella or the American President Johnson. But Charlie wasn't interested in this talk, and six weeks of it had left him numb. He missed his tutors back in Foochow, where his father had left him to learn the tea trade. It was tea that filled the holds of the Cairngorm, and it was tea that was the only reason the clippers still existed. Charlie understood this and appreciated it, knowing that the slow steamers could not get the goods back to the home markets quickly enough. Charlie had learned a lot from his year in China, and it had all been a great adventure. Hong Kong, Macau, Foochow...Charlie had seen them all, but he longed for home now, and even the swift clipper ship could not speed him back to Wiltshire fast enough.

Each night aboard the ship was like the one before, and when the passengers finished their meals they talked and played games, and sometimes the men wagered at cards. All of them were kind to Charlie, and all of them were like his parents. English, mostly, they had purchased passage back to Britain full of stories, their pockets packed with Chinese wealth. There was only one passenger who never ate with the others, an Oriental woman who kept to herself and spent almost every evening at the bow of the ship, sitting in her strange and colorful clothes, knitting or reading, always alone. Her name was Lady Kita. She had dark hair and dark eyes and she looked different from the women Charlie knew in China. Priscilla had explained to Charlie that Lady Kita was standoffish and cold, and that was why the rest of the passengers ignored her. Tonight, however, Charlie had heard his fill of politics, and so left the supper table before the tea was served. Knowing he could not get lost aboard the ship, Priscilla let him go with a warning to be careful, then turned back to the charming man named Hawthorne who Charlie

knew she fancied.

Six weeks at sea had made Charlie an expert seaman. He knew the Cairngorm nearly as well as any of its crew, who had spent hours teaching him about the vessel. He had no trouble making it across the deck, not even this night, when the sea was choppy and the deck tossed him about. It was summer, late July, and the sun was just dipping below the ocean, blazing on the horizon. Waves crashed against the vessel's hull. The busy crew—there were thirty of them—went about their usual work, smiling at Charlie but mostly ignoring him as he made his way to the bow.

Lady Kita had taken her usual spot, sitting in a deck chair facing the clipper's wake. Her hands were empty, clasped in her lap. She wore a fine robe of patterned silk, cinched around her waist by a wide, elaborate belt. She wore her hair pinned up in the back. Charlie slowed as he neared her, spying her. He had explored every inch of the

Cairngorm except for this strange woman, but now he grew afraid of her. Was she a baroness, Charlie wondered, or a duchess perhaps? She was called "lady," and where Charlie was from that meant nobility. His father had spent months in Japan and had dined in the court of the nobles there, but Charlie himself had never been.

"Come out," said the woman suddenly, making Charlie jump. He stood very still, hiding himself in the shadow of a crate. "Come out," the woman repeated. "It is rude to stare."

Charlie's face grew hot. "Sorry," he stammered. He stepped out from his hiding spot. "I wasn't staring. Honest."

"What were you doing, then?" The lady finally turned to face him. Charlie didn't know how to answer.

"We were having supper. My governess is waiting for me..."

Lady Kita pretended to look around. "I don't see her."

"She's back in the galley," Charlie managed.

"Where you should be," said the lady, not unkindly. "Never mind. It is good to see you. You are Charlie Mason."

"Yes," said Charlie brightly. "How do you know that?"

"There is little to do onboard. I learned the names of everyone."

She spoke in a courtly voice, with the hint of an accent. Charlie was used to the Chinese women and the way they spoke, fast and loud. Lady Kita's voice was neither of those things. She reminded Charlie of the women back home.

And then, to Charlie's great surprise, she invited him to sit. Since the lady occupied the only chair, Charlie took to the deck, captivated by her. She seemed to sense his boredom, something that they shared, perhaps.

"Do you like this ship?" she asked. "I have seen you with the crew, full of questions for them."

Charlie nodded. "It's my first time on a ship like this. I've traveled with my father before, but only on a steamer. This is better. It's faster."

"For now," said the lady. "The world is changing."

Her expression darkened. Charlie puzzled over her words.

"You're Japanese," he pronounced. "I can tell. My father went to Japan. He met the emperor."

Lady Kita raised her brows. "Did he? That is wonderful."

"It is," said Charlie proudly. "My father told me about him. He went all over Japan meeting important people. He's a diplomat." He looked at her. "Do you know what that is?"

"Yes," said the lady, smiling. "How much do you know about Japan, Charlie? I can tell you stories if you like. Do you like stories, Charlie?"

Charlie loved stories. Best of all, he loved stories of places he had never been before.

For the next week, Charlie went every night to Lady Kita's side. Sometimes she had treats for him, strange confections from her homeland that she had lovingly packed for her long journey. She regaled him with tales of the emperor, explaining to him about the warlords she called daimyos and how they had battled with the emperor for control of Japan. Japan was changing, she explained to Charlie, and this she told him over and over again. The old ways—the things she cherished—were quickly fading. But Lady Kita kept them alive, at least onboard the Cairngorm, bringing them to life with her stories. Most of all, Charlie loved to hear her talk about the samurai, the warriors of Japan, and that strange group of mysterious men she called the nin-sha.

"They are shadows of the samurai," she had explained to him. "We have words for them. We call them shinobi-no-mono. That means they are the unseen people. But you know Chinese better, Charlie, so we will say what the Chinese call them. Nin-sha."

Now Charlie was truly fascinated. Lady Kita's stories about the samurai were good, but her tales about the nin-sha were astonishing. She had filled his mind with tales of the nin-sha so that Charlie could barely sleep, so excited was he to hear more. This night, as they settled in to their deck chairs over a pot of steaming tea, Charlie insisted she tell him more.

"Where did the nin-sha come from?" he asked. That was still a mystery she had left unsolved. Charlie knew she had deliberately held back the best bits of her story. Just as she had explained everything about the daimyos and their samurai, he wanted now to know everything about the nin-sha.

Lady Kita held her teacup in both hands, savoring its warmth, her white face lit by a nearby lantern. "A long time ago, when my country first began, there was a man named Jimmu who wanted to be emperor. Jimmu was a powerful man. He had armies, but he had enemies, too, and he needed the favor of the gods to defeat them. Jimmu prayed mightily for help, and the gods answered him. They told him to fetch some clay from the holy mountain of Amakaga, but Jimmu could not do this alone. He needed help from men who could sneak their way past his enemies and reach the mountain."

“Nin-sha?” asked Charlie excitedly.

“The first of the nin-sha,” the lady explained. “Their names were Shinetsuiko and Otokashi. They dressed themselves up as peasant women and sneaked past Jimmu’s enemies to reach Mount Amakaga. They fetched the clay from the holy mountain and returned it to Jimmu, who fired the clay into a bowl as an offering to the gods. The gods were pleased with Jimmu and gave him victory over his enemies. He became emperor.”

“What about the other two? What happened to them?”

“Shinetsuiko and Otokashi disappeared into the mountains. They taught others what they had learned. And Shinetsuiko established his clan.” The lady paused. “Do you know what a clan is, Charlie?”

“A family,” Charlie replied.

“Yes,” said Lady Kita brightly. “Shinetsuiko’s clan was the first nin-sha family. They settled in Iga, where Shinetsuiko was born, and they became the finest of the nin-sha clans. There were many clans once, but none were as fine as Shinetsuiko’s. They were a proud people. They made schools, like you go to school, Charlie.”

“I have tutors,” Charlie corrected.

“But you learn, yes? And so others learned what Shinetsuiko and his clan taught them, and the knowledge was passed on. And they cherished the bowl that Jimmu had made from the holy clay. It was their symbol. It was their strength. It was not fabulous to look at, and those who saw it said it looked like the work of peasants.” Lady Kita laughed. “But it was made by an emperor! It gave Shinetsuiko and his clan power. The nin-sha became like magic folk.”

“They can pass through walls, that’s what you said. Tell me about that.”

“Some nin-sha can do these things, it is true. Some nin-sha are very powerful.” Lady Kita leaned forward over her teacup. “Some nin-sha are not people at all.”

Charlie blanched. “Not people? What are they?”

“Ghosts,” said Lady Kita.

Charlie laughed. “There’s no such thing!”

“But there is, Charlie. In my country there are many spirits, and many things that the outside world does not know or understand.”

“My father never saw any ghosts in Japan.”

“And how would he see a ghost anyway?” asked the lady tartly. “Nin-shas are never seen or heard, not unless they choose to be.”

“But I thought they were men,” Charlie protested. “How can they be ghosts?”

“Not all were ghosts, Charlie. Only the best of them ever became ghosts.”

Charlie’s mind began to reel, and he knew that his father would never believe these tales. But Charlie believed, because he trusted Lady Kita. She had no reason to lie to him.

“Are there still nin-sha?” he asked.

“Some,” replied the lady. “In old Japan there were many, but the daimyos are fading now, and with them fade the samurai and nin-sha, too. There are masters, though, who still keep nin-sha as their servants.” Lady Kita smiled. “But that is a tale for tomorrow night.”

That night, Charlie dreamed of the nin-sha ghosts Lady Kita had told him about, and all the next day he waited to find out more. He rarely saw Lady Kita in the daytime, and, besides, he didn’t want to share her with anyone else. He spent time with Priscilla and the other passengers, and sometimes with members of the crew, because Charlie knew his lordly father wanted him to take every opportunity to learn and would ask him questions when he returned home. Nighttime, though, was Charlie’s great respite from the drudgery of day. He rushed through supper with the others in the galley, begged off the desserts offered by the staff, and made his way to the bow of the ship where, as usual, Lady Kita was waiting. This time, though, the woman’s demeanor was different. She smiled when she saw Charlie, as though he was a ray of sunlight striking through some gloom. She had dressed beautifully, too, more so than usual, in a dazzling robe of red and blue that Charlie had never seen before.

“What’s the matter?” Charlie asked.

Lady Kita stiffened. “I have been thinking, Charlie, about the stories I have told you. They make me sad, these stories.”

Charlie did not understand. “But they’re great stories. I love your stories, Lady Kita.”

“You are a little boy, Charlie. When you are old like me, stories will mean more to you. Sometimes, they will be all that you have left.”

Charlie sidled closer to her, wanting to comfort her. “I’ve been thinking,” he began, “about what you told me about the ghost nin-sha. I’m not afraid of them.”

Lady Kita broke into a smile. “No?”

“No. I know they kill people and all, but they’re not bad. That’s right, isn’t it? You told me that nin-sha aren’t bad people.”

“That’s right, Charlie. The nin-sha were as good as the samurai. Better, even. A samurai might kill for the pleasure of it. A nin-sha would never do such a thing.”

“I like them better,” said Charlie. “Will you tell me more about them?”

“Yes,” said Lady Kita, “but first, why don’t you tell me a story?”

“Me?”

“Yes. I have told you a story every night for weeks now. It is your turn.”

Charlie thought hard about this. “I can tell you about my father.”

Lady Kita brightened immediately. “Yes. Yes, that would be good.”

So Charlie told the lady about his father, Sir Ernest, the diplomat and traveler, who had made a fortune importing tea and who insisted that his young son learn the trade. His father was an important man, Charlie told the lady, and had been to many foreign lands. He had been to Japan to meet the emperor, of course, and he had lived among the nobles who had taken him into their homes. One of

them, a man named Okaga, had once been a friend to Charlie's father.

"Okaga is well known in Japan, Charlie," said Lady Kita. "He is a daimyo. Do you remember? He is one of the great men. He has a castle in Iga, where the nin-sha come from."

"I remember," said Charlie. He remembered every small detail of Lady Kita's tales. "Is Okaga a nin-sha?"

"No," said the lady flatly. "He is Lord of Iga, but he is no nin-sha. He is just like other powerful men of his kind. Like the samurai class, Charlie. It is Okaga's birthright to rule Iga, that is all. And he is loyal to the emperor."

Charlie didn't know if that was a good thing or bad. Not all the daimyo were loyal to the emperor, he remembered. But Okaga had once been his father's friend. "My father is only friends with good men," said Charlie. Then, his expression flattened. "He hasn't been to Japan for a long time, though. He doesn't talk about it much anymore, or about Okaga."

Lady Kita took note of this, then urged Charlie to tell her more. Charlie continued with his story, telling of the gifts Okaga had given his father, all of which had been taken home to Wiltshire where they adorned Charlie's house in the country. Charlie missed the house, but he missed his father more.

"My father left me in Foochow to learn, and I have learned," he insisted. "I learned from my tutors and the men aboard this ship, and I've learned from you, Lady Kita." He smiled, hoping to coax her into finishing her tale. "Will you tell me more about the ghosts?"

Lady Kita smiled. "Yes, I will tell you. But you must listen closely, so that you understand everything. Make me that promise, Charlie."

Charlie promised without really knowing why, then settled comfortably into his deck chair. Night had fallen quickly and they were alone on the bow, the perfect setting for a ghost story.

"All of the nin-sha come from their own clans," the lady began. "They do the bidding of their masters. And sometimes, the best of nin-sha remain here after they die, and are bound to their masters. Do you know the story of Aladdin and his magic lamp, Charlie?"

Charlie nodded. "The lamp with the genie."

"Yes, that is right. It is like that for some of the nin-sha. They are like the genie of the lamp. They remain with their masters and they cannot be freed until they do his bidding one hundred times." Lady Kita grimaced. "That means one hundred kills, Charlie. They may kill ninety-nine men for the master, and still be forever in his service. Until they kill that hundredth person, they can never leave this world."

Charlie's jaw went slack with awe. "Why do they have to serve their masters?" he asked. "Why are they servants?"

"Mostly because they were sold into it," said the lady sadly. "The daimyos have always been powerful. And the nin-sha clans were always poor. Sometimes they give away things that are precious to them so that they may be protected by the daimyo. Sometimes the things they give away are people. Sometimes not."

"But they don't have to serve forever," Charlie pointed out. He pretended to wield a sword, waving it in the air before him. "They could kill a hundred people easily!"

"No," laughed the lady. "That is not the way of things. The master must give the order, Charlie."

Remember what I told you? The nin-sha are not like samurai. When they were strong, the samurai trod the earth like princes. They enforced the law however they wished. Woe to you if you displeased them, Charlie! The nin-sha, though, they were not like that. They were not butchers. They would not kill for the sport of it.”

“Oh,” said Charlie darkly. “So they’re stuck. That’s doesn’t seem fair.”

Lady Kita continued. “You asked me if there are still nin-sha in the world, and I told you that there were. But there are very few of them left. As the world changes, the clipper ships will sail away. The samurai will all vanish. The only nin-sha who exist now are the ghosts, Charlie, who are bound to the last of the daimyos.”

She looked profoundly sad. Charlie nudged her with a question.

“Why won’t the masters let the nin-sha ghosts go?” he asked. “Why are they so cruel?”

“Oh, there are many reasons, Charlie. Some of them you will not understand until you are older.”

“What happens then?” Charlie asked. “What happens after they kill a hundred people?”

“They go to heaven, Charlie,” said Lady Kita serenely. “Like everyone else.”

For the rest of the voyage, Charlie saw Lady Kita almost every night, and she continued to regale him with stories. But she no longer spoke about the nin-sha. Their story, she explained, was already told and there was nothing more for Charlie to know. Charlie did not badger his friend about it, but simply enjoyed her company and the tales she told about other things. She knew a lot about Japanese history, which Charlie thought was strange for a woman. She was a scholar, far smarter than any of his tutors had been. She knew so much about the world that she reminded Charlie of his father back home.

Eventually, the

Cairngorm reached its destination, and Charlie and the other passengers of the clipper disembarked at the London docks. Because most of them were Englishmen, the passengers sung the praises of their homeland, glad to be home after so many weeks at sea. At the docks, Charlie said good-bye to Lady Kita, who did not offer to write the boy or ever see him again. She shook his hand politely, said nothing to the other passengers, then disappeared into the crowded port. Charlie held Priscilla’s hand as he watched Lady Kita go. For a moment, he thought he would cry.

It was early in September.

The season rolled from summer into fall. The autumn chill crept into the English air. In Wiltshire the leaves were changing early, and the estate of Sir Ernest burst with color. The lord of the manor had servants who milled about the green lawns, keeping the hedgerows trimmed and the animals fed, and pruning back the flowers for the coming winter. Sometimes, horses clip-clopped across the pretty hills. At night, when the estate was quiet, the windows winked with oil lamps and the chimneys spouted smoke. The animals fell silent. Sir Ernest and his only son got under the covers of their soft beds and slept.

All of these things Kita had watched while she waited. She had always been endlessly patient.

After months aboard ship, tracking Charlie Mason to his father, there was no real rush to do the thing she had come to do. She enjoyed Wiltshire, though it was nothing like home, and seeing Charlie with his father pleased her. It was easy for Kita to spy from the woods or to walk the grounds when the sun went down. She was like the nin-sha of old, soundless when she walked, able to leave the grass undisturbed beneath her feet.

Tonight, Kita moved like a breeze, her slippered feet barely grazing the earth, her face obscured beneath wraps of black cloth. The sun had gone down long ago, and the moon had dimmed, too. A gentle wind buffeted the leaves of the yard. Sir Ernest was a widower and slept alone. He had only one child but a score of servants, all of whom would be asleep and none of whom—Kita was sure—would see her if they weren't. In the weeks he had spent at Okaga's castle, Sir Ernest had talked incessantly about himself and his collections, and Kita had seen some of these things when she'd spied through the windows. He was not an unkind man, though, and her master had liked him. Charlie, of course, loved him.

Kita paused, thinking of Charlie. Then, like a tiny flame, she snuffed out the image of his face, focusing instead on her task.

Her target was in the upper bedroom. Kita drifted to the doors. In the days before the restoration, men and women like herself ruled the night and made the daimyos tremble. They were servants now, those who "survived," but they still had the skills, and being what she was made the doors no obstacle at all. With merely a thought she passed through them. She wore no weapons and her body was like ether, but when she willed it so, she could make her hands like steel. Kita did not will that now, though, and so floated her way through the silent house, admiring the things Sir Ernest had collected. He had many things from China, and items from the dark continent, too. Of course, the things her master Okaga had given him were well displayed in his enormous home, gracing the walls and tiny walnut tables, showcased by crystal chandeliers that must have been grand when lit. Kita allowed herself only a moment to admire these treasures.

Like the doors, the stairs posed no problem. Kita willed it and she ascended, carried aloft by an unseen force. On the second floor were the bedchambers, and the largest of these belonged to Sir Ernest. Not far from his own was Charlie's room. Kita paused and looked at Charlie's door. For a moment she was frozen. For a moment, she hesitated. How much did she truly want to do this thing? She had come on a mission, but now all she wanted was to see Charlie one more time.

No.

That could never be. Never again.

Resolute, Kita pushed on toward Sir Ernest's room. This time she did not move through the portal, but opened it silently, and through the darkness she saw the chamber, large and—what did the English say? Posh. Sir Ernest slept upon his enormous bed, little sounds of sleep bubbling on his lips. The velvet curtains of his window hung open, letting in stray beams of moonlight. Kita scanned the room and its riches, and saw a sword near his mantle, a beautiful katana resting on a silver stand, perfect and unblemished. Other treasures rested near it. Kita's eyes went at once to the object of her mission. Looking plain and valueless, the clay bowl sat atop the mantle. The thing that had called her across the seas, the one holy relic her people treasured.

Her eyes darted between the clay bowl and the man in the bed, and then to the katana on the

mantle. Sir Ernest began to stir. Kita smiled. In a blur she went to the sword, pulling it free of its ornate scabbard. Quickly, she took the bowl in her other hand. Standing over Sir Ernest, she put the tip of the katana to the startled man's throat. Sir Ernest gasped as he saw her, the blade nipping his skin. She shook her head, bidding him to silence. Half-asleep, Sir Ernest obeyed. He looked terrified to Kita, and also very brave. Other men had begged for their lives. Sir Ernest, she knew, would not beg.

"This," said Kita, holding up the bowl, "is mine."

Sir Ernest moved only his mouth as he spoke. "It was a gift," he explained steadily.

"It did not belong to the giver to give," said Kita. She pushed on the sword ever so gently, making her point. "Do not follow me."

Backing away, Kita dropped the sword to the floor and sped from the room. With the bowl tucked safely in her arms, she raced down the stairs and through the house. This time, she unlocked the great doors before fleeing, no longer soundless as she held the earthly item. Still a ghost, the holy bowl bound her to the world of men. Outside, she cursed the moonlight as it lit her black garb, speeding toward the trees and their protective darkness.

Up in his chamber, Sir Ernest sat stupefied by what had happened. Then, when at last he had collected himself, he ran to Charlie's room to check on his son.

Lady Kita returned to Japan in January, following a tumultuous return voyage aboard a modern steamship. Just as she had during her voyage aboard the Cairngorm, she kept to herself and spoke to almost no one. This time, she did not befriend anyone, for there was no one she needed to befriend to lead her to her goal. She had not expected to like Charlie as much as she had, and she was surprised that even now she remembered him so fondly. But she had accomplished what she had set out to do, and when she arrived in Japan, she did not return at once to the court of her master at Iga Castle, but instead went to the mountains in the south, and returned the clay bowl to her clan. Lady Kita's people were no longer practitioners of the unseen arts. They had seen the changes coming and became blacksmiths and farmers instead, and this saddened Kita because she was stuck in a world that no longer existed. Then, when she was done, Lady Kita went to Iga Castle to face her master, Okaga.

Word spread quickly of Kita's return. She knew her master would be displeased, but there was very little he could do to her. She was already his servant. She had been so for decades. She was too beautiful for him to ever release. Her beauty was a curse. It had made Lord Okaga love her.

Like all of the daimyos, Okaga's castle—a modern hirayamajiro—was remarkable, rising up from the side of a small mountain so that he could oversee the land of Iga—the land of Kita's people. Upon her return, Okaga summoned Lady Kita to the donjon, the tower of his castle, where vassals attended him, kneeling upon the big wooden floor. Okaga himself sat upon a bamboo chair, his youngest children playing at his feet. Lady Kita did not dare meet his eyes. She knelt before him, her gaze downcast. There was no need to explain what she had done. Lord Okaga had already figured that out months ago.

"The bowl," said Okaga. "You have returned it to your people?"

Kita nodded. "Yes."

Lord Okaga already knew this as well, and yet still seemed disappointed. "Are they not my people, too? I am the Lord of Iga."

"Yes, my lord."

"So the bowl is mine, too."

Kita hesitated. "No, my lord. The bowl is holy to my clan."

Okaga's attendants stayed very still, shocked by her disagreement. It was Kita's clan who had made the bowl, and all of them knew it. But like sheep, they were afraid. Kita, though, was not afraid. She could only die once.

Lord Okaga rose from his chair to stand before her. "You have offended my friend, Sir Ernest, and you have disgraced me, Kita."

"I am lower than dust, master," said Kita. "I am unfit to serve your house."

"True," said Okaga. "I should send you away, yes? Release you?"

"Yes, master."

Even as she said it, she knew her master would laugh. And laugh he did.

"No, Kita, my beautiful one. There will be no hundredth kill for you. For what you have done, I will never release you. I will pass you on to my sons and they will pass you on to their sons, and you will be our servant for all of time."

His verdict did not shock her. "Yes, master," she replied.

"Go. Walk the nights as a ghost and return to me in the daylight so that I can look at you in pleasure."

Lady Kita rose and, head bowed, began backing out of the room. There would be no hundredth kill for her, not ever. She could kill a thousand men, but without her lord's sanction those deaths would mean nothing. She would never join her ancestors in heaven or meet the gods who had made the holy clay. Instead she would steal for Okaga and spy on his enemies, never to kill in his name again. She was more than his servant. She was his slave.

"Kita," said Okaga before she left the room. "Was this worth it?"

Kita did not need to think before giving her answer. The bowl belonged to her people. It was never truly Okaga's, and never his to give.

"Yes, master," she replied, and left the donjon.

The world would continue to change. Lady Kita took comfort in this. It was just like she had explained to Charlie all those months ago. Someday, there would be no more clipper ships. The samurai would fade away. And all the daimyos and all their castles would one day fall to dust. And then, perhaps, she would be free.