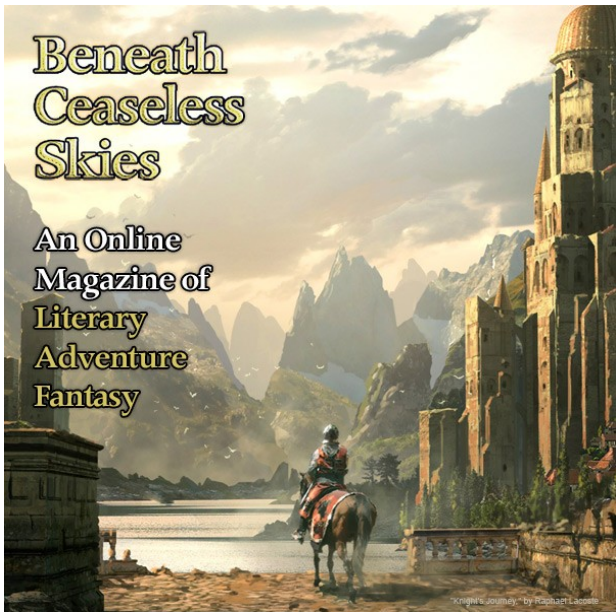


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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A Double-Issue in Celebration of Our 100th Issue

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## IN THE PALACE OF THE JADE LION

by Richard Parks

Just before the Time of Troubles there lived in the Kingdom of Zhao a poor young scholar named Xu Jian. He owned nothing except the clothes on his back and a battered pen case, but he had done well in King Youmiu's Royal Examinations and thus won a posting as Official Censor to a remote northern province. There were two drawbacks to this posting: The first was that he had no money for travel and would have to manage the journey unaided. The second was that he had to survive that journey in order to accept his post, and the northern road was infested with bandits, monsters, and dark spirits of all sorts.

"If I refuse the post and stay here, I will starve," he said to no one in particular. "Whereas, If I am slain by bandits or devoured by some demon beast on the journey north, at least my problems will be at an end."

Since he could see no obvious flaws in his argument, Xu Jian set out immediately on the northern road from the capital city Handan and made good progress for several days. Sometimes he was able to trade his tutoring skills for an

occasional night's lodging and a little money, but villages were few in that part of the country, and as often as not Xu Jian slept shivering in his robes under a sky full of cold stars.

On the morning of the seventh day, he turned off the main road and onto a smaller trail parallel to it because that trail led for a while along the banks of a swift-flowing stream, and Xu Jian found himself badly in need of both a drink and a bath. When he had drunk his fill of the cold, clear water and braved the chill long enough to cleanse himself, he continued on that trail, expecting it to rejoin the main road further along. By noon he realized that he had been mistaken. He considered retracing his steps but hated the idea of delay. Besides, this trail also led north, so he knew he was still going in the right direction.

“Bandits are more likely to haunt the main road,” he said to himself. “As this trail is obviously less traveled, it will be safer.”

By nightfall, however, Xu Jian was having serious doubts about his reasoning. It was now obvious that the trail was in fact an old military road, built for a purpose long since served and forgotten. While he hadn't expected to find any villages in this part of the country, it was clear now that no one at all used this road. Worse, as evening approached, he had seen several columns of mist rising from stone cairns and the caves that

sometimes appeared in the hillsides. These, he well knew, were the signs of ancient tombs and the spirits that dwelled in them. Xu Jian now walked unprotected through a land of ghosts.

He considered the matter, but he feared that the situation was hopeless. Xu Jian had eaten nothing at all that day and was too exhausted from the journey and the lack of nourishment to turn back. There was nothing for it but to find a place, preferably well-concealed, to spend the night.

He came to a thick tangle of flowering wisteria growing in the crevice between two large rocks. The path between them offered not only a fragrant shelter from the wind but also a place to hide himself. He had no sooner settled in to rest when a glowing lantern appeared floating along the path between the rocks.

“In my foolishness I have chosen to rest by an unquiet tomb,” Xu Jian said in despair, but he was too weak to even consider fleeing. His worst fears were confirmed when a terrible figure appeared in the cleft of the rock.

It was a huge, glowing apparition of a soldier in armor, with nothing but a black shadow where his face should have been. He carried a halberd of moldering bronze, the point of which was aimed directly at Xu Jian’s heart. The ghostly soldier advanced, and his intent was clear. Xu Jian closed his eyes.

“Please withdraw. We will deal with this matter.”

The voice was female and, he was fairly sure, did not belong to the ghostly soldier. Xu Jian opened his eyes and noted with some relief that the soldier had disappeared. The lantern he had seen earlier now reappeared, and he realized that the lantern was not floating in the air as he had believed but rather was being carried by a winsome girl of about sixteen, impeccably dressed as a lady's maid.

She stopped a few paces away from him and bowed low. "I hope our faithful guardian did not frighten you. My mistress noticed you from her chamber window, and she cannot in good conscience allow a gentleman such as yourself to sleep on the cold ground. Please accept our hospitality for this evening."

Xu Jian was not a complete fool. He knew that the idea of any real humans living near this isolated and ghost-ridden stretch of road with a spectral watchman on guard was nonsense, but he considered his options and decided that he didn't have any. He offered a silent prayer to any kindly gods who might have been listening and then followed the girl, who conducted him through the fissure in the rock, which soon led them to a large and finely constructed walled mansion compound within a pleasant valley. Silks hung from the rafters, and the wood accents on the hallways and chambers were exquisitely carved.

“What is your name, girl?” Xu Jian asked, “And what is this wonderful place?”

“I am called Patience, may it please you,” the girl said. “And this is my mistress’s home, the Palace of the Jade Lion.”

“Patience, are you leading me to my doom?”

“I am obeying my mistress’s instructions,” Patience said, and she smiled.

That smile wasn’t exactly reassuring, but Xu Jian had already resolved to meet whatever outcome fate had arranged for him with as much courage and dignity as he could manage, though he was less certain about how well his courage would hold. He followed Patience through the main hall and out into an immaculate garden. In the center pavilion, a magnificent meal had been laid out for him.

“Our mistress sends her apologies for not greeting you in person,” Patience said. “but she bids you to please sit and refresh yourself.”

Xu Jian assumed that the food was either poison or simply an illusion, but the aroma rising from the table was heavenly. There were meat dishes of pork and fowl, along with vegetables and fruit, and sugared lotus root and other delicacies he had never seen before. In Xu Jian’s famished condition he lacked the strength to resist any of it. He ate and

drank heartily, and to his surprise he began to feel a little better.

At this point a second maid appeared, a girl of about the same age and no less striking than the first, whose name, she said, was Wind Whisper. She brought fresh clothes, and together the maids led Xu Jian to a chamber where a large bronze cauldron filled with steaming hot water awaited him.

“Ah. I am to be boiled alive, then?” he asked.

“Honored Sir, you are to be bathed, and as you are alive now, we hope that is the condition you will maintain,” Patience said, and Xu Jian was certain that she was trying not to laugh.

After he—with all politeness—refused their offers of assistance, the two maids discreetly withdrew, and Xu Jian disrobed and cautiously lowered himself into the cauldron. The water was hot but not scalding and had been scented with jasmine and cloves. Xu Jian felt the aches and pains of the day falling away from him, and by the time he emerged, he felt quite a bit restored. He dried and then dressed himself in clean robes, and when he left the chamber, he found Patience and Wind Whisper waiting for him. They led him to a large chamber with a fire burning in a brazier, a well-made and equipped writing table, and a comfortable-looking bed.

“My mistress says that you are welcome to remain with us tonight and sends you her wishes for a pleasant journey tomorrow,” Patience said.

She seemed about to bid him good night, but by this time Xu Jian’s curiosity was catching up to his fear. “May I ask who I am indebted to for this hospitality?”

“The noble Lady Green Willow,” Patience said. “It is she who saw you in distress earlier this evening and bid us come to your assistance.”

As a scholar and a well-read person, Xu Jian well knew the stories of the awful things that happened to people who slept near tombs. He also knew of all the variations on that tale where a handsome young man—surely not himself!—would be taken into a fine home and given all manner of good things but in the end would be visited in the night by the true mistress of the house, a malign ghost who would appear beautiful and seductive and come into his bed, only to drain away all the poor fool’s *yang* energy, leaving only his wretched husk of a body to be found lying on the cold hard ground the next morning. Everyone knew this was what ghosts did, and surely now he was among ghosts. Even so, he could not refrain from asking, “May I meet her? I wish to thank my benefactress in person.”



Patience and Wind Whisper both bowed low, and Patience said, “Our mistress knows that you must be weary and does not wish to impose upon you. She has so instructed us.”

Xu Jian considered this. “While it is true that I have traveled far today and remain very tired,” he said, “Lady Green Willow’s generosity has restored much of what my journey has taken from me. I would be shamed if I could not express my gratitude properly.”

The two maids looked at each other. Xu Jian studied them as they did so. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, perhaps a gleam of cruelty, or some sign of menace, but he did not find it. All he sensed in the two young women was a profound melancholy.

Wind Whisper finally spoke, though Patience tried and failed to shush her. “Our mistress spends a part of every evening on the northern veranda, for that is her favorite view. We cannot escort you there, for that would be disobedient. However, if in the night you should happen to wander...”

Patience glared at her and she said no more. They bowed then and took their leave. Xu Jian retired to the chamber prepared for him, but he did not remain there. He rested for a short time, and then he made his way through the empty palace to the north side of the building as Wind Whisper had instructed.

A tall and lithe young woman, elegantly dressed in red and yellow silk, stood on the veranda by a railing; her hair was long and unbound, flowing over her shoulders like dark waters. Her face was turned away from him. She stood looking toward the northern mountains.

“Young scholar,” she said without turning around, “it was foolish to seek me out. You know what we are.”

Xu Jian found her frankness something of a relief. He always felt better in any situation when he trusted his understanding of it. Now it seemed that he had understood his peril full well.

“I intend no offense, but only the dead dwell in this land,” Xu Jian said, “Yet such was my condition when your servants came to me that I was in your power regardless. I appreciate the kindness you have shown up until now, but if it is my time to die, then so be it.”

Now Lady Green Willow turned to face him, and he immediately noticed two things: the first was that she was, without question, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The second was that she was crying.

Xu Jian bowed, feeling his confusion return. “My Lady, what is the matter? Surely I cannot be the cause of your grief? As you do not know me, there is little reason for you to regret my passing.”

“Little reason’? Young Sir, there is all the reason in the world! You know how this must end, and yet you have no idea how I have dreaded this day.”

The scholar felt his confusion deepening. “But... why? The nature of a ghost is to be a creature of little substance save *yin* energy, incomplete, envious of the living. When you’ve drained my life away, you will be, at least in a small regard and for a short time, alive again.”

She shook her head. “No, Young Sir, if I warm my spirit for a little while with your living energy, I will simply be reminded of what I was, and what I have become, and how all of the hopes and dreams of the living woman I once was have come to nothing. What person, alive or dead, would want to experience such a painful thing? Please, Young Sir, if you leave now, I may yet find the strength to let you do so. Go as far away from this place as you can.”

Xu Jian sighed. “Again I must thank you for your generosity, but even as restored as I am, I could not get far enough tonight to escape this spirit-haunted land. If it is not to be you, Lady, then it will likely be another. I honestly do not wish to cause you more grief than you already bear, but if I must die tonight, I would rather spend that time with you.”

Lady Green Willow covered her tears with her sleeves. When she showed her face again, she was more composed. She

smiled a sad smile. “In that case, Young Sir, I will be as gentle as my nature allows. Please return to your rooms and wait for me.”

Xu Jian bowed to the lovely ghost and slowly made his way back to his rooms through the empty and echoing Palace of the Jade Lion. Despite his great show of calm, he was in no particular hurry to die. In addition, the ghost’s plight had touched him deeply, and, try as he might, Xu Jian could not see how his death would serve either of them.

“There has to be another way.”

Xu Jian was a man of letters, not a man of action, and he did not have strength or skill at arms to serve him. All he had was his education and his love of learning and the untangling of mysteries, and he used them to consider the problem just as he had done to so many others in his life. He gathered all that he knew of ghosts, the overwhelming *yin* principle that characterized them—but no solution presented itself.

After a while he sighed and did little but contemplate Lady Green Willow’s coming visit. He found himself wondering in what aspect she would reveal herself, now that they had spoken their true minds to each other and all pretenses were laid aside. Would she come as a horrible specter with long gnashing teeth and huge yellow eyes? Or perhaps as a cruel seductress, perfect of form, with a demeanor as cold as ice? Xu Jian allowed his

imagination free rein, but when Lady Green Willow finally glided into his rooms, Xu Jian was astonished despite himself.

The ghost appeared as a bride.

Lady Green Willow wore a robe of red silk embroidered with yellow bats and other symbols of luck and prosperity. Her headdress was of intricately carved green jade, and her lips were as red as the silk of her dress. So striking was her appearance that for a few moments all Xu Jian could do was stare, and finally Lady Green Willow blushed.

“I never had the chance to wear this, you know, before...” she said almost shyly. “It was to be my wedding dress. I hope you don’t mind.”

Xu Jian quickly stood and bowed to her. “It is rather I who should ask for pardon,” he said. “It occurs to me that I never asked what tragedy left you here in this desolate place. I would like to know, if the memory is not too painful.”

She sighed. “My betrothed was the military governor of a border province. I was on my way north to be married when our party was stricken by a deadly fever. I was borne away by it, as were my two unfortunate servants, so our bones and ashes were buried here together.” Lady Green Willow looked away. “And so we remain, along with some other members of our military escort who suffered as well. I believe you met one of them.”

He bowed again. “Now I understand why you turn your eyes to the north. He must have been a fine man.”

She smiled then. “I was assured this was the case, but in truth, I never met him. It was all arranged by our families, as such things are, and it was ages ago. Whatever sort of man he was, he is dust and ashes now, so we at least share that much. No, I do not look toward him. I look toward what might have been, Young Sir, and pray for release. Now it seems I must add you to my list of regrets as well. I think you are more resigned to this than I am.”

He sighed. “Do not mistake me—I do not welcome death,” he said, “but I also know that few men could be privileged to have such a charming executioner....”

Xu Jian’s tongue stopped as his mind suddenly began to race. For all his pondering and puzzling, he had seen no alternative to either his or Lady Green Willow’s unfortunate situation, but now he wondered if, perhaps, in her choice of dress she had given him the solution to this puzzle-box herself. What began as a notion turned into a glimmer, then a revelation. He almost grinned.

“I should have thought of this before,” he said. “I really must be a fool; the solution seems so obvious now.”

She frowned. “‘Solution?’ What are you talking about?”

“Marry me,” he said.

Lady Green Willow looked as if she wanted to burst into tears again. “Even if I must be your death, it is cruel of you to mock me,” she said, but Xu Jian was quick to deny that notion.

“Sweet Lady, I assure you I am completely serious.”

“But... it is impossible!”

“Say rather that it has never been done. Are there obstacles, difficulties? As with any union, of course there are.”

“Not the least of which is that I am a ghost and you are a living man,” she said dryly. “Such a union is an affront to Heaven!”

He dismissed that. “Has death made you a demon, Lady? A monster? No! All who are mortal must die, but not all who die become ghosts. You did, and that is because your hopes and dreams as a living woman were so completely frustrated. Therefore, your defining characteristic is not death but rather an excess of the *yin* principle, which you would instinctively attempt to counter by taking my living energy. Thus you must realize that you are *out of balance*. Your present condition is not fate but rather a *condition*, an illness. An illness can be cured.”

At first while he spoke Lady Green Willow had the somewhat bemused expression of an adult listening to a child's nonsense babbling, but as she did listen her expression slowly changed.

“That... that almost makes sense,” she said.

“Almost? It is my living energy that calls you, not your wish to harm me, and it is a characteristic of that energy that it renews itself, given a chance. So this is what I propose: if you could restrain yourself, sip rather than gorge, I would survive to replenish what you have taken and so give to you again and again. In time, if we are careful and I am strong enough, you would gain far more than you could take all at once from me or a dozen of my betters. We could do it, you and I. We could restore the balance.”

She frowned. “But... what would I be then?”

“I don’t know,” Xu Jian said, “since it has never been done. But I can assure you it would not be a ghost.”

There were tears in her dark eyes again. “You would attempt this for my sake?”

“I would have the advantage of not dying here and now,” he pointed out, “so I cannot call my plan completely unselfish. Plus I would be wedded to a woman of truly unearthly beauty and kindness. As you have something to gain, so do I, and as our parents are deceased we need no one’s permission to formalize this union, only our own agreement. What is your decision?”



Lady Green Willow's robe fell from her shoulders and she stood before him wearing nothing but her jade bridal headdress. "Come to bed, Husband."

Xu Jian did not need to be asked a second time. He quickly disrobed and joined Lady Green Willow in the covered bed, where he took her into his arms. He hadn't been certain of what to expect there, either, but she was as warm as he was, and she smelled of jasmine and musk.

She kissed him then, and she said. "I do not know if I can restrain myself. It may yet all be for naught. If you do not survive this night, I ask that you forgive me. If you do live, you will be free to leave this place. I will not ask for your promise to return for me. I ask only that you do not forget me."

"I do promise. And I will return."

They spoke of a few more things that needed to be said, and then and for a long time they did not speak at all.

\* \* \*

Somewhat to his own surprise, Xu Jian awoke the next morning on the hard ground—chilled, weak, but alive. The passing night was slightly foggy in his memory, but he did remember a joy greater than any he had ever known. He knew he had come very close to death and yet, left just this side of life, he had found Heaven.

Xu Jian recognized the crevice in the rocks that marked the entrance to the place where Lady Green Willow and her servants Patience and Wind Whisper had been entombed. If he had any notion of dismissing the previous night's event as dream, that was immediately dispelled by the bundle of provisions he found on the ground beside him, as well as a string of bronze coins and two small ingots of gold.

“It seems my new bride has provided for my travel expenses.”

Xu Jian paused long enough to eat a couple of rice cakes and then, and a trifle unsteadily at first, resumed his journey. Late in the day the old military road—little more than an animal trail by this point—finally met the main road once more. With Lady Green Willow's money, Xu Jian was able to secure lodging in the next village he passed and was able to start again the following morning greatly rested and refreshed. He completed his journey without further incident and claimed his assigned post, somewhat to the annoyance of the provincial officials already in place.

Those officials had considered themselves fortunate to be without an Official Censor for over a year, and as it was Xu Jian's duty to keep watch over their activities and punish such misbehaviors as bribery and abuses of office, he was not completely welcome among their ranks. It didn't take Xu Jian

long to discover why. After studying the reports available to him and hearing a long list of citizens' grievances, it was clear that many local officers had taken full advantage of the lack of oversight.

"Alas," Xu Jian said, "the situation here is much worse than I expected."

Indeed, such was the state of affairs of the government's offices in that province that it took Xu Jian over a month of hard work to restore a semblance of proper order, and then only after he threatened to have the worst of the offenders, Tax Collector Lung Shen, beheaded as a lesson to the others. He relented only when the man begged for mercy and swore to mend his ways.

Despite this act of leniency, Xu Jian knew he was making enemies among the other officials of the province even as the merchants, farmers, and other common folk sang his praises. Yet what filled him with the greatest unease, as one day led to another, was the thought of his unfulfilled promise to Lady Green Willow. He found his thoughts filled with her, often when they should have been on other matters. Xu Jian was an honorable man and wanted to keep his word, but even more than that he wanted to see Lady Green Willow again.

When the situation was as stable as he could make it and his assistants properly trained, Xu Jian made his preparations.

He left word with his staff that he had been called away on urgent family business and would return in a few days but otherwise gave no details. He bought what tools he thought he might need, plus a horse and an enclosed cart such as were often used for the private transportation of high-born women. He set out on the southern road, leading the horse by its reins.

Xu Jian thought he would feel better now that he was finally honoring his promise, but all along the journey back to the tomb he felt his apprehension growing. He thought perhaps this was due to his worries that Lady Green Willow would be angry at his tardiness but doubted this would be the case. Still, his apprehension did not diminish, even when, in the afternoon of the third day, he reached the familiar wisteria-marked crevice between the rocks along the old military road. He looked around but there was no sign of anyone. Even the buzzing of the insects was muted, as if nothing in that place wished to draw attention to itself. Xu Jian tethered the horse and fetched a hammer, a chisel, and a torch from the cart and prayed that he did not meet the ghostly guardian again.

Fortunately, there was no sign of that frightening spirit. The trail through the rocks was familiar, since he had followed it once before behind Patience as she'd led him to the Palace of the Jade Lion. There was no palace now. The trail led only to a widening of the defile large enough for grass and a few bushes

to grow and ended at the door of a sealed tomb. If there had ever been an incense brazier or altar stone, both had long since vanished.

Xu Jian studied the sealed entrance. This was another part of the process that had left him feeling apprehensive, but the stonework proved to be no obstacle at all. It had obviously been done hastily, and the crush of centuries had not improved its condition. It took no more than half a dozen firm blows of his hammer to crack through the remaining mortar and send the stones tumbling. Xu Jian lit his torch, took a deep breath, and entered his bride's tomb.

The lack of care in the sealing of the opening suggested that Lady Green Willow and her attendants had been buried in haste, possibly out of fear of the fever that killed them. Xu Jian's suspicions were confirmed when he realized that he was traversing a natural cave, not a properly carved tomb. Still, he had to admit that the cave was suited to the purpose—it had a flat, sandy floor and there was no excess of water, suggesting that the natural forces that had carved it had moved on sometime in the past thousand years or so.

Lady Green Willow had told Xu Jian what to look for, and now he found it—a large and exquisitely carved lion done all in jade, carefully placed on the flat top of a broken stalagmite. She had said it was actually a cleverly constructed box, meant as a

wedding gift. Instead it had been pressed into service as an ossuary. Such was the artistry of it that for a few moments all Xu Jian could do was stare at the lion in admiration.

“The Palace of the Jade Lion. Of course—”

“Well, well. I knew our new Censor must have secrets, but I never suspected you for a tomb robber.”

Startled, Xu Jian whirled about to find his path out blocked by three men. The man in the center with the stocky build and the nasty grin he recognized as Lung Shen, the corrupt tax collector he had spared execution. From the family resemblance, he surmised that the other two hulking figures were Shen’s brothers. He had heard much of them, as well, and none of the stories had been to their credit. Lung Shen held a long knife, and his two brothers each carried stout cudgels.

“And after I spared your life? Is this how you repay me?” Xu Jian asked, but Lung Shen laughed.

“For humiliating me before the entire town? Fool, of course this is how I repay you! My brothers and I have followed you for some time. Discreetly, of course. We needed to make sure we weren’t seen in the vicinity where your remains will be discovered, so I was thanking the gods of luck when you turned off onto this abandoned trail. You made our mission so much easier, and I would have killed you then, but I admit my

curiosity was piqued. I had to know what your business here was. Now I know.”

Xu Jian shook his head. “You don’t understand.”

“Oh, but I do,” Lung Shen said. “It would give me great pleasure to turn you over to the king’s justice, but why bother? Especially since you have so graciously added profit to my revenge. That trinket there,” he said, pointing to the jade lion, “must be worth a fortune!”

“It is beyond price to me,” Xu Jian said. “I won’t let you take it.”

He held his torch in front of him. It wasn’t much of a weapon, but it was all he had, having foolishly left his hammer at the entrance. Nevertheless, he saw no alternative other than to fight as best he could. He braced himself for what was to come, but then his scholar’s curiosity distracted him.

“This torch is the only source of light,” he said.

Lung Shen scowled and tested the edge of his knife. “What of it? Extinguish your torch and we will find you by feel if we must. You will not escape us!”

Xu Jian sighed. “I merely meant that the torch is the only source of light, and it is in front of me, and there are only three of you. So why are there six shadows behind you?”

Lung Shen practically growled out the words. “We won’t fall for your tricks.”

“You should believe my husband when he tells you something,” said a sweet, familiar voice. “I know him to be an honest man.”

The three extra shadows stepped closer, and the torchlight illuminated Patience, Wind Whisper, and Lady Green Willow. She smiled at Xu Jian through the torchlight.

“You came back for us,” she said. “I confess that I had my doubts.”

“Please forgive my tardiness,” Xu Jian said, “Though I will say in my defense that the delay owes in part to these gentlemen and others like them.”

Lung Shen’s scowl turned into a rather unpleasant smile when he realized who was behind him. “That you would have your wife meet you in a tomb is one more sign of your lack of character,” he said. “I think my brothers and I will seize this opportunity to teach you one final lesson before we cut your head off.” He turned and advanced on the women.

Now Lady Green Willow smiled again, but this time her smile was, by an order of magnitude, even less pleasant than Lung Shen’s.

“Husband, please close your eyes,” she said.

Xu Jian didn’t hesitate, which he later realized was fortunate for his peace of mind. The first screams started immediately, and neither Lady Green Willow, nor Patience, nor



Wind Whisper were doing the screaming. When all was quiet, he opened his eyes again.

Lung Shen lay sprawled against the cave wall, and his two brothers lay in equally awkward positions not far away. Xu Jian didn't need to examine them to know that they were completely and very emphatically dead. He was also rather certain that, unlike the means Lady Green Willow had used to extract his own life force upon their first meeting, this method had been much quicker and far less pleasant for Lung Shen and his brothers.

Xu Jian smiled a rueful smile. "It seems I owe you my life a second time, Lady Green Willow."

"Forgive me," she said. "Not for your life, but for what we had to do to preserve it. You must see us as monsters now, and perhaps we are. That is not what we... what I, wish to be to you."

"We've already discussed this," he said. "You are no longer human but you are not a monster. It is almost nightfall, and when the sun goes down I will move the jade lion to the cart I've prepared for you, and we will go to your new home."

"Do not worry, Husband," Lady Green Willow said. "The jade lion itself is proof against the sun. You can move our bones now and we will not be harmed."

The three women turned into clouds of mist, then vanished. Xu Jian, not without effort, carried the large and heavy sculpture to his cart, where he packed it carefully with fabric and cushions for the journey. He led the horse back up the trail toward the main road, making good progress before night fell. When the sun finally disappeared behind the mountains, Xu Jian found Lady Green Willow walking beside him as if she had been there all along.

“Where are Patience and Wind Whisper?” he asked.

“Resting, the poor things,” she said. “I’m afraid I asked them to do most of what had to be done, back in the cave. It wasn’t fair of me, I know.”

“The matter of Patience and Wind Whisper is of concern to me,” he said. “I cannot abandon them, nor do I wish to do so, yet I’m not certain I will have enough living energy for all three of you.”

“If you are correct about the remedy to our unfortunate situation, this may delay the cure,” she admitted, “but I must share whatever I am given, from both my own will and of necessity—my bones are commingled with those of my two maids, and there’s no separating us now. At the moment, however, they’re like two happy little snakes digesting a large meal.”

Xu Jian sighed. “I rather fancy that those ruffians’ life energy will better suit the three of you than it did the Lung brothers themselves. Please do not consider this a complaint, Wife, but there are people who will miss those three and rightly suspect me.”

“I can see that your duties are proving difficult. Please, Husband, tell me your troubles. Perhaps I can help.”

Xu Jian was doubtful, but he told her all that had happened in the time since their last meeting. “My charge is to prevent corruption among the provincial officials,” he said finally, “and I’m afraid that I misjudged just how fond of corruption they would be. If I had executed Lung Shen, as I knew was just, this wouldn’t have happened. Yet as a poor man, I know only too well the plight of a citizen under the sway of brutal officials. The last thing I desired in this life was to become one myself! Yet how else can I fulfill my duties and keep order?”

“This is no great difficulty, Husband,” she said. “In fact, one problem solves the other.”

Xu Jian frowned. “I’m afraid I don’t understand you. And how am I to explain what happened to the Lung brothers?”

She smiled then as she walked. “Why should you explain anything? Forgive my impertinence, but it is neither necessary nor desirable that all people fear you,” she said. “It is only

necessary and desirable that the *right* people fear you. You say it will be known that the Lung brothers sought your end? It will also be known that they set out, three against one, and yet it is the Lung brothers who will be seen in their homes no more.”

Understanding dawned in Xu Jian. “Oh,” was all he said.

She nodded. “Your silence on the subject will speak in a voice like thunder, and word will spread. Soon I think you will find far fewer of those in your charge willing to make trouble.”

Xu Jian was a gentle man at heart, but he was also a realist, and he knew that Lady Green Willow’s counsel was nothing but sense. When he returned to his home and resumed his duties in the provincial city, he carried on as if nothing at all had happened. When he was eventually asked, as he knew he would be, about the Lung brothers by a close cousin of the missing men, he had simply smiled and said, “What of them?” The man asking the question went more than a little pale, and the subject was never broached again.

As Lady Green Willow had predicted, from that day forward Xu Jian found the exercise of his duties far less onerous, and he was able to devote more time to his new household. Which was a good thing, since his living arrangements were unusual, to state the obvious. Xu Jian had been living in the villa that had been owned by the previous Censor, and he was frankly embarrassed to bring Lady Green

Willow and her servants there because it was somewhat cramped and in disrepair. Within days of her arrival, however, strange workmen began to appear towards evening several days in succession and the sounds of construction could be heard far into the night. At dawn they were never in evidence. At nightfall they would return.

“How did you arrange these workmen so quickly?” Xu Jian asked. “Skilled craftsmen are in short supply here.”

She looked uncomfortable. “As I said before, my servants and I were not the only ones inhabiting the place where you found us, Husband, and many soldiers are craftsmen of necessity. They still serve me, in their fashion.”

Xu Jian already regretted asking the question, and he asked no more. It was enough that, in almost no time, the buildings were all refurbished, some expanded, the roofs and the villa wall retiled, and the formal garden put in order.

When all was done, the villa was quite appropriate to a man of provincial Censor rank, neither so humble as to reflect badly on the master of the house nor so grand as to call unwanted attention to itself. It was, as Xu Jian readily acknowledged, perfect.

It was clear enough to him by this time that his wife had a greater grasp of the niceties of rank and the proper application of power than he did, and he was more than willing to seek her

advice and follow it. Their living arrangements, on the other hand, were unexplored territory for them both, and this took some effort and risk to sort out. The first time Lady Green Willow came into Xu Jian's bed after settling into their new home, she nearly killed him.

"This condition I have seen in newlyweds before," the hastily summoned physician said after examining Xu Jian, "but never this severe."

Nevertheless, he prepared medicines, gave instructions for their proper use, and advised the obvious—rest. "You must be mindful of your husband's strength," he said to Lady Green Willow.

"I could never forgive myself if he came to harm," she replied. The old doctor stroked his beard and looked thoughtful but said nothing else.

"Do you think he suspected?" Xu Jian said after the man was gone.

"Ghosts are not the only creatures with an excess of *yin*, it seems." Lady Green Willow said. "He is puzzled, but I think he has enough doubts to avoid coming to the obvious conclusion."

"Then all is well," Xu Jian said, and managed to pat her hand, though it took all his strength to raise his. "I will be fine."

There were tears in her eyes. "And what about next time? We have already seen that my control is far from perfect."

“And who held you tight when you were ready to let go? No, Wife, there’s blame enough for two. After I am recovered, we will try again, and this time we will both be more careful.”

It was three weeks before they dared to share a bed again, and this time the effects were nowhere near lethal. Nor were the results anywhere near satisfying for anyone involved.

“One who hesitates is sometimes saved,” said Lady Green Willow philosophically.

“One who hesitates will always miss the ferry,” said Xu Jian. “In this one regard, must I be fearless for us both?”

On the third attempt they were closer to the balance Xu Jian had once spoken of. Further experimentation was of course required, and in the next few months they finally settled on something like a schedule. They found that Xu Jian could share his bed with Lady Green Willow in relative safety about once every seven days. A two-week separation was better for Xu Jian’s strength but not especially preferred, since a longer absence tended to make both of them less mindful of potential consequences.

“The more often we can be safely joined, the sooner your excess of *yin* may be compensated for,” Xu Jian.

“Yes, Husband,” Lady Green Willow said, and she blushed, which pleased Xu Jian a great deal. She had only done that once before, at their first meeting, and he took it as a good sign.

Meanwhile the business of life continued despite the odd but hidden nature of Xu Jian's household. The jade lion was given a place of honor in their home and was much admired by all who saw it. As ghosts, Lady Green Willow and her two attendants still could not venture out into sunlight, but a second tier of servants were engaged to handle needed excursions outside the home, and it was not considered unusual for an official's wife and her closest attendants to remain relatively secluded.

Yet complete seclusion simply was not possible. There were social duties required of the household of someone in Xu Jian's position that could not be avoided, but to Xu Jian's surprise, even this proved no difficulty. Lady Green Willow showed herself to be an excellent hostess, with a knack for inviting both well-connected and entertaining guests, and Patience and Wind Whisper showed themselves to be fine dancers and musicians, playing flute, pipa, and guqin alike with consummate skill. Soon Xu Jian was known for the quality of the wine-tasting, moon-viewing, and poetry-composition parties held at his residence that, while modest, he still referred to as the Palace of the Jade Lion.

Gradually, Xu Jian noticed changes in Lady Green Willow and her two winsome servants. For one thing, when they walked through the house now, he could usually hear their



footsteps, soft though they were. For another, they spent less and less time resting as spirits do among their bones within the jade lion and more and more time reading, sewing, playing music, writing poetry, gossiping, or simply, for want of a more accurate term, *living*. Lady Green Willow now had her own apartments within the villa for those times when she was not sharing Xu Jian's bed, where she and Patience and Wind Whisper often slept as human women do. All these signs told Xu Jian that his original theory, born of desperate hope, was proving correct, and that the excess *yin* energy that bound the three women to their ghostly state was slowly losing its dominion.

He also knew that matters were at a delicate pass in Lady Green Willow's recovery and all their hopes could yet be easily undone.

It was the jade lion itself that proved to be their greatest danger. By the material of its construction alone it was obviously of great value, but more to the point, it was also an exquisite work of art; even the most refined and well-traveled guests often remarked that they had never seen its equal. The second time thieves invaded his home attempting to steal the treasure, Xu Jian began to understand his dilemma.

"I know Patience and Wind Whisper don't mind," he said, after the last two unfortunate thieves' bodies had been

discreetly removed, “and that such... incidents, may actually speed our future happiness. Yet these deaths grieve me. I had assumed, as in the case of the Lung brothers that, after the first thieves’ example, further warnings would not have been necessary.”

“In the average official and bureaucrat, fear will always trump greed,” Lady Green Willow said. “Unfortunately, not all men are officials or bureaucrats. I am sorry, Husband, I should have foreseen this and advised you to keep the jade lion hidden.”

Xu Jian sighed. “And in my foolishness it never occurred to me that there are men in this country who would covet anything I possessed... other than yourself. I’ve noticed the way Governor Zheng looks at you. And he does write a good deal of poetry these days.”

Lady Green Willow blushed again. Was this only the third time? Xu Jian thought so.

“Husband, Governor Zheng is a dear old man and an incorrigible flirt, but that is all. I think greed is our greatest concern. Perhaps one day matters may be different, but right now whoever possesses the jade lion possesses our three spirits. You, my husband, see that as a virtue. One who lusted for the jade lion itself would call for an exorcist.”

“That had occurred to me. Also, King Youmiu is noted for acquiring whatever he desires, art or women, and there’s a good chance that word of the jade lion has reached him by now. It’s not the thieves who come in the night that worry me the most, Wife. Would it be possible,” he hesitated, then went on, as delicately as he could, “to remove, perhaps, your mortal remains from the jade lion?”

She sighed. “After so many years our essence is as bound to the jade lion as it is to our ashes and bones. We will not be free from the one until we are free from both.”

Xu Jian considered. “There has to be something we can do.”

Lady Green Willow’s countenance brightened. “Ah! The problem is that you are known to possess a treasure. What if it was known that you did not?”

He frowned. “You mean we hide it?”

“In a manner of speaking. At our next gathering you let it be known, as an act of piety, that you’re donating the jade lion to a temple in the far south. A large armed caravan will be sent from your villa toward Handan in due course. Everyone will see it leave.”

“Which everyone will also assume bears the jade lion,” Xu Jian said, stroking his small beard. “While we keep the lion itself hidden, as it should have been from the beginning. But

what if the caravan is attacked by bandits and they discover the truth? There are those who would risk it, whatever their chances.”

Lady Green Willow smiled. “I said the caravan would be seen to *leave*. I did not say it would be seen anywhere else, by anyone. Ever.”

“Ah.”

Xu Jian well remembered the manner in which their home had been refurbished, and understood what Lady Green Willow was proposing now. He knew it was a good plan. It might even have worked, if there had been time to put it into action. That was not to be.

\* \* \*

The very next morning as he tried to assume his duties, Xu Jian found the two gates to his villa manned by armed guards, who refused to let him leave the compound.

“What is the meaning of this?!”

“Censor Xu, you are to remain in your home until His Majesty’s Counsellor, Master Huang Ti, arrives tomorrow to question you. Those are my orders,” said the guard captain.

“B-but why?”

The guard feigned ignorance, but after a while Xu Jian got the man to admit that Master Huang’s visit had something to

do with an object in Xu Jian's possession. Xu Jian didn't need much imagination to guess which one was meant.

"It is as I feared," he said to Lady Green Willow. "Doubtless the counselor's mission is to seize the jade lion for the king on some pretext or other."

"Do you think they will harm you?" she asked.

He frowned. "Harm? Oh, I suppose they might. Even the king sees the need for a cloak of legality and will need to justify the theft if I do not give up the jade lion freely. I'm certain there's something I can be accused of, and someone willing to swear to whatever it is, if I do not give in."

She bowed. "If you have the chance, you must make of us a gift to the king, if that will save you."

"And what will happen to you and Patience and Wind Whisper if I do that?"

"Likely we will be exorcized, but that would happen whether you surrender our ossuary freely or no. I have heard of this Master Huang. He is a Daoist of some skill. He will recognize us for what we are."

Xu Jian hesitated. "Wife, I must beg your forgiveness."

She frowned. "Why, Husband?"

"I know you were not happy where I found you, but at least you were not suffering from a false hope. Yes, I wanted to save my own life, but I sincerely thought there was a chance for both

of us. I offered you the life you never had, and now it will be taken away. I never meant to be so cruel—”

She stopped him. “Whatever happens next, I have no regrets. Patience, Wind Whisper, and I have been happy these past months, and for the first time in centuries. That alone is more than any of us dared to hope.”

There didn’t seem to be anything else to say. They spent that day together, Xu Jian trying to read a scroll on exorcism in the vain hope of learning how to prevent one, and Lady Green Willow doing calligraphy and sewing. As evening approached, she summoned Patience and gave her one of the scrolls she had made.

“What was that?” he asked.

“If all goes as we fear tomorrow, it’s a last gift to a friend. He always admired my calligraphy, as well as my person. I’ve asked Patience to pass it on to a servant to deliver.”

“Governor Zheng?”

She smiled then. “Don’t be jealous, Husband. I’ve also asked for a small favor from him. Perhaps he can help us.”

Xu Jian sighed. “I know the governor is a good man at heart, and I suppose it can’t hurt to ask, but even he won’t dare stand between us and the King’s Counsel.”

“I didn’t ask him to. Pardon me for a bit, Husband. I feel a need to visit our altar.”

She took the other scroll she had prepared and left his studio. For a while Xu Jian toyed with the wild hope that his ghostly wife was up to something, but he knew that was only his desperation, grasping at nothing. They were trapped, all of them, and he could see no way out of it. If Lady Green Willow could find some solace in prayer, then so much the better.

After a while, and for want of a better plan, he decided to follow her example. When he came to the altar, however, Lady Green Willow was no longer there. The warm ashes in the brazier and a hint of jasmine scent mixed into the smoke told him that she had been, but she herself was nowhere to be seen.

He searched through the house but couldn't find either his wife or her two maids, until he approached Lady Green Willow's apartments and found Wind Whisper laying out her mistress's silk robes.

"Where is my wife?" he asked.

"Bathing, Master," she said, "and if you'll forgive an observation, you could do the same."

Xu Jian started to rebuke her, but then he remembered what he had forgotten, under the weight of his worry. "Oh. It's tonight, isn't it?"

"Master is distracted," Wind Whisper said, smiling impishly. "So I won't let my mistress know that you forgot."

She then led him off and prepared a bath for him. After a time he had to admit that the warm water felt good and that, once he emerged, he felt quite a bit better. He put on the clean clothes Wind Whisper had brought out for him. He considered going to his bedroom to wait, but then he changed his mind.

He found Lady Green Willow in her bedchamber, almost as if she were expecting him. She was dressed in a new robe, and Patience was combing out her mistress's long black hair. Xu Jian was certain that she had never looked more beautiful. Lady Green Willow smiled at him and then at Patience, who discreetly withdrew.

“This might be our last night together,” he said, “and I must confess now to a very selfish thought. Tonight I do not want to worry or think about holding back, or holding you back, or anything that by necessity has always been a barrier between us. I might die, I know that, but believe me when I say that I do not seek the coward's way out of our dilemma. I simply want you.”

Lady Green Willow took a long, slow breath, and her eyes were shining. “It will be as you wish. I only ask for one favor in return.”

“What is it?”

“If you die,” she said. “Take us with you.”

\* \* \*



Xu Jian came back to consciousness in a shimmering pool of light. For a moment he thought it might have something to do with heaven, but after a bit he realized it was only the sunlight filtering in through an upper window. After a moment or two he sat up, somewhat amazed that he could, indeed, sit up. In fact, he felt only a pleasant and, in his opinion, well-earned weariness.

“Good morning, Husband.”

Lady Green Willow lay beside him, propped up on one elbow. Apparently she had been watching him sleep.

“I’m alive,” he said, and he knew he sounded a little surprised. So surprised, in fact, that it took him a moment or two to realize that Lady Green Willow was sharing the pool of sunlight with him. “Doesn’t the sunlight bother you?”

“A little,” she said solemnly. “There was a time when anything more than a mere touch of it would have turned me to vapor and ash, but I have developed a tolerance for it lately.”

Xu Jian sighed. “That makes me both happy and sad. If only there was a little more time. We were so close....”

“It can’t be helped. But since we are both still here, in our fashion, then I suppose we will be facing Master Huang together,” she said. “Are you worried?”

“Terrified.”

She nodded. “Me, too. Though perhaps matters are not as bad as we feared. We had a message this morning from Governor Zheng. It seems Master Huang was delayed on some business with the governor and will not call here until this evening. Perhaps there will be a way to use that to all our advantage.”

He sighed. “I wish I knew what that way might be. I would ask Patience and Wind Whisper to treat Master Huang as they did all the other thieves, except—”

“Except that we are very close to being human again. The unfortunate part of that is it’s now impossible for us to deal with Master Huang as we dealt with the Lung Brothers. We could have done so, once, but now this matter is beyond them,” Lady Green Willow said. “And me as well. Especially since....” She stopped.

Xu Jian frowned. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“I *think* so,” she said very seriously, “but I am not really sure.”

Lady Green Willow was reluctant to say any more on the matter, and Xu Jian was too concerned about the coming evening to press her. He finally withdrew to his own rooms and armed himself, concealing a short but very serviceable dagger in the sash of his robe. He had no idea what, if anything, he

could do with it, but he felt a little better knowing it was there. Otherwise, there was little else to do but await Master Huang.

The priest arrived shortly after sunset, accompanied by the captain of the guards Xu Jian had spoken to the previous morning. Master Huang was a tall man, perhaps fifty, with long gray hair and beard. He wore the robes of a Daoist priest in rich fabrics. Xu Jian greeted him alone, having thought it best to send Lady Green Willow and her maids to their apartments. He could not imagine any competent priest not recognizing a ghost when he saw one, and there was no point risking more troubles than they had already.

“Censor Xu Jian, you have been accused of corruption,” Master Huang said.

“That is a very serious charge, which I know to be untrue. Who has sworn against me?”

Perhaps it was his imagination, but Xu Jian thought that the priest looked a little uncomfortable. “It is not a formal charge yet. It may not yet come to that. This, you understand, depends somewhat on you.”

Xu Jian did understand. Master Huang’s words only confirmed what he already suspected: that this wasn’t about anything he’d done or even anyone he had harmed or offended. It was about one thing only.

“You’ve come about the jade lion,” Xu Jian said. “The king has sent you to take it from me.”

Master Huang’s face reddened, though whether with embarrassment or anger, Xu Jian was not sure, even after the priest answered harshly.

“It is not the custom of His Majesty to seize property without cause,” he said.

“Then I take it your office is to find that cause?”

Xu Jian had trouble believing his own words echoing in his own ears. He had never spoken so freely, and certainly not to a king’s counselor. As much as he was worried about his own and his wife’s future, he was also deeply offended by the complete injustice of it all. As he spoke, he found himself wondering if Huang Ti was aware of that injustice, despite the fact that he obviously did not wish to be.

“You presume too much, Xu Jian,” Huang said, “and this does not help your case. I wish to examine the jade lion now.”

Since there was no help for it, Xu Jian bowed. “This way,” he said.

He led the two men to his studio, where the jade lion was prominently displayed on a table of ebonized wood. At his first sight of it, the priest couldn’t suppress a gasp. “I see that its quality was not exaggerated. This confirms the king’s suspicions.”

“Which are?”

“There is simply no possible way that a provincial censor could afford a work of art such as this by honest means. You must be taking bribes!” the counselor said as he continued to study the lion.

Now Xu Jian was a little puzzled. Master Huang had been examining the piece closely for some time now, and yet, except to admire its artistry, he had not reacted to its presumed ghostly aura at all.

“And you notice nothing... unusual, about the jade lion? Nothing at all?”

“Unusual? Only its quality.”

Xu Jian thought it very strange that a priest of Huang Ti's reputation would not recognize the vessel for what it was, yet he clearly did not.

He finally sighed. “Master Huang, you and I both know that wealth is not at issue here. The king himself could not buy a work of art such as this, because no others exist. It is very old.”

“Then how did you acquire it?”

“It belonged to my wife's family, and it came to my household with her. It was sort of a dowry.”

“And who is her family? What is their name?”

Xu Jian thought about the question for a moment, but was finally forced to shrug. “Master Huang, I do not know. It never seemed important.”

“Censor Xu, do you take me for a fool?”

“I am an honest man, Master Huang, and so I will answer you honestly—I take you for an honorable man as well, doing your best to serve a king who is neither honest nor honorable.”

“Now you speak ill of His Majesty? How dare you!”

“I speak the truth,” Xu Jian said. “And I believe you still recognize the truth when you hear it. The king wants the jade lion, and one way or another I suppose he will have it. There is no reason to insult either me or yourself by pretending there is anything else to the matter.”

“I have heard enough!” Master Huang turned to the guard. “Captain Fei, summon your men. Search the house and bring everyone you find here.”

Xu Jian would have cursed himself for making matters worse, only he knew they were already about as bad they were going to get. If he could have neither happiness nor Lady Green Willow, at least he could speak the plain truth again. It wasn't a trait that was especially valued in the normal functioning of his office.

Captain Fei reappeared, accompanied by the three other soldiers, escorting Lady Green Willow and her two maids. Xu

Jian knew they would find no one else, as all the other servants had been sent away that morning for their own protection. Patience and Wind Whisper appeared apprehensive, but Lady Green Willow held her head high, though she did bow when brought into Master Huang's presence.

"Is this everyone?" Master Huang asked.

"Yes, sir," Captain Fei said. His voice sounded a little odd to Xu Jian, though perhaps it was because he had hurried so. Master Huang turned to Lady Green Willow.

"Your husband says that the jade lion belongs to you."

"He speaks the truth, though I share all that I have with my husband, so it is his as well."

"Was it a wedding gift?"

"It was meant to be. Instead it was a funeral gift," Lady Green Willow said frankly. "I was buried in it."

For a moment Master Huang just stared at her. Then he turned to Xu Jian. "Has your wife gone mad?"

"My wife is also an honest person. She's telling you the truth," Xu Jian said. It was clear that his wife also saw no point in deception now. He then told Master Huang the story of how he had met Lady Green Willow and her maids, but he couldn't fail to notice how Master Huang's countenance was turning darker by the moment. When his story was done, he hesitated, then stated the obvious. "You don't believe us, do you?"

“Of course I don’t believe you!” Master Huang said. “I am a priest of the highest rank! Do you think I could be in the presence of spirits and not know this?”

Xu Jian nodded. “I wondered about that. It was the main reason I tried to keep my family away from you. But you didn’t even recognize the jade lion for what it truly is—an ossuary.”

“You’re all insane,” Master Huang said.

“I assure you we are not,” Xu Jian said.

“Feh.” Master Huang reached into a pouch on his belt, held up a small slip of paper covered in fine calligraphy. “Xu Jian, do you recognize this? As a scholar, surely you have studied the form?”

Now Lady Green Willow did look apprehensive as Xu Jian answered him. “It is a ward against spirits.”

“If you doubt my competence, please examine it closely.”

Huang Ti handed the slip of paper to Xu Jian, who did as he asked. “It is very well done,” Xu Jian said. “I can see no errors in it.”

“If you recognize that, then you should also know that it requires no great spiritual power on the part of anyone who wields it. I created it, but it would work even if someone such as you were to apply it. Is that not so?”

Xu Jian, suspecting the priest’s intent, felt his knees tremble. Nevertheless, he spoke clearly. “I believe so,” he said.



“I want you to place the spirit ward on your wife’s forehead.”

“You can’t ask me to do that,” Xu Jian said, nearly shaking with fear and rage. “It would destroy her!”

“I am not asking. I am *ordering*. Do as I say or I’ll have you and your entire household executed here and now. If she really is a ghost, then you’ll be the only one to die. Shall we test this?”

Xu Jian’s fear diminished as his rage grew at Hunag Ti’s cruelty. His hand inched toward the dagger in his belt. In his desperation he thought that, if he moved quickly enough, he could take the priest hostage and use him to make their escape. If that failed, Xu Jian was determined to kill the man if it was the last thing he did on earth. He took one step, but he made the mistake of glancing at Lady Green Willow first, and she met his gaze and quickly shook her head.

“Husband, do as Master Huang commands.”

Xu Jian stopped where he was. Master Huang, perhaps suspecting trouble, had already taken a half-step behind Captain Fei, and the moment was lost. Xu Jian knew he could not possibly reach the priest before the soldiers struck him down. He turned to his wife.

“I can’t.”

She smiled at him. “It may be the last thing I ask of you, Husband, but I do ask. Please trust me.”

The guards, at Master Huang’s prodding, had already drawn their swords. Tears formed at the corners of Xu Jian’s eyes, but he took one step and, as gently as he knew how, touched the paper to Lady Green Willow’s forehead.

Nothing happened.

After a moment or two the paper fell off and fluttered to the floor like a dead leaf in winter.

“I have reason enough to relieve you of your duties,” Master Huang said. “To tell a king’s counselor such an obvious lie.”

“But as a follower of the Way,” said Xu Jian, “you understand the nature of balance and imbalance. I have tried to correct that imbalance in Lady Green Willow, and this just proves that our treatment is working!”

“It proves nothing, because there is nothing to prove. Lady Green Willow is a woman, like any other.”

“Hardly like any other, but I can see that you’ve found your excuse. Declare me corrupt or unfit if you want. I can offer no defense save to repeat that we have told you the truth. You can seize us and the jade lion with perfect justification. Or....”

“Or?”

“You can let us go. The jade lion belongs to us, and we have done nothing wrong. You know this to be true.”

Master Huang did not speak for several long moments. He finally shook his head. A bit reluctantly, perhaps, but firmly. “Captain Fei, you are to place Censor Xu in custody. All his property and chattels are forfeit to the king. See to it.”

Captain Fei didn’t move.

Master Huang scowled. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

“Orders, Sir,” Captain Fei said.

“I just gave you my orders!”

“Not your orders, Sir,” Captain Fei said. He looked at Lady Green Willow, and his eyes were glowing red. “Lady Green Willow’s orders.”

“Seize Master Huang,” she said.

Before the priest could react, Captain Fei pinned his arms, and the other guards held their bronze swords against his neck. Lady Green Willow plucked the pouch containing other spirit wards from Master Huang’s belt and tossed it aside. “Now I understand why you did not recognize my nature, Master Huang,” she said. “But you must not be the priest you once were, or you’d have certainly recognized my friends for what *they* are. Has serving your king served you as well? I would consider this, if I were you.”

For a moment Xu Jian was too surprised to speak. “I think your prayers yesterday must have been answered!”

She smiled at him. “I wasn’t praying, Husband. I was sending for help. As you may recall from the repairs to our home, Patience and Wind Whisper are not the only ones who still serve me. But the delay was necessary, since my soldiers could not come to us before sundown.”

“My Lady, what shall we do with Master Huang?” asked Captain Fei, or at least the spirit who bore Captain Fei’s appearance.

“I will spare his life, but we need time,” replied Lady Green Willow. “Husband, with your permission?” Xu Jian nodded, and his wife turned back to the ghostly soldier. “Escort Master Huang to the cave where I used to reside, but otherwise do not harm him. Once that is done, you will all please consider your obligations to me and my family faithfully discharged. You are free, as I hope to be.”

“Thank you, Lady Green Willow,” said the ghostly soldiers in unison, and they bowed to her.

After the spirits had departed taking Master Huang with them, Xu Jian embraced his wife in happiness and relief. “You’ve saved us! I thought to kill Master Huang myself, but I am glad you didn’t. Perhaps he deserved it, but I believe he was a good man once.”

“I am sorry that we must leave this place. Especially now,” Lady Green Willow said. She looked down at the spirit ward lying on the floor. She stepped on it, then ground it under her dainty heel. “As for Master Huang, he owes his life more to my gratitude than to my mercy.”

“Gratitude? Why? He would have had me destroy you!”

She smiled then. “But I wasn’t destroyed. I already knew that we... that I, was less and less connected to the spirit realm with each passing day, but I wasn’t able to convince myself that my progress had gone so far. Now I see that it has done so, and if I am simply a mortal woman now as Master Huang’s spirit ward proved, then I must be something else as well, something I hardly dared to believe, or to tell you for risk of false hope. That is why I am grateful to him.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Husband, I am pregnant.”

\* \* \*

The accounts of Master Huang Ti’s mission to interrogate Censor Xu were a little unusual, to say the least, and were thus recorded years later along with many other strange happenings in a book called “Official Accounts of the Mysterious” compiled by the scholar Sung Man Hei. In that version, Master Huang’s guards were found unconscious by the remains of a villa called the Palace of the Jade Lion. The censor’s residence itself was no

more than an old ruin, full of cobwebs and rats; it was obvious that no one had lived there in some time.

As for Master Huang Ti himself, he reappeared several days later, dirty, disheveled, and muttering some nonsense about being trapped in an abandoned tomb. In deference to his delicate health, Master Huang was allowed to retire to a monastery in the south.

The Provincial Censor and his household could not be located, though there were reports that a wealthy branch of the Xu family later established itself in the city of Xianyang in the state of Qin, whose ruler was far more intent on annexing his neighbors than in collecting art. Descendents of the Xu family, it is said, live in that area to the present day.

As for the jade lion, it was never seen again.

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Fantasy, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Fantasy Magazine, Weird Tales, multiple times in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and in numerous anthologies including Year's Best Fantasy and Fantasy: The Best of the Year. His third story collection, On the Banks of the River of Heaven, was released by Prime Books in 2010, and PS Publishing released his novella The Heavenly Fox last spring.

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## RATCATCHER

by Garth Upshaw

The stone blocks lie tumbled and bollixy on the blasted earth and black moss covers them like scabs. I push my head a hair's-breadth further out my crusty hole and flare my nostrils and sniff. Mossy trees and rotting ferns and stagnant water. No oil or coal or smoke. Good.

“Come on out then. Lively like,” I hiss, and scuttle into the open. Moonlight casts pools of black shadow and clouds scud low.

Ashera scrambles after me, eyes squinting and clearly painful and darting looks here and here and here. Like a sparrow in a roomful of cats.

The dark clouds press down on my back like the threat of a butcher's cleaver low and poised and ready and I tremble all shook up and skin tingling as if my clothes have been set aflame. “Hsst, then. Follow step for step, my darling daughter. You will be safe.”

So we check my lines and traps and I am not called Ratcatcher in idle folly. I bait their lairs with gobbets of rotten meat or peanut mash though there is no excess of the latter



what with the general scarcity and the great number of yaps to feed.

My beautiful daughter steps lightly and surely after me and holds the lines and does not shirk from the killing and skinning, and I save their internal parts what is foul eating for people but quite usable for bait. My traps are clever constructions with no clockwork, of course, but they take a large slice of time with pliers and wire and a good candle for the close-in work and my eyes may not be what they used to be, but I am accomplished.

We spend the night in a most productive and enjoyable way and by the time the light grows in the east and we have to make for one of my hidey holes, we have recovered two score rats and their skins hang off my belt in a thick gray mass and their meat is salted and wrapped and kept close-in and safe near my belly.

My safe hole is dug in under a mound of stone and shattered wood and chips of colored glass that I fancy used to be a church. But I was quite young and the memory has been turned and worked so often in my brain that the edges are worn smooth and I am most sure that what remains bears little resemblance to what actually passed.

But it is what I have and often a truth can be constructed from nothing but spiderwebs and moonshine anyway. I make a

tiny fire from the store of wood I keep tucked away in the hole. The safe comfort of the earth drives me half mad with its closeness and oppressive dank and dark and roots and mud and I long to feel as safe and comfortable out of doors, but that is wasted thought.

So I skewer half a dozen rats and soon the smell of roasting makes my mouth juices come on very strong and I have salt and mint leaves and a potato the size of my fist and an onion so ripe and pungent my eyes and nose stream and my whole face swims with anticipation.

Ashera shows interest in my hazy recollections of the tall spire and the great mass of people all dressed in clothes so clean they sparkled in the colored light which fell through the room like giant spears of red and gold and green and blue and the cunning clockworks imbued with song so sweet you would swoon just hearing one short note, and she listens rapt with her head tilted sideways. But she is more desirous of those other marbles of memory that are polished to a high glossy sheen.

“Tell me about my ma.” She licks the grease off her fingers. “Tell me about when you first laid eyes on her across the room. How you were smitten.” Her eyes glow yellow in the firelight.

So I do. The trade delegation from the Highlands with wool and thick warm sweaters and smooth planks of honey-colored hardwood had traveled a great long way and we were

lucky to have them as we lived close in under the shadow. One member of their party had yellow eyes like fire and some laughed at me for they thought she was old and not so pleasing to the eye, but they lacked discernment, for she was smart and funny and lively and would not take an unfairness lying down or suffer a pontificating fool or see a hurt she did not wish to balm.

She was named Emma and was an angel in my eyes and I laughed at my mates who were so blind and thick and we danced and told each other the little stories we all have growing up and it did not matter and we kissed and her lips were soft and her teeth were sharp.

We were married by the end of the week and the highlanders went back to their cold mountain fasts richer with salt and salmon and metal scavenge but poorer by one and the trade seemed overweighted in our favor to me but Emma laughed and said she was no trade at all and that she were a free person and not a piece of furniture to be exchanged on a whim for a tub of butter. She kissed me again.

Ashera's eyes have closed and her light steady breathing shows that she has drifted off to slumberland and my thoughts turn darker for those days had been so sweet and short and like a dream where you wake all reluctant and try to roll over and

fall back but you can't and you can't and you can't and you have to wake up.

There are clankers and buzzers out during the bright hours of the day. Clockworks doing their impenetrable workings but the hidey hole is safe and I much desire to drink myself into blackness with a flask of the grog I trade for with One-Arm Jelly. Good fermentation of berries or potatoes and he boils and boils and captures the essence with twists of copper line I scavenge for him.

But I have my daughter with me and a man cannot live who loses his daughter due to insensibility or slowness of reaction and I have left the juice at home in a safe place. I shiver and sweat all day long and the sound of the clankers makes my blood boil with fury and despair and that is a most helpless kind of combination.

In the evening, we break our fast with some johnnycakes made from weevily cornmeal and water and we pick out what bugs we can, but the whole is spotted with black dots and after a time our hunger overtakes our fastidiousness and we fire the cakes on a hot rock and eat them with a handful of dried apples and it fills my belly.

We check lines all night long zig-zag up the hill behind the rubble that once was a church, and the results are worse than spotty with most traps sprung and nothing but clumps of gray

fur and I reach the top of the rise in a foul sour mood and much wanting a taste of grog to take the edge off.

We are well disguised and not visible even though the morning sun is up, and we take cover in a stand of vine maple and blackberry that makes the going thorny and very uncomfortable but I believe it is a price well worth paying. I sit down on a rock and my beautiful daughter sits next to me and the radiance of her presence tries to melt my sourness, but I look out over the bay and my stomach twists and the foul mood comes rushing back like a storm.

Tall black smokestacks rake the bottoms of the clouds like evil fingers and thick black smoke boils from the clockwork factories in noxious dark billows, and Ashera grows very quiet and still for she has never laid eyes on the factories before. My hands shake like palsy and I want my grog with such a fierce desire that I find I have bit the inside of my cheek and the hot salty taste of blood fills my mouth.

I should say there are times I ache to drink myself into a stupor and lie down on the tracks of a clockwork train or to fill my pockets with stones and walk into the water or leap from the bluff onto the sharp jumble of rocks below, for I wake often in the dark hole we call home and it might be the middle of the night or it might well be high noon and we insensible to such fundamental knowledge.

But there is my beautiful daughter and in her eyes I see her mother and she plays games in the holes in the ground and she cries and she laughs and she wants her belly filled with food and her mind stuffed with stories and how could I ever leave her?

Sometimes in the blackest of my moods I toy with such a terrible notion that it leaves my bowels runny and I think about filling her pockets with rocks too and the both of us wading into the bay and I get up and I pace and I drink and I push those foul thoughts into the deepest hole in my mind that I can find.

I am too old.

Ashera stares at the smokestacks and the slag piles and the buzzers that flit about like demented bats and the scars of tracks cutting through the earth across the water. There are no trees, no touch of green, no pool of water that is not fouled with poison, no leaves to provide much needed balm to the eye.

“They took your mother.” My jaw clenches. Ashera knows this, knows this story though its edges are still rough for I never tell it unless my mood is something foul. “She went for a walk. Said she were going half mad holed up under the earth. Asked how we could stand it. Said she was not a worm nor mole nor crawling thing to live so long under the earth.”

Ashera's eyes shine and her jaw clenches but she does not cry and does not turn from me, and she is her mother's daughter and she is strong.

I crumble a dirt clod with the rough planes of my calloused fingers. "You were four years old. A regular hellion. Your mother said she would take a walk. Said I could watch you. Said she would not be gone long."

There is a pause. "Why do they take us?" Ashera's hand finds mine and she clutches my fingers hard. "What do they want?"

I shrug. One-Arm Jelly was taken years and years ago and he escaped and he tells stories late when the children are asleep. Tales of clockworks clanking and whirring around his cage and wheels and hair-thin gears spinning in their heads and bright colored buttons and sometimes pushing the red button brought pain in great shocking bursts and made him writhe and twist and lose control of his bowels and other times red brought food in packets still warm to touch.

Blue and yellow buttons and mazes and shots and tests and pain and pain and pain.

Jelly scavenged a blade and one night he sawed off his own hand to work free from the steel bonds the clockworks had him in and he tied off the wrist to staunch the flow of his bright red blood and he made his way free, but he lost the arm due to rot

and he's very handy and can tie off a line with his teeth or work his remaining fingers so fast and quick I'd swear he had the full complement.

But I tell Ashera that I don't know for sure. And that is the truth, but sometimes what is true can be a lie. What I do know and have told her over and over is that the clankers set traps for us. Bright shiny new things that you see lying in fields are not to be touched. The clankers wait and listen for the snap and clack of the steel trap that swings shut around the hapless person and that is all and they are taken and they are gone.

I think about the church and about the big clean people all fat and well fed and with their dainty nails trimmed and talking about God and the devil, and nowadays I do not believe in either one, but I am a damn sight sure there is more evidence for the latter.

But again, I do not share all these sour thoughts with my daughter and instead we watch the smoke billow out across the water and the sparks from hidden forges glow on the undersides of clouds and we make our bed in the center of a grand old bramble thicket and sleep.

The moon lights our path back and it is much faster both because we travel downhill and because we do not stop and zig and zag to check the lines. Ashera does not speak much but I know she thinks of smokestacks and traps and I hope she does



not know about the buttons and the shocks but there are no secrets under the ground and I am sure she does know anyway and I am sure her mind turns sour and dark like mine.

It rains again next evening and I am glad not only because the clankers do not seem to prefer the rain, but also because my mood is so black and foul that had it been sweet and nice out I would have felt compelled to be even blacker to compensate.

We walk all night and I am very tired and weighted down with the near four-score rat skins and meat we've harvested and my feet are soaked on account of the puddles and ditches and creeks we must slog through. Daylight steals our cover and we are not near as far as I would like and I walk faster.

Ashera is a stalwart and does not whine or complain though I can see that she is very worn out as well and I think she is getting to be a big girl and it is almost seven years since the clankers have stolen her mother.

Those thoughts rattle around in my brainbox and I want a nip of grog even worse than yesterday and to tell the truth I want more than a nip, but then we round a hillock and there is Billy Boy.

"Well, hi, Ratcatcher," says he and I grunt and I do not think much on Billy Boy because he is a no-account ignorant blowhard and he is all puffed up on his own self and thinks that

young people and himself in particular know better, and so all I do is grunt and keep walking and thinking how could the day get worse? “Hello to you, too, Ashera,” says he. “You are looking mighty fine.”

So I stop and I want to hit him but I can see he is prepared for that eventuality and I don't give him the pleasure and besides I am tired and weighed down. “What are you doing above ground, Billy Boy?”

He puffs up even more than usual and he says his name is not Billy any longer and that he has taken a new name and that name is Reiver and he looks proud and excited and dangerous.

I shrug. “Could be Billy or Reiver or Wet-behind-the-ears or even Wipe-the-shit-off-your-arse because I have done that for you, you know?” I have my skinning knife in my pocket and the blade is very sharp.

He laughs, a fake-sounding bray that makes the skin on the back of my neck crawl what with us being outside and daylight and clankers about, but he steps back. “No need to get your dander up, old man. I simply came to escort you back home and to tell Ashera the good news.”

“What good news?” I say and I have no doubt the words will not sound good in my ears.

“Why, that I chose Ashera.” Billy nearly bursts from puffing himself up. “As my name-day mate.”

I want to strike him down and the picture of him lying at my feet bleeding his life blood into the mud is strong and I think I have already done it, but I hold and hold and hold. I do not want Ashera to see such a terrible sight and besides my position in the tribe is precarious in the extreme and I cannot afford to make enemies of Billy Boy's family and friends and so I hold though my hand clenches the hilt of my knife so hard my fingers tingle.

"Good news," he says again.

"Congratulations on your new name," I choke out. "We will talk on your offer though Ashera is still quite young." I turn to my daughter and in that moment I see the woman she is becoming and I do want her to know love and I do, but not now and she is not ready and not with Billy and my heart near stops.

Ashera's eyes are white all around the edges, very skittish and she speaks breathless. "I don't want to marry."

My hand clenches on the knife. "That is one thing your mother taught us, is not that the truth?" I let go of my knife and slap Billy Boy on the shoulder. "Women are free people and not sticks of furniture, eh?" Billy starts to argue, but I chivvy him forward on the path. "We should not be flapping our yaps what with clankers about, don't you know?" I tap the side of my nose

and it were not a lie either for I smell their dirty smoke and their exhaust and a flake of soot lands on my cheek.

We make good time and I keep an ear out and both eyes scanning left and right and behind. Billy must have sensed it somewhat through his dense skull as well, for he steps up his pace and we come out of a tangle of thick hazelnut brush and there in a clearing lies a fine shiny new mirror in a wrought-iron frame all gilt and flash and perched pretty-as-you-please on a patch of grass.

I stop and grab Ashera's arm. "Ssst." The mirror reflects the clouds and the sky and looks like a deep pool of gray water.

She freezes, but Billy Boy saunters forward like the mirror is already his very own and all he has to do is pick it up and he will become king of the world. Clanker tracks litter the clearing and their spoor seems thick and close.

"Ssst," I say again, but Billy Boy scoops the mirror off the grass and leaps sideways in one smooth motion and he is far too slow. Steel bars spring from the ground, and in a great clanging clatter and ripping of earth he is caught.

He grabs the bars and he screams and I can see the learning reach his brain too late and he shouts my name, but I turn and scoop Ashera into my arms and I run for cover as fast as my legs can go and my heart rattles in my throat and fires the blood in my veins.

I throw myself into the center of the hazelnuts, careless of the impact of branches as they whip my face and body. Ashera whimpers but is quiet at my touch and we crouch in the mud and watch, eyes wide, wide, wide with terror.

The clanker hoves into view over the trees tall as the church spire in my memory and red lights blink on its dull metal body and huge pincher arms move with jerks and hissings of steam and coal smoke pours thick and black from the boiler on its back and fills the clearing with a noxious reek, and I shiver in the marrow my bones and I am sure I am close to a trip to Hell.

The cage swings into the air depending on a hook caught by one of the pincher arms and Billy Boy screams high and frantic like a cat with a crushed tail and in no way sounds human. The clanker turns and turns and then lumbers away and the ground stops shaking and a crow calls and it is gone.

I discover that I have pissed myself and I feel old and oppressed by the sky above me, but I am in no way ashamed because whoever has not been that close to a clanker is like a child nattering on about subjects they do not comprehend.

Ashera had curled in a ball next to my leg and she does not move and so we stay there and shiver until the daylight fades and the dark and cold and blackness of night is solid and the moon is gone and I leave the rat meat wrapped well and buried

for protection and I carry my beautiful daughter home to our hole in the ground.

\* \* \*

Billy's service is somber though no one calls it a funeral especially me and it is threaded with hints of accusations from his kin and family who have more sense than Billy and know my probable reaction to his marriage plans, but it does not amount to much as Ashera tells her part of the story in a thin, flat voice that leaves me cold and hating the mushroom faces that surround us.

Jelly plies me with free grog after and I drink and drink like it is a job of work to fill the holes inside of me.

The next week goes by in a blur. Jelly trades for the skins and I drink and drink and piss and eat and drink. Ashera sleeps and sleeps and then seems back to before and is all smiles and sunshine, but she does not ask for stories about her ma anymore. Not a one.

Jelly is the only other old one besides me who remembers times before the tinker boys made clockwork this and clockwork that and clockworks got all smart and refused to be servants any longer, and he and I used to trade stories of the world without clankers, but I find I have no stomach for that any longer and Jelly gets sour and bars his door to me and the grog gets low and then gets gone.

I can not stand the stink of me and I punch Billy's brother for no good reason and his family wants a punishment on me and I bluster and shout and they show me the steel of their knives and my head pounds and my hands shake and I am weak and filled with cowardice. Billy's family is eager to cause me hurt and Jelly and the rest of the mushroom faces are flat and cold to my sight and I have no choice and I must leave, and it tears at me inside to go without saying goodbye to my sweet daughter but I do not want her to see me so low.

Jelly says he will look after Ashera and I leave and go upside again even though it is day. I am not banished forever, but it is clear I should stay gone for a good long while. White puffy clouds fill the sky like a flock of foolish sheep and I wade into the river and sit naked and shivering while the sun dries my clothes and my mood is especially dark.

\* \* \*

I wander west and south, staying in my hidey holes and I scavenge and check the lines, but my heart is not in it and I snap my finger in one of my own traps and it hurts fierce and sharp and blood fills the skin under the nail and it turns purple and throbs. First time I have ever caught my own self.

That is where I start a new tack. Used to be, I'd catch clanker spoor and go the exact opposite direction for who in their right mind would want to tangle with a clanker? But I

guess that shows I am not in any sort of right mind and maybe that is so and maybe not but to me my mind feels as sharp and clear as ice.

I scout and roam farther south and west than ever before and I head right around the great curve of the bay towards the clankers and their evil-smelling factories and their foul trains, and I dig hidey holes and make stashes of wood and rat jerky and all the necessary kaboodle to keep a body alive.

Clanker traps litter the terrain the closer around the bay I forge. Vats of peanut mash and barrels of fish and shiny mirrors and suits of clothes. I study their traps and use my shovel and a steel pole to probe the ground. I load up with a chisel and hammer and pliers and pry bars till I can hardly take a step and have no room for rat skins or extra meat.

I scavenge a line of braided steel cable and fashion a grapple hook for the ends. The clanker traps are simple enough things though very well made and sure to work. Spring-loaded and all of a piece and every one the same. Lift the bait and slam-bam-snick and the clankers have got you.

At last the winter ends and daffydills and crocus and tulips thrust up out of the mud and though some days it blows ice-cold rain sideways other days it dawns clear and soft and I weep at the beauty for it is too much and my heart is still black and hard like a withered nut and I wonder if the mushroom



faces have let my daughter see the spring and I weep because the beauty slides off me like yellow butter off a hot rock.

I trip forty-three clanker traps and I feel driven like the traps are jugs of grog and while I am doing one I have no thought but of the next I would do. I poke my pole at a vat of peanut mash or I hook a suit with my grapple and the spring triggers and the bars slam shut blowing the air by my nose and I run and laughter bubbles inside me like madness.

I wear their clanker clothes and I eat their clanker salmon after bashing it on the head so it does not flop no more and though their goods reek of oil and coal and metal they are very fine and well done and many a clanker goes home with an empty cage but I wonder more about my daughter, and the work I do feels empty and thin as water.

I dig out traps and chisel the joints and groins, but it is laborious and most times not worth the effort as they are hair-trigger and quite dangerous and the clankers check them often and never leave bait out during the day.

One night, I investigate a mine the clankers have dug against the side of a crumbling hill where their diggers grind through the rock and dirt with a steady roar and the empty cars roll into the earth in great long trains and roll out again dripping with heaps of dirty black coal.

I wait and I watch and I time their rhythms to an eyeblink over many days of hard and uncomfortable spying and one morning when the sky east glows red and angry like new blood I slip and crawl to a bend in the track where the full cars go rattle-rattle-rattle down the hill and when the track is clear, I slide my pry bar under the hard metal and I heave and my muscles strain and the track comes loose.

I pant and wipe the hot sweat from my forehead and a train is due so I hide myself away and watch and the cars fly off the track in a great squeal and tear of broken metal, and coal puffs into the air in a huge black dusty cloud and my heart sings a dark song.

A buzzer flits above me and my breath freezes and my bowels turn to water, for I am sure that I am seen. I run and stumble down the hill and the sounds of clankers stirring spur me to great risk and I leap and slide down the slope.

The buzzer follows and follows and I run until my heart pounds and my breath tears in and out of my lungs and my side stabs with pain like a knife is plunged in with every step, and I turn and the buzzer darts high and aims back towards the clankers and I do not stop for I know that it will tell the clankers and they will come and root through the ground and rip up bushes and trees trying to find me.

When the sun is high above and burns my head, I wriggle into my hidey hole and collapse into a sleep wracked with dark dreams of clankers and dismemberings and buzzers picking at my entrails like metal crows. And the satisfaction of the wrecked coal train drains from me like water down a crack in the earth for it is just one train and the clankers have their thousands and I am just one fool throwing rocks at the tide.

I spend two nights in my hidey hole eating rat jerky and not daring to light even the smallest fire and the stink of my own shit fills the air like a noxious fog, and soon enough I cannot stand it and I careful, careful, careful slip outside and my heart beats and my mouth gets dry but there are no clankers about and at last I breathe.

I wander back along my trail for the clouds are low and rainy and so buzzers will not be out though I am still careful since day has just left and I spy a great knot of clankers working near where I last saw the buzzer. They call to each other with clicks and whistles and sharp fast noises that hurt my head and their lights burn hot and white and throw huge dark shadows across the whole of the world.

When they leave, I work slow and careful down a hill of loose gravel scree and basalt in crumbling towers and I take my time and the stars burn like holes in the sky, and then laughter breaks out in a mad cascade of sound and I freeze mid-stride

for it is not I who laughs and the sound is human though skittery and rough.

The laughter is followed by a scream like the gates of madness have been thrown open and my foot comes down hard and I slip and drop my canteen clatter-clatter-clatter down the rocky hillside.

“Come out you bastard.” The laughter comes quick and fast again and my breath grows short.

The air is tainted with clanker reek but nothing close and so I retrieve my canteen and I wonder what manner of insanity would compel a soul to such raving in so heedless a fashion.

“Come out, come out wherever you are.” Another scream shivers the air. “You cannot hide from the King forever.”

I move closer though I know it is a foolish and dangerous thing to do and most other people would turn and run, but I look behind and above and to the sides and I fill my nose with air and I deem the risk high but my curiosity higher and it has been a long time since I was truly curious. I peer around a shattered boulder.

There on the ground sits a rough old man dressed in a suit of clanker finery with his legs crossed. He looks familiar, but I cannot know for sure. I take a breath. “Ho there King, if that be your name.” My voice sounds rusty. “Speak soft for my ears are

keen enough and I would not have the clankers join our conversation.”

“King I am and King I be.” His stained teeth look black in the shadow and his left eye twitches and twitches. “I know you.” His face grows sharp and crafty and he motions me close. “Come to King.” He rocks back and forth and his beard brushes his knees.

Leery I be, but also fascinated. I take one step closer and another. “But I do not think I know you.”

“Ah, yes. I was taken a long time ago.” His smile is like to split his face in two and giggles leap unheeded from the wet opening of his mouth.

I stare close and I do recognize him. An old man, a leader of the tribe when I was young. But his name was not King then. “Richard?”

He laughs. “Shut your gob.” His eyes burn. “There is no Richard here.” He motions me close. “They do paint your picture, do they not? They have their wires on my head.”

“The clankers?”

“Well, of course, you arsehole.” He clamps his jaw shut with a gnarled hand and then pries the fingers loose with the other. “They want you.” He licks his lips. “Just one more step, damn you.”

I freeze and curse myself. The clankers. The clearing. I ease back and he leaps to his feet and the trap is sprung and steel bars rip through and through the earth and I am knocked catywampus to the edge of the clearing and I take a great impact on my side and a rib cracks and the ground shakes and Richard screams and screams and screams.

He clutches the inside of the cage and spit flies from his mouth in great ropy froth and he squeezes an arm through the bars and reaches toward me. "Your knife, man. Give me your knife."

And his eyes are so wild and round and my heart goes out to him and even though he tried to trap me I do not blame him. I hand him my knife hilt-first and he snatches it and throws his head back and his neck is long and white in the moonlight, and when he slashes he strikes hard and the blood spurts up in a terrible dark fountain and he sags to the floor of the cage like all his strings have been severed at one go. The ground rumbles and clanker reek taints the air.

I turn and run and every step sends bright agony from my side and I press my arm tight to my rib and sharp white lights burst in my vision and at first I think my brains have snapped a line but then I realize the clankers have searchlights and they stab into the night and I am sure that I am dead or worse.

I splash uphill through a muddy creek and dig at the slope of scree with the hand not pressed tight to my side and the gravel is sharp and hard and my finger jams and my nails split, but I wriggle my body under the rocks and they press close and hard on my back and they poke my neck and my mouth fills with grit.

Cold white light burns the night and I close my eyes and a clanker strides close and I can smell the coal and oil and hot steam, and the metal-on-metal sounds of its joints stab into my ears and my breath stops and I wish I could stop the pounding of my own heart for it makes an unearthly racket and I picture the heavy metal fingers of the clanker sifting through the gravel and plucking my body from the rocks like a weevil from cornmeal.

I die a thousand times and then the light moves on and the tread of clanker feet recedes into the night and I suck air into my lungs and I do not mind the dust and grit, for the glory of just being alive fills me.

I head north and east towards the mushroom faces and Ashera for I miss her dreadful much and besides I have no knife and a man cannot live without a knife.

\* \* \*

When I arrive Jelly wonders aloud at my mental state for I no longer desire grog, free or not, and I have heard all of Jelly's

stories too many times and Billy's brother has made plans to marry Ashera and I am fierce and glad that I have returned and I take a knife and some stores and no one stops me for my eyes are wild and I can see in their faces that they know I have no patience and nothing will hold me back.

I leave with Ashera who stands so straight and tall and has grown so much in the time I have been away and though it pleases me to see her traipsing along in the moonlight, I do not say much as my heart is still twisted up and we have both had enough talk from the mushroom faces for what else is there to do under the earth but yap and yap and yap on many a tedious subject. We see a V of geese touch down to spend the night in a marshy place and we catch each other's eye and it is much like a whole conversation and may indeed be better.

One evening, deep into clanker territory where the only cover is scabbly brambles as every tree worth burning has long been torn from the land leaving wounded pits, I hear a crying and sobbing, and though clanker spoor is thick on the ground I am not afraid for myself but only for Ashera and I make her hide away in one of my hidey holes and I follow my ears.

In a hollow that looks for all the world like it has been scooped from the ground with a giant spoon, there sits a woman sobbing into her hands. Her head is down and her hair



is very ragged cut but her dress and shirt are clanker quality and quite tidy.

She looks up and my heart is torn clean away from my body leaving a great sucking hole for it is my own Emma and I leap forward and I run towards her, but she screams and waves me back and clanker spoor is heavy in my head and I stumble to a stop.

“Sam, oh sweet lord, go back. No, don’t leave.” Her voice is as ragged as her hair, but she knows me and in that instant I am a changed man. The darkness falls away like shackles have been struck clean through and I am no longer old and no longer just plain Ratcatcher.

“I will rescue you, Emma,” I say and my heart comes back in a flood like the ocean has turned tide and it fills me up and the blood pounds in my head like a drum.

“Oh God,” she weeps, but she warns me away. “It is a trap, Sam. An evil clanker trap.” She raises her arm and displays a forged steel band thick and hard and it attaches to a chain and the links of that chain fall down into the earth and I know those links attach to the steel plate that is the bottom of the cage.

“Yes. I know their traps.” Each word seems to leave my mouth in a bubble of joy and horror.

“They want you, Sam.” Emma sobs. “You have done something.”

“They show you pictures?”

“Yes.” Emma nods and her left eye twitches. “You standing over a track. You snatching fish from barrels.”

I think of the wires and the pain, and a spot of oil on the surface of a puddle sends rainbow shivers of light dancing in my eyes and the moon is reddish and falling fast and I imagine the steel bars clanging shut and I at least would be with her and we would be together.

She must have read my thoughts clear as words on a page for she screams and throws a clod of mud at my face. “Don’t you dare, Sam. Tell me of Ashera. Tell me of our daughter. I have thought of her. I have thought of you. I have thought much.” Her voice is ragged and there is an edge of madness but I do not judge, for who would not be somewhat mad and she is still my Emma no matter what.

I nod and swallow and tell her that Ashera is beautiful and a true stalwart, and Emma’s eyes fill with more tears and so do mine and she shakes with fury.

Black smoke curls up from beyond a rise further south and I know with cold certainty we have little time. I creep onto the grass and note the traces of the steel cage where they ought to be and I ready my hammer and chisel and I strike and strike, but the chain is very strong and quite well made and I can get no purchase though I push my whole heart into each stroke.

I dig the earth away from Emma and expose the steel plate atop a spring just exactly like she were a bucket of fish save that I can not hook her with my grapple, nor can I push her over with my pole due to the links of solid chain and I am quite frantic and my breath comes fast and the moon is an enormous red ball low, low, low in the sky.

“It’s no good,” says Emma and I know she is right, but I strike at the chain links another time and she is right and they have shiny scratches but no damage. My new skinning knife rides up in its sheath and Emma grabs for it and the blade is shiny in the light.

“Careful,” I say. “It is quite sharp.” My heart stutters and I am afraid.

She nods and her hair flies up and down with the force and she touches the knife to the throbbing vein at her throat. “I will not go back,” she says. “I will not.”

My mouth feels dry and my blood turns to ice, but I have an idea. “Wait my darling. Wait.” I touch the knife and move the blade with her hand still holding the hilt so the sharp edge is away from her soft white throat and I take the knife whole in my hand and I touch the point to the skin over the base of her thumb and a single bright drop of blood wells up.

I pile rocks and my metal hammer and whatever else I can find close and easy that is heavy and I do not stop until a

mound near as high as Emma is reached, and I laugh for the madness is thick on me. She scoots part way off the trigger and we stack rocks until the balance is reached and she is completely off the trigger but still shackled.

I take the knife again and the bones of a woman are much the same as the bones of a rat though writ larger and I have had much experience with the cutting and butchering of rats. I push fast and true and sure and though her face turns pale and her eyes seem to leap from her head, she says not a word and she holds the screams and the pain inside.

There is much blood but her thumb is off and the shackle slides over her fingers and I wrap the wound and tie of a length of cloth. It is a delicate business and Emma's face is bone-white and my head swims with the agony of what I have done, but I am sure and true and fast and when I lift her, the trap does not spring shut and when I step forward one-two-three it still does not spring shut, but as I cross the boundary of the hollow, a rock shivers loose from the pile and steel bars come ripping from the ground and catch and knock me catywampus.

I land outside the trap with Emma in my arms, but my left leg is broken and when I try to run a great stab of pain shoots up my body and I fall down and whimper.

Metal feet clank and the ground shakes and evil smoke billows round my head and I look over my shoulder and a

clanker is hooking the cage but it turns and turns again and red lights blink and white lights stab through the fading night and it steps towards us and not away and I throw the braided steel cable with the grapple hooks and catch it in the knee joint and the other end hooks on the cage and Emma holds me on one side.

The clanker falls to the earth tangled in the cable and the ground shakes and we jump and move and the sound of its clangs and clicks and grindings grow fainter and I am sore hurt in my body, but my mind flies up and away from the muck of the earth and I picture all the clankers tripping and falling and their trains rusting in long rows all empty and Emma holds me close and helps me walk and we kiss and I cannot believe, but it is true.

We meet Ashera at the hidey hole and cauterize Emma's wound with the flat of the knife blade heated in the fire and Ashera hugs Emma and I hug Ashera and we all three hug and the touch of the bodies around me makes the hole in the ground feel as large as a church and the yellow firelight flickers off the walls.

Ashera holds Emma's good hand tight tight tight and I bustle about and make johnnycakes and Emma does not want fish or peanut mash but her eyes light up at skewered rat and we eat with relish and she is very tired and there are many

tears and smiles and exclamations and kisses and hugs and my heart feels firm and whole in my chest and I laugh and my heart is set very solid and when I finally let myself go to sleep pressed up tight to Emma and Ashera, I am not afraid to wake up.

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## THE THREE FEATS OF AGANI

by Christie Yant

A girl sits cross-legged in the dirt before the unlit pyre, her face dotted with yellow clay and her dark hair unbound. The girl has just seen her ninth summer. The man on the pyre is her father. The old woman at her side, bent and gray, is no relation.

The girl does not cry. She looks at the pyre with coal-bright eyes, her jaw set, her fists clenched. The pyre is covered in the flowers of the season: purple, blue, and yellow. Their scent is carried on the breeze. She fidgets with the curled edge of her tunic as the aurochs horn sounds in mourning, and she knows she will never enjoy the scent of summer flowers again.

The three of them—the girl, the old woman, and the corpse—sit in silence while the sun traces its slow arc across the sky. The girl knows that this silence is expected of her. She is satisfied with it, because if she is not silent then she will scream. She does not know the right word for the anger she feels, the rage and wanting in her heart that threatens to burst from her chest and lay waste the entire settlement and everyone in it, seek out the men who ambushed and murdered



her father. There is a word for it, but it is taboo to her people, and never expressed.

If she knew the right word, she would say that what she wants is vengeance.

She sits in silence with her rage in her throat and waits for the old woman to speak.

She knows that soon the old woman will tell her a story, and then it will be time to light the pyre.

Instead of one story, the old woman tells her three.

\* \* \*

Every one of our people hears three stories of Agani in their lifetime. You have never heard his name, but he was once a powerful god. To speak of him is to give him power, and power is something Agani must not have.

So it is only three times in our lives that we hear his name: once when we leave childhood behind and become women; the second before we marry and become one with another; and the third when we must face death and send a loved one off to the other world. The stories are always told in order. I had hoped to tell you the first story in the summers to come. It is my sorrowful task to tell you all three, instead.

\* \* \*

1.

Agani was born when the Earth was still young and all of the gods existed beyond this world. Fox and Jay Bird were still asleep; Spider and Snake had never spoken. The People prayed to the gods beyond the world, until the day that Bear came down from the caves, saved a child of the People from the swollen river, and gained a soul.

The old gods had never intervened so directly on behalf of the People, and so they prayed instead to Bear, who taught them how to fish and where to gather food for the coming winter. Soon the people forgot those who had created them from clay, and the gods grieved as for the loss of a child.

Only Agani did not grieve. He did not cut his arms or join in the keening. He sat alone with his anger, listening to the prayers of the People, and thought about this new small god who would usurp him.

*Bear is but one god. What can one god do, he asked himself, when we are so many? If the Bear God dies, the People's love will be our own again.*

It is hard work and dark magic to become something else. On the first day he hunted in the forest for the things he would need: tufts of fur caught in branches, fish caught from the river with his hands, small animals which he slew and left in the sun. He gathered the things that bears eat and climbed into the hills to find the shelter of a cave.

On the second day he made an ointment of rancid fat, pine needles, salmon scales, and spoor. He cooked it over a small fire at the mouth of the cave, the pungent smell making his nose sting and his eyes water.

Raven came and sat on a rock beside him.

“Agani,” Raven said, “what are you doing?”

“I am becoming a Bear,” Agani answered.

“Why do you wish to become a Bear?”

“So that I may find the Bear God, and slay him.”

Raven hopped down from the rock and examined the ointment that Agani prepared.

“How will you know a god from a Bear?”

“I will know.”

“It is unwise to try to become something you’re not,” Raven said, and flew away.

On the third day Agani woke with the dawn. He cut off his hair and hid his braid under a rock for safe-keeping, so that he would be able to assume his true form when this was over. He ran a blade over his scalp until only uneven stubble remained.

Raven returned and sat again on the rock. Agani ignored him.

Another raven came alighted in a nearby tree, followed by another, and another, until the branches were heavy with birds. But still more came until they surrounded Agani’s small camp,

and Raven moved from his rock and joined with them, so that he could not be distinguished from his brothers. All at once they gave their call, so loud it hurt Agani's ears, and then they erupted into the air, still calling. Above the noise Agani heard Raven ask again:

“How will you know?”

Agani rubbed his body with the ointment, leaving no part of himself untouched. It burned his eyes and nostrils, and tasted bitter on his lips. He longed to cover himself in dust and scrape it off, but he continued until even the soles of his feet were covered. He mingled a strand of his hair with the fur of a bear in a bowl of carved stone. He burned the mingled hair on a small coal from his fire. He breathed in the acrid smoke, and when nothing was left but ashes and soot, he dipped his finger into it and drew the spell down his arms and legs, over his heart, and finally on his brow. Then he lay down on the hard earth under a moonless sky and slept.

When he woke his head was full of pain and his nose was assaulted by unfamiliar scents. In his Bear-mind he struggled to make sense of them. There, the mineral smell of clear running water; there, the alarming scent of smoke lingering from his own fire. All around him, other animals—the oily scents of deer, squirrel, porcupine.

Agani rose and walked off on four legs into the woods, in search of the Bear God. He left his knives behind; he could not use them, but his claws were sharp as daggers and his teeth as deadly.

Birds evacuated the forest in a panicked flurry of wings as Agani-Bear approached. The insects ceased their buzz and hum; squirrels bolted for the safety of the highest boughs. The whole forest sensed the strangeness of him. Only Raven did not flee. He watched Agani-Bear from a broken branch. He said nothing, but Agani-Bear could feel his doubt and disapproval. It worried at him like a thorn, the presence of the silent judge.

He reared up on his powerful hind legs and bellowed, "I WILL KNOW," but the words of Agani were lost in the roar of Bear. "I will know," he tried to say again. The growl that came from his throat sounded uncertain. He dropped to four legs again and set off deeper into the woods.

It is difficult to be a quiet bear. Agani found this to be true with every step he took. The cubs, when he came upon them in the clearing, also found it to be true; even in the unnatural quiet they tumbled and rolled through the fallen leaves, kicking sprays of them high into the air. Three cubs: one black, one chestnut, and one pale as river sand.

Agani watched the cubs closely. At first the sandy cub grunted and tumbled with his brothers, but he became aware of

their observer and quit the game. He sat up on his haunches and looked quizzically at Agani-Bear; the cub had a look of intelligence, and, Agani thought, of wisdom. Something more than a Bear.

He longed for his knives; he was unpracticed with his claws and the first cub died screaming in the tangled mess of his own hide and entrails. The second, the black cub, was easier, though no more elegant, lifted into the air between Agani-bear's giant paws and dashed on the rocks. Its broken body looked so small, and the little tongue protruding gave Agani a moment of doubt, but then he remembered the prayers sung and the offerings on the fire, not for him, but for Bear.

The sandy cub had not moved, had not run, had not made a sound. He only looked at Agani as if to ask why—a question no mere animal would ever consider. Agani dispatched the sand-colored cub with a savage slash across the throat.

It had been easier than he expected, but Agani was tired. He looked forward to shaking off this cumbersome body and enjoying again the songs and dances of the people.

His braid lay in the depression where he had left it. He hooked it with one curved claw and let the stone fall back in place. He carried it in his teeth to the shore of the river and waited for the waxing moon to shine its first light on it and restore him.

It is difficult to be a quiet bear, but the female surprised him as he stretched and gloried in his true form. She lifted him high into the air with her powerful forelegs and dropped him onto the rocky ground. Her eyes were black and wide with fury, and Agani knew his mistake when the Bear Goddess roared a curse in his face, her breath hot, withering, and foul.

Agani drew his dagger from his belt just as her heavy paw again smashed into him like a stone. Her claws sliced through his face as easily as a knife skins a plum. He looked up at the towering, frenzied Bear through the blood that streamed from his wounds, and with all his strength drove the dagger into her heart.

This is how Agani came to be known as Slayer of Alien Gods, the name that would forever define him.

Now none may look on Agani's ruined face, not even the gods themselves. He wears a mask made from the blackened hide of the Bear Goddess. And he is even angrier than he was before.

\* \* \*

The old woman carefully removes the curved knife from its soft leather wrapping. It is made from a bear claw, as long as the woman's hand from wrist to fingertip, and sharpened to a point.

“This is why on your twelfth birthday your father would have anointed you with fat and soot, and you would feel the pain that Agani felt as the bear claw is pushed through your face, and you stop being one thing—a girl—and become another—a woman.”

“I am only nine.”

“Yes,” she says sadly, “but your father is here now, and he won’t be when you are twelve.” She lifts the girl’s chin up with a strong but gentle hand. “And you are already braver than girls many years older than you.” She pinches the girl’s lower lip hard, and the girl knew fear. “Agani tried to become something he was not, and could not tell a bear from a god. We do this to remind us that we do not know more than we know and cannot be more than we are.”

Almost faster than she can believe, it is over—the sharpened point of the claw punches through her flesh; blood runs down her chin and pools in the dirt. “We do it to warn against anger, jealousy, and hate.” Another sharp pain and the smooth, small piece of bone is in place, a bright blue stone embedded in the end.

“Prayer is the most important thing to the gods, isn’t it?” she asks. Her lower lip is swollen, and speech is difficult, but she wants to understand.



“Yes, prayer is to the gods as food and water are to the People.”

“So wasn’t it right that Agani killed Bear? Wouldn’t the gods have died if he hadn’t?”

The old woman’s jaw tenses beneath the soft lines of age.

“You have heard the story too soon. You will understand when you are older.” She wipes the drying blood off the girl’s chin and looks at the sky. “We haven’t much time. I will tell you the second story of Agani.”

\* \* \*

2.

You know of the cruelty of the Otrava—they were less than human; the death of an enemy was not enough for them. This is because their goddess fed on pain the way that our gods feed on dance and prayer. All gods survive on the love of their people, and for the goddess of the Otrava, pain was love.

So when the sun baked the life out of the land, we danced to appease the gods; when the sky remained clear and the rains did not come, the Otrava made war on the People. There were more of them, and they were fierce and deadly fighters. There were few of us left of fighting age; most of our men and women killed or captured, staked to the ground and brutalized for the pleasure of their goddess.

Our gods wept for our losses. They were afraid, also—afraid that with none left alive to worship them, they would return to the dreamless dark and perhaps never again awake, which is as fearful to a god as death. They begged Agani, the Slayer of Alien Gods, to help them—and so did we, dancing the ritual of darkness and despair, of outrage and anger, the godsworn priest in his black mask like Agani’s crying out so that even the creatures in their burrows felt it in their bones. It was enough to give Agani strength, and he set out toward the Otrava lands.

The goddess’s messengers are the wasps and bees, the humming stinging things of the air. It would be difficult to reach her without her knowing and impossible to surprise her and cut her down swiftly. The goddess must come to him. So Agani set a trap, a trap so sweet that a creature who thrived on pain could not resist.

Agani sat on a hilltop on the edge of the Otrava lands. With a long, thin blade he sliced into his flesh and made a cut up the side of each leg, deep and long, and let his blood run out upon the ground. He did the same to his chest, and each of his arms, leaving his wounds open wide. He bound his ankles with leather thongs to stakes he drove into the ground, and bound one wrist the same—for the remaining hand he asked Badger

for help, and Badger took the leather cord in his teeth and tugged it tight.

Badger took all but one of Agani's knives and hid them in his burrow. The last—the smallest and sharpest, curved like the hook of Badger's claw—remained hidden beneath Agani's bound wrist.

This goddess had such a taste for the suffering of others that pain sang to her and blood smelled to her like the nectar of the sweetest flower. Agani's pain floated in the air and drew her up from her valley, where she found him, bound and bleeding, his wounds open like the mouth of a lover, waiting for her kiss.

Even in his suffering he could see that she was very beautiful, with eyes the color of rich honey and skin as smooth as river rock. She laughed in delight as her wasps descended on him, cutting away pieces of his flesh and stinging him over and over while his body writhed from the pain of it.

She probed his pain like a butterfly probes a flower, delicate fingers prying open his skin, hot tongue searing his flesh. He endured this agony, praying silently for the strength to hold on until the goddess's desire overcame her sense.

Her fingers painted crimson lines down his mask and throat, and she toyed with the laces that tied it tightly to his scalp and hid his ruined face. She whispered words of longing as she took in his pain, and her eyes became soft with desire.

“Hold me, lover,” she said and untied his wrists even as she tore his flesh with her teeth. “Come to me, your bride.”

He reached as if to touch her face, and the leather cord fell away, leaving a raw, seeping ring where it had cut into his flesh. She did not see the knife in his hand.

She died in ecstasy, never knowing she had been betrayed.

He had done what the gods had asked of him, but Agani was not satisfied. He closed his wounds with porcupine quills, piercing the flesh on each side, crossing the quills to hold it tight. The wasps still harrowed him, confused and without direction. He lifted the body of the goddess in his arms and walked all day to the Otrava village.

This is what the Otrava heard:

A hum, low at first, so subtle, so much a part of the air itself that at first they were uncertain that they heard anything at all. Then the sound rose in pitch, and they could feel the thrum of it, the dizzying vibration of it in their blood, in their eyes. As the sound grew louder they felt in their marrow, in their guts—their stomachs revolted and their bowels betrayed them.

This is what the Otrava saw:

A faceless monster with a head of blackened hide, whose arms, legs, and torso bristled with spines, carrying the figure of a dead woman, attended by swarms of every flying stinging

thing he had passed on his journey. They swirled around him like smoke and flame, and as he approached they filled the air that stank of shit and vomit. The air was so thick with them that the people were afraid to breathe. They flailed in fear, angering the insects, which sought out the warm tender places: mouth, nostrils, groin.

Agani carried their dead goddess to the center of the village and left her there in the dirt, while her people swelled and turned black with poison and died all around her, too late to save her or themselves with their offering of pain.

Agani stumbled back out of the village, near to death himself. He fell to the ground and crawled, dragging himself as far as he could, hoping that the Gods would find him and spare him, for all that he had done for our people.

Agani was on the precipice of death....

\* \* \*

“But Agani is a god,” the girl interrupts. “He cannot die.”

“Agani was once a man,” the old woman says. “But that is a story that is too dangerous to tell.”

The girl realizes that she has stumbled upon a secret.

She looks up at her dead father in the light of the setting sun and wishes that she could bring the wasps down on the people who killed him.

“Do you know it?” the girl asks.

The old woman does not answer; only studies the girl for a moment with her watery eyes and then continues.

\* \* \*

Agani was on the precipice of death as his life's blood drained from his open wounds, now ragged from the attentions of the wasps. He could not sit up, he could not see the treetops above him, or the sky—only the edge of the cliff of life, and the chasm of death below.

The gods came to him, and said: “Agani, we hear the cries of dying children. What have you done?”

“Saved our own children,” he answered.

“Agani, we hear the screams of suffering women. What have you done?”

“Spared our own women,” he answered.

“Agani, we hear the voices of a nation falling into eternal silence. What have you done?”

“Only what you should have done,” he said, and the gods turned their backs on him and left him to heal or die in his arrogance and pride.

\* \* \*

“Agani seduced and betrayed the goddess, and a nation died. Seduction and betrayal even among the People can poison and destroy a community, as it did the Otrava. This is why on your wedding day you will feel the sting of the wasp, so

that you may never feel the sting of your husband's betrayal, and the poison of it will never harm the People," the old woman concludes.

The girl has not thought of taking a husband and does not understand the meaning of such a betrayal. That is many years away. The part that she does understand worries at her, and while she knows she should keep silent, she cannot.

"Agani only did what the gods asked him to do," the girl says. "He saved the People from the Otrava. Why did the gods leave him? Why do we not pray to Agani, who saved us all?"

The sting of the old woman's hand as it strikes her face brings sharp tears to the girl's eyes.

When the old woman speaks again, there is a new edge to her voice, a high note that was not there before. To the girl it sounds like fear.

"The sun has nearly set. Hear the third tale in silence."

\* \* \*

### 3.

It was the last of Agani's great feats that caused him to be outcast, cursed forever to walk our world, never again allowed among the gods. Agani's curse is our own, for now he turns his rage against us.

Agani's wounds were too great, and his will was gone. He went down into the earth and waited for the starless night to

come. But instead of the end to pain that he longed for, Agani suffered visions of mortal death and decay, of corruption and horror, of desiccation and rot. The visions tormented him, and Agani cursed the gods for abandoning him and hated the People for worshipping them.

He woke in autumn sunlight. A full season had passed. Even Death had rejected him—but from his visions he had learned much and had gained power that none should possess.

His wounds had healed, but his mind was broken.

Agani had tried the gods' patience; always misguided, always proud, always seeking to be greater than they were, wanting always the gods' place in the hearts of men. He believed he had earned that place; he believed that he had done right while the gods stood by and did nothing. His resentment and jealousy consumed him.

When the People met the enemy in battle at Three Lakes, we prayed as have always prayed, for victory and the lives of our warriors. Agani watched from the shore, the names of the gods crackling like hot coals in his ear. The battle was hot and fierce, and many of both nations died.

Dawn came and with it came the survivors, ours from the North and theirs from the South, to gather the dead and face the enemy as honorable people must. The Earth did not care whose blood painted the ground red; the blind and empty eyes



that stared up at the rising sun belonged as much to their people as to ours.

On this field of pain came the wife of a fallen warrior. She closed her husband's eyes, washed his body and prepared the litter on which she would carry him back to the village. Her bent back was still strong enough for this saddest of duties, the last thing she would ever do for her mate. As she bound his hands together with red cloth, her eyes met the eyes of another woman across the meadow doing the same. The woman was bent as she was bent; she grieved as she grieved, and she saw not the wife of the enemy, not the woman who had cooked for the man who had killed her husband, but only her sister in pain.

Agani saw that they had forgotten their hatred. The people had forgotten that they had lost this battle. They had forgotten how they had called on the gods and the gods had not spared them—these broken, bloodless bodies, hacked and spattered across the meadow.

He hated the gods, and he hated us.

The women fell back to tending their own dead and did not notice when the first chalky body rose from the ground on unsteady legs, its head lolling to one side. They did not see the second, as it lifted its head from where it had lain face down, or

see its black eyes snap open—unseeing smoky holes in the mask of mud that covered its face.

The dead man lurched toward the living, and others began to rise. Their wounds from battle were horrifying to see, and their eyes looked nowhere, but they turned toward our people as if they could see their loved ones or smell them as the animals do. Soon a battlefield of risen dead stood and faced the people, their hands on their weapons, on spears and knives, axes and stones. The grotesque army of Agani's puppets began to walk. Their families screamed and ran for their lives, chased back into the forest by the very people they had come to mourn. And the enemy, seeing this, grew bold and chased them too, shouting their anger and grief at the retreating backs of our people.

But this was not the end. The dead turned back, and as the enemy survivors followed them into the forest, the dead struck them down, while Agani laughed.

When nothing was left alive beside the Three Lakes, the dead went into the hills, where the enemy lived. The enemy was afraid at the sight of the lurching dead, and they prayed to their own gods to save them. The mouths of the dead opened, and they spoke, saying, "Pray to Agani, greatest of all the gods," before they struck down all who remained.

\* \* \*

“And this is why when our people die we send their spirits into the afterlife on the smoke of the pyre: so that Agani cannot raise our own against us.

“We tell this story to remind us that all nations grieve, all nations feel loss, all widows mourn their husbands, and somewhere there is a girl like you who misses her father.”

The old woman stirs the fire as the last rays of the sun disappear behind the hills. “It is the burden of all men and women to know these stories, to understand them and keep them safe. It is a much heavier burden for a child such as yourself, who has not known your first blood. But you are marked now as one braver than the rest: you are a woman before your time, and you will light the pyre. Your father’s spirit will go safely into the next world and dwell there forever, and it is your honor and your duty to send him there.”

She has listened with the all dutiful attention she can manage, but something about the stories troubles her.

“But Agani always did what was right,” she says. “He did those things to protect us.”

“Agani took matters into his own hands, child. He did not heed the wisdom of the gods. He thought he knew better than they did. He rebelled, and so he was outcast. This teaches us to listen to our elders, and always heed their counsel.”

*But they were wrong*, she thinks. *Why should he heed them if they were wrong?* But she can still feel the heat where the old woman struck her before, and this time she does not speak.

Her father's body lays on the pyre, still and ashen, his arms resting at his sides, his knife on his chest, wildflowers tucked amidst the kindling so that it almost looks as if he floats on a cloud of petals, already on his way. She thinks that she would give anything to see him sit up and smile again, to reach for her and call her by her name—even if it is only Agani playing a trick, even if her father were only a puppet.

The girl touches the torch to the pyre, and the air fills with the scent of burning pitch and blossoms. She watches the flames rise, and her father's body disappears behind them.

She thinks about how she begged the gods to not let her father die, and how they did not answer.

She thinks about the story that is too dangerous to tell, and wonders if the old woman could tell a girl from a god.

Unheard in the crackle of the fire, she whispers a prayer to the only god who matters.

In answer, from a distance: the roar of a bear.

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## VIRTUE'S GHOSTS

by Amanda M. Olson

It was ten days past her coming-of-age ceremony when she came to live with us, after a week of urgent telegrams and hushed dining room conversations between Mother and Aunt Lily. This *was* a boarding house, Aunt Lily pointed out, and Victoria would take up one of the rooms without paying rent.

Aunt Victoria was bad for business. In the early days, more than once, we would find her in a room with a knife, hacking desperately at the ribbon around her throat. It never took the slightest damage, though Aunt Victoria managed to cut her fingers more than once. Other times, she would stand at her window and stare out, causing more than one potential boarder to start at the eerie sight and promptly take themselves over to the less-respectable Mrs. Harper's. I hid behind Mother's skirts when Aunt Victoria came into the room. I remember wishing that I, too, could move in with Mrs. Harper.

In a burst of inspiration, Mother let me run rampant in the attic as she cleaned it out for Aunt Victoria, who would be using it as a bedroom to free up the extra one downstairs. Aunt Victoria drifted up to inspect the proceedings. "See?" Mother

said to me. “Watch how her skirts pick up the dust. Could a ghost do that?”

Aunt Victoria contorted her face into an almost supernatural grimace. I bravely stuck my tongue out at her.

Before Aunt Victoria, I hadn’t realized that a virtue could be a curse. In the schoolyard, my friends and I had always pretended at being grownups, putting on old necklaces of our mothers’ and aspiring to the greatness of colors we had heard of or invented—things like deep purple Valor and moss-colored Genius.

None of us were excited for the pinprick that would decide our glorious futures, but Tib’s older brother said that it didn’t hurt any worse than a vaccine. We all figured he wouldn’t lie about that, although he *had* gotten much nicer since he’d gotten his pendant.

There were boring virtues, like Temperance and Tolerance—and Tib’s brother’s Benevolence—which I didn’t want at all, but the world would hardly end if I were given either of them. A virtue like Aunt Victoria’s, though....

Before her coming-of-age ceremony, Aunt Victoria had wanted to be a singer. Aunt Lily was the one who told me this—Aunt Lily’s pendant was a pale yellow color that became almost clear in the sunlight, so even a small girl could depend on her for accurate information.



Aunt Lily liked to tell me that my melodramatic behavior would one day see me brought up on sedition charges, which I didn't like at all, but when she told Aunt Victoria that she would never sing again, Aunt Victoria broke a teacup and fled the room. Later, Mother found her in the garden, throwing small rocks at the side of the house.

Life with Aunt Victoria became routine, even with her ghost behavior—until the night after the fourth of July, when she broke something in the middle of the night.

This was odd, because Aunt Victoria usually consigned her vandalism to daylight hours. If left to her own deciding, she would sleep from eight at night until two o'clock the next afternoon. As for me, I had run out of things to do at midnight and seized my chance to be the first to the scene.

The sitting room was strange in the dark, all lumpy shadows where the furniture stood, with Aunt Victoria grim and pale like moonlight above it all. Another shadow lay at her feet. For a moment, I became sure she *was* a ghost, and everyone had been wrong—even Aunt Lily, who could not tell a lie.

Then Mother swept in, Aunt Lily behind her, and the flickering light of the candle put everyone back to normal again. Everyone, that is, except the man sprawled on the floor.

Mother rushed to the poor soul and determined that he yet lived. “Victoria, did you break a vase over this man’s head?”

Aunt Victoria’s eyes swept heavenward, and even to my eight-year-old self, it was clear that she was not sorry. She mimed slashing off her hands at the wrists and her head at the neck.

“I hardly think he meant us such harm,” Mother protested. I, on the other hand, had feasted heartily on ghost stories and was not in the least surprised that someone might come to dismember us in the night. But I would have expected the dismemberer to be Aunt Victoria—not the young man who was now coming round to consciousness and whose face was screwed up with pain.

He said a word that made Aunt Lily cover my ears and had Mother insisting that I go back to bed immediately. I pleaded with her not to make me leave, but her scowling attention was solely on the young man. He noticed and smiled at her. But then he swore again because Aunt Victoria kicked him.

“My name’s Brandon,” he gasped, looking warily at Aunt Victoria, even though he wasn’t speaking to her.

As soon as she heard his name, Mother sprang into action. “Lily, take Rose to bed!” she ordered. “Victoria, you too.” With that, she whisked the unlucky thief into the study, where there was nothing of value besides the letter opener with the pearl

handle and the locked drawer that I was never allowed to touch. She kept letters in that one, the ones that came without a return address.

\* \* \*

Brandon claimed he had really only come for the silver. Mother, with her virtue of Kindness, must have taken pity on him, because he was at breakfast the next morning, between her and Aunt Victoria.

They put me next to Aunt Lily, who looked fit to have a conniption. Brandon seemed oblivious to her ire and complimented Mother on the sausages, slicing each one into small pieces before eating it. He had somehow failed to understand Aunt Victoria's virtue, because he addressed her directly after he swallowed his first piece. "Unusual hue, that pendant. You must have gotten it recently? I'm afraid I'm not quite up to date with anything outside the reds—although people normally pick me out for Charm right away."

"It's a new color," Aunt Lily explained for Aunt Victoria, who seemed to be trying to tear her napkin to shreds in her lap. "It's Silence. The chaplain had to consult two books to find it when the mage brought in this year's batch. He mistook it for Sympathy; it took another three days before they could understand why she went mute when they put it on her."

Even the mages who make them don't know what a person's virtue will be, not until the stone is finished. They bring them in on racks for the ceremony, all labeled. We always try to guess from the color, although it's hard to see from a distance. They sell pamphlets for a penny with the most common colors. I hadn't needed mine in years. They were for babies, I had decided, who were too young to know the difference between reds and blues—although usually people with a son or daughter in the ceremony would buy them, too, as a keepsake.

Aunt Victoria made an angry gesture and savagely sliced her toast into two halves, buttering them with a fury that suggested she saw the mage's face in one and the chaplain's in the other.

Aunt Lily scowled. "I wish it had been Sympathy, too, dear—you could certainly do with a bit of it. They should really have a woman reading the colors; men have absolutely no eye for them. Everyone knows that sympathy is lavender."

"I didn't know that," Brandon volunteered, to which Aunt Lily responded with a knowing look and a case-in-point gesture with her fork.

"Our grandmother was Sympathy," Aunt Lily said. "Loveliest woman you've ever seen, if a bit melancholy. Very popular with the neighborhood. She always said that it was for the best; she'd been a cold and calculating child."

Aunt Victoria bit into her toast and chewed it, staring grimly over my head as though I were the ghost and she the haunted one.

“You always *were* too loud,” Aunt Lily told Aunt Victoria.

Victoria thrust herself away from the table and, without pushing in her chair, left the room. Her dress caught on the doorframe, but she paid it no mind and let the fabric tear.

Aunt Lily sighed. “That silk will run, and so much for another month’s rent.”

Mother looked ready to burst thunder and lightning; her pendant almost seemed to glow.

“It isn’t as if I said something untrue,” Aunt Lily said. Her voice shook a little.

Brandon looked between Aunt Victoria’s second slice of toast and the door. He snatched the toast so fast that I was the only one who saw. This was our new boarder, and it seemed he had his bright Charm pendant to thank for it.

\* \* \*

He had no funds with which to pay rent, and with Mother off during the days for suffragette rallies and meetings with the Women’s League, she soon hit upon a solution that Brandon found completely agreeable.

“What do you think?” she asked me, having sat me down on the floral explosion of a sofa in the sitting room for this

purpose. “How would you like Brandon to stay with you while I go out for the day?”

I certainly wasn’t opposed.

Aunt Lily flipped open her lace fan, waving it to better supply herself with air. “You’re hiring a man as a governess. Justine, you have gone out of your wits.” Aunt Lily had been gifted with *Scrupulous Honesty*, but I heard someone mention once that she had always been cantankerous. That part wasn’t from the virtue. The virtue just kept her from lying.

“And I should leave her with Victoria?” Mother suggested angrily. It was the one time I heard her lose patience with her younger sister.

“The man has no morals.” Aunt Lily sniffed. “Are you sure they didn’t give you *Gullibility*?”

Aunt Lily might have been more fun if she lied sometimes. I had to ask Brandon what “*gullibility*” meant. I didn’t like the answer.

\* \* \*

For reasons I didn’t understand, Aunt Victoria always stayed around while Brandon and I played. She did have a tendency to drift into rooms with people in them, and given that her other option was Aunt Lily, I shouldn’t have been surprised. She was unusually well-behaved around Brandon—that is, she wouldn’t direct her ire at anyone else as long as he

was in the room. He would include her in our conversations, as though she were sitting down to play games with us and not standing in a corner looking eerie. It wasn't long before she *did* start sitting with us.

We were drawing that day, and I was practicing horses while Brandon told me a story that ended in him getting away with quite a lot due to his natural charm. He had a whole repertoire of those stories. "I hope I get a virtue like that," I said, when he finished.

It was then that Aunt Victoria reached out and knocked my pencil box from the table. My usual response to such behavior was to stick out my tongue and go pick up whatever it was of mine that she'd displaced.

Brandon's chair scraped against the floor as he lurched to his feet. "For God's sake, Victoria!"

She launched into a series of sharp gestures that proclaimed her innocence and blamed me.

"She hasn't done anything!" he said. "And even if she had, you could try to tell her—you can *write*, can't you, if it comes to that? I think you just like making a show! You can't perform in a concert hall, but by God, you can have fits to excess around your family!"

Aunt Victoria drew back her hand as if she would slap him, and I shrieked, because there had to be some sound made. Otherwise, it would be like nothing at all had happened.

She did not slap Brandon, but spun around so only I could see her eyes grow wet, almost to tears.

“Don’t yell at her,” I said to him. “Show me how to draw a horse again.” I offered him my pencil and paper, but he was too much taller than me to notice.

“I’m right, Victoria,” he said.

She flung her arm out, pointed at me. I pieced this together the only way I could. “I can *too* read!” I cried. I read very well for my age, having practically devoured books of all the most sensational ghost stories I could convince Mother to buy for me. Until Aunt Victoria came, of course; then my habit was discouraged.

“None of these people have done anything to wrong you,” Brandon said. “*I* haven’t—”

Aunt Victoria was not impressed.

“Oh. The—right. Look, maybe I was going to take the silver, but I haven’t, have I?”

While staring at Brandon, Aunt Victoria stood on one foot and made a sweeping motion at his legs. *You haven’t got a leg to stand on.*



I giggled. They both sighed, and Brandon laughed—Aunt Victoria joined in, in her spooky way. Brandon stopped laughing and, in the silence that followed as she fought to control herself, simply watched her.

She must have thought he had a point, after all, because after that, she rarely knocked anything over at all.

\* \* \*

Aunt Victoria guessed before I did that something was amiss with Brandon, although at the time, I was convinced that she was sweet on him. She had taken to following him around at times when he wasn't watching me, often dragging me along. She would press a finger to her lips, then grab my wrist and pull me after her.

There were small sounds that I had never quite appreciated before Aunt Victoria started the Let's Spy on Brandon game. The crush of dewy grass underfoot, the sound of my own breath—so long as Aunt Victoria held onto me, these vanished.

I wasn't sure how much I minded. I had developed my own fascination with Brandon, the kind of idol worship that is specifically set aside for eight-year-olds to do with as they please. I never truly suspected we'd catch him at anything. Aside from his unorthodox arrival, he had never done anything the least bit criminal.

One morning, just as Mother was leaving to do her work with the Women's League, two men approached the door. One of them showed a badge that was not local police but some higher-up authority in the government. They introduced themselves as Inspectors Loughton and Lee, and they were looking for a particular young man.

Mother said she had not seen anyone of that sort. But that night, after I was meant to be in bed, I sneaked down the hall for a glass of water, only to find that Mother and Aunt Lily were awake, sitting at the kitchen table with a lamp lit between them. "They'll come back to ask me, if they think of it," I heard Aunt Lily say, "when their other leads run dry. I say, send him along."

"Where?" Mother asked. I heard the soft, dry sound of her hands wringing with worry.

Aunt Lily sighed. "You're the one who can lie, Justine. Not me." I realized then what I should have known from the outset. There are plenty of thieves in the world who come to steal silver, but they steal silver because, for some reason, they need it.

Brandon had come to us with neatly trimmed hair and a shirt whose only damage came from climbing through the sitting room window. He just wasn't the sort to become a burglar.

After that night, I began to notice other things, like Aunt Lily, and how she wasn't saying anything about our lack of new boarders. I noticed the small things that Brandon did every day: how Mother had given him a room at the back of the house, how he would stay slightly away from the front windows, how he never went outside. Brandon was a criminal, but we weren't letting him stay simply because of Mother's kindness or because everyone thought I needed looking after. Maybe his arrival hadn't been an attempted burglary at all. We weren't sheltering a clumsy thief. We were *harboring a fugitive*. Someone who had done something worse than stealing.

In a way, Aunt Lily might have had a point in her sermons about gothic novels leading to a depraved mind. The conversation I had overheard led me not to fear and nerves, but to a kind of romantic fascination with this figure in our household who had taken on a new air of mystery. Now, I became a willing partner in Aunt Victoria's game of Let's Spy on Brandon—more than that, I would instigate it. I wanted to know what he had done.

The morning we found out, it was because of me. I pulled Aunt Victoria into the backyard to spy with me through the window. It was relatively early, but Brandon was already awake.

He didn't notice us; he was looking in the mirror on his wall, performing a routine in which he would run his fingers through his hair, and then scowl and repeat the exercise. Aunt Victoria was unimpressed. For me, I hadn't realized that looking like a charming rake was something one had to work at.

Then, quite casually, he unfastened his pendant and laid it on the bedside table.

I expected Aunt Victoria to fly at him, flinging silent insults and possibly small objects, but she didn't.

She dropped down onto the grass with no mind for her skirts. I protested without a sound that she was twisting my arm, until she abruptly let me go and my voice rang out into the morning.

“—toria, why hasn't he got—”

I gasped and ducked beneath the window, but it was too late. We'd been seen.

Brandon leaned out the window, not even bothering to replace his fake pendant. “You two can now have me put in prison for years, did you know?” He was trying to be his usual self, but his voice had a tension in it that belied the attempt at lightness.

This was, I thought, because he was not really a charming person at all; he had not gone to his coming-of-age ceremony

and was still a child, carrying his worst flaw uncorrected. I couldn't even formulate words to describe the magnitude of this deception. "You lied," I said at last.

Aunt Victoria stared off across the yard, biting her lip.

"I know what you're thinking," Brandon said quietly.

"We already knew you were a criminal," I said. "So, don't worry, it's not—"

"It's not your fault," he told Aunt Victoria. "I had my parents' help; I was fourteen—you couldn't have done anything to prevent—"

She shook her head. Everything she'd ever cared about had been taken from her, and now she knew that if she'd been someone else, somewhere else, she might have had a choice.

\* \* \*

The inspectors returned, just like Aunt Lily said they would. This time, they came into the house without asking permission. "We have reason to believe that you're sheltering a criminal, ma'am," said Inspector Loughton, while Inspector Lee handed her the search warrant. "We won't trouble you far. We'd just like to ask one question of Miss Lily Howell. If she answers to our satisfaction, we needn't even bother following up on the warrant."

Mother's reply was cool and reasonable. "If there is a question to be asked, you may just as well ask it of me. I am the

owner of this house, as your warrant should show.” She turned to me; I was frozen in place at the foot of the stairs, having come down when I heard the knock at the door. “Rose, go upstairs and fetch your aunt Lily.”

“But—”

She interrupted me, and Mother never interrupted me. “Go, Rose.”

Aunt Lily was not upstairs. She was in the pantry, making the list for the week’s shopping, like she always did on Sunday evenings.

I bumped into Brandon at the top of the stairs. He had been telling me one of his stories when the knock had come at the door, but he knew better than to go down with me. He had heard everything, though, and he knew as well as I did what they were going to ask Aunt Lily, and Aunt Lily couldn’t lie. “Upstairs,” I whispered. “Go hide with Aunt Victoria.”

He looked warily up at the stowed ladder that led to her attic bedroom. It was the only place I could think of. I hoped Aunt Victoria was still awake.

I ran dutifully to Aunt Lily’s bedroom, checking under the bed and in the closet so I could tell Mother and the inspectors that I couldn’t find her. “I looked everywhere,” I said.

“Where could she be?” Mother said, but the inspectors were on to her.

I didn't like the look of them at all, so much taller than even Mother and dressed in suits of black. I tore back up the stairs and followed Brandon into the attic, clambering up the ladder as fast as I could to slip in before either of them lowered the trapdoor.

Aunt Victoria closed the door behind us and gestured for help moving a trunk over it. A brief, silent argument ensued wherein Brandon maintained that this would only get everyone into more trouble when they found him. She suggested the window, but there was a third inspector outside, waiting with the carriage they had come in.

For a moment, the silence was so loud that I understood why my aunt would break plates to escape it. Brandon sat down heavily on the floor next to Aunt Victoria's bed. I scrambled over to sit next to him, not knowing what else to do. There was nowhere else to hide.

Brandon suddenly began to speak—under his breath; he already knew how dangerous it was, but something in or beyond this moment seemed to compel him. “I was fourteen when my parents sent me away,” he said. “I lived with my grandparents for two years, and they pretended I was younger—I was small for my age; it was easily done—and when my father came to fetch me back, he'd had the false pendant made. We told everyone I had come of age out in the country, which

was true, and everyone simply assumed.... I made a mistake, telling someone; I thought she... but she didn't. They wanted me to go through the ceremony the next year. I couldn't stand the thought of that weight around my neck, never being able to take it off.... And I'm sorry, to both of you—”

Though I tried to be quiet, I was still at the age where I was too small to help crying, and Aunt Victoria wrapped her arms around me so that I didn't have to. Brandon fell silent as well, and for a little while, the only sound was his breath in the darkness.

The stairs creaked, just once, and then— “That is my sister's room!” Aunt Lily cried. “Gentlemen, I ask you, just *what* are you implying?”

Aunt Victoria let go of me and leapt toward her writing desk, where she scrawled something in pencil, following it with one vehement mark, an underline. She shoved the scrap of paper into Brandon's hand. He read it, and as the trapdoor swung open, he squeezed his eyes shut.

The paper fell to the floor. I read it later:

*It does not determine who you are.*

The arrest was quiet. Brandon went down the stairs between the two men, and he left the house in front of them. As they rode away, none of us said anything, not even Aunt Lily, though it was perhaps an opportunity for a word about morals.



Soon after that, Aunt Victoria disappeared. She took a single bag with her, leaving behind most of her things and a cryptic note for Mother, about not letting what she'd said be a lie. One of our neighbors later claimed to have seen her at the train station, carpet bag at her feet, notepaper and pencil in hand.

Aunt Lily was the first to notice, on Sunday, that the silver candlesticks were missing.

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## COVER ART

“Knight’s Journey,” by Raphael Lacoste



Raphael Lacoste is a Senior Art Director on videogames and cinematics. He was the Art Director at Ubisoft on such titles as *Prince of Persia* and *Assassin’s Creed*. Raphael stepped away from the game industry to work as a Matte Painter and Senior Concept Artist on such feature films as: *Terminator: Salvation*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, and *Repo Men*. Raphael now works as a Senior Art Director for Electronic Arts and now Ubisoft. His artwork “Chinese Steampunk Village” was the cover art for *BCS* in winter 2010. View his gallery at [www.rafael-lacoste.com](http://www.rafael-lacoste.com).

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