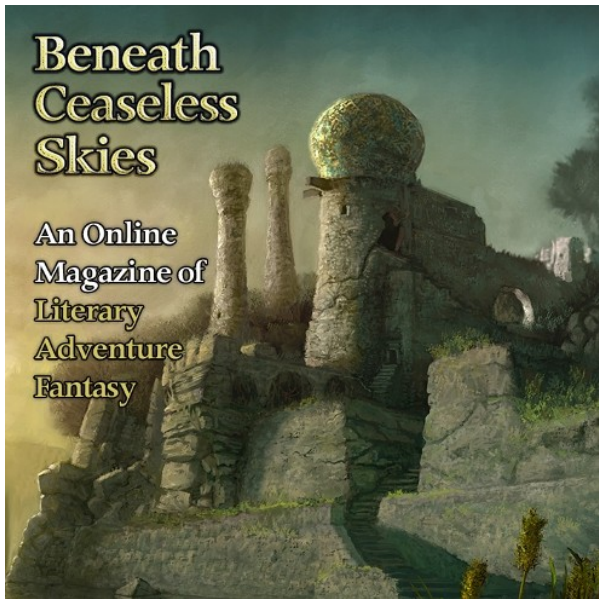


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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THE MANSION OF BONES

by Richard Parks

The two ghosts appeared with the rising of the moon. At first they were nothing but mist, each hovering over the pile of stones on either side of the path that marked where the gate towers of the Fujiwara compound had once stood. Large sections of crumbling wall remained, but the gate itself had long since fallen.

So much of the atmosphere of sadness and misery of this place filled the senses that one might easily make the fatal mistake of overlooking the ghosts entirely, if one—unlike me—wasn't expecting them. Beyond the opening I could see the grassy mounds that contained the ghosts' handiwork—piles of broken, moldering human bones. They were sobering reminders of how easily Kenji and I could join them.

At such times I was all too keenly aware that I had not had a drink in over a week. I waited for the ghosts to finish their manifestation while Kenji, blissfully ignorant, waited on me, but I would not be rushed. Only now, with the two wretched spirits before me, did I finally understand the full extent of my mission here. Even so, I did not yet see what path I would need to take to complete that mission, and our lives were in the balance.

“Don’t you feel it?” I asked. “The unrelenting sadness of this place? It sinks into my bones like the cold of winter.”

“Lord Yamada, you’re a moody sort in the best of times, and I know you don’t like ghosts,” Kenji the scruffy priest said. “I’ll exorcise them if you wish, but you’ll have to hold the lantern.”

I sighed. “First, no one asked you to do so. Second, you charge exorbitant rates for such services. Third...tell me again why you’ve insisted on accompanying me? I didn’t believe your story about wanting to see the countryside, you know.”

Kenji smiled a rueful smile. “If you must know, matters are a bit unsettled for me in the Capital at this time. Therefore I felt it prudent to make this journey with you.”

“You could contain the abundance of my surprise in the husk of one grain of rice, with room to spare. Who was she?”

Kenji looked at the moon. “The wife of a minor palace official. You wouldn’t know her.”

“Neither should you.” I thought of saying more on the subject, but dismissed the idea. It was pointless to scold Kenji. He was what he was, and even a reprobate monk with both the appetites and the piety of a stray cat had his uses. “I hope you brought your prayer beads. We may yet need them.”

“So I surmised. What have you led me to?”

I started to remind Kenji that I had led nowhere; he had simply followed. I did not, since that reminder was pointless too. We were three days from the Capital along the southern road toward Nara, safely through the bandit town of Uji, and now outside a ruined compound that, I was reliably informed, had once belonged to the former provincial governor, Fujiwara no En. “Former” as in nearly one hundred years previous to the rein of the current Emperor Reiza.

“My client insists there is an object somewhere in this compound that once belonged to her family. I have been engaged to reclaim it. That is all you need know.”

“So your client is a Fujiwara. And the ghosts?”

“Rumor, but a very consistent one, which fortunately I believed. Now please be quiet for a little while.”

There’s not much you can tell about a ghost if its preferred manifestation is little more than a vapor, but I was given to understand that these two normally presented themselves in a more substantial form. After a few more moments, it was plain to me—and especially Kenji—that this was the case.

“They’re women!”

I sighed. “Your morality may be suspect, but your eyes are still good.”

The figures were still vapor from the knees down, but from the knees up, they had the appearance of two very pretty young

women with long black hair and cold, dark eyes. There was menace and suspicion in those eyes, but also a sadness almost beyond bearing. Now I knew the source of the melancholy I had felt the moment I came near to this place. I had seen ghosts times beyond counting, but I found that I could not look into these pitiful faces for very long.

They were clearly aware of our presence, but they said nothing, merely hovering over the twin sets of ruins, watching us.

“The Chinese say that ‘to make love to a spirit is to know the ultimate pleasure,’” Kenji said a little wistfully.

“They also say that to love a ghost is to die. Is that a price you’re willing to pay?”

Kenji sighed again. “Such is the nature of the bargain that one wouldn’t know the correct answer to that question until it was too late. Still, they are lovely.”

“Were, Kenji. They are dead and have been for most of the past hundred years. And unless you want to join them, stay where you are, keep quiet, and leave this next bit to me.”

I rose just high enough to slip forward about ten paces from where the old gate had stood, and with my back to Kenji, I produced the token my client had entrusted to me. As one, the two ghosts bowed respectfully and faded to mist and then to

nothing. “It’s safe to come forward now,” I said, rising. Kenji soon joined me.

“What did you do?” he asked.

“I showed them my client’s credentials, which I am not at liberty to reveal to you, so do not ask.”

Kenji scowled. “Then I’ll ask this: what would have happened if we’d attempted to enter the compound without those ‘credentials’?”

“We’d have been ripped limb from limb by those two charming *rei*, which I can assure you are far more dangerous than they appear. Look over there.”

I pointed to the thick clumps of grass that I had already noted, now drawing them to Kenji’s attention. When Kenji peered closer he saw what I saw: the graying skull and leg bones of a man.

“What happened to him?”

“The same thing that happened to those two over there... and there,” I said, pointing out more unburied bodies. “Or do you still wish to pay court to those two charming guardians?”

“I think not,” Kenji said, “but why did we not wait for daybreak? Both ghosts’ and demons’ strength is diminished by the sun.”

“Not nearly enough, I think, but in this case rumor also has it that there is a demon guarding the item I was sent to

retrieve. In which case, only that demon's presence will reveal where the object may be found. If the demon hides from us, so does our objective."

Kenji just shook his head. "And a demon as well. I'm beginning to think I should have taken my chances with that lady's husband."

We passed through the empty gate. I noticed Kenji keeping an eye on the ruins, but there was no sign of the two ghosts. Not that I believed for a moment that they had departed. If the stories I'd heard were true that wasn't possible for them, but they did not show themselves or interfere, and for now, that was all I wanted. I had gotten a much closer look at them than Kenji had, and there's only so much pain and sadness one can bear to see on the face of another person, living or dead.

The compound was—or had been—a rather large one, befitting the status of its former master. The main building was once a massive structure, but now it was little more than a roof and pilings on a rotting platform; the left and right wings that had once run perpendicular from the main house and connected to it with covered walkways were little more than two long mounds of rotten wood and vegetation. One or two of the outbuildings stood as well, but little else. I knew where the garden had been, of course, as the placement of the garden was a fixed feature at such stately homes, but it was impossible now

to differentiate it from all the other weeds and trees that had grown as they willed in the past century.

“You’re not going into that, are you?” Kenji asked. “Forget the demon; the roof’s more likely to collapse and kill you, if you don’t break your leg falling through a hole in the floor first.”

Kenji had a point, but I didn’t see much in the way of alternatives. I kept my hand near the hilt of my sword as I approached the house; Kenji followed close behind and held the lantern high, though the light did not reach very far into the gloom of the house. The moon shining through the gaps in the ceiling gave more, and I used it as I stepped on the great stone leading to the veranda that encircled the decaying mansion.

I passed the threshold into the deeper gloom of the interior, and the air was thick with the scent of rotting wood. Even so, I quickly realized that there was one great advantage for us in the dilapidated condition of the house—there was, almost literally, no place to hide. Most of the sliding screens that had once been used to divide the interior space of the mansion had long since either collapsed or gone to tatters. Except for the shadows not covered by either our lantern or the shining moon, there was nothing hidden.

We located and entered the *nurigome*, the family’s inner sanctum where treasures were likely to be kept, but found nothing. After a slow and careful round of the interior with

Kenji holding the lantern, and even raising that lantern toward the rafters, we could see that there was nothing lurking in the house save for an ordinary rat or two and several moth-demons and other nightflyers too small to be a threat. The floor creaked ominously but otherwise held.

Kenji looked unhappy. “I know I’m going to regret asking this, but what about beneath the house?”

That had occurred to me as well, but the area beneath the floorboards was little more than a crawlspace, and it would simply be impossible to explore it properly without the risk of setting fire to the entire structure, a chance I was not yet prepared to take. “That’s something that very well might have to wait until morning, if no other signs present themselves.”

“Are you sure that what you’re searching for is within the house?” Kenji asked.

“I’m only sure it’s within the compound. It could be anywhere; the house simply seemed the sensible place to begin.”

“There’s far more to this tale than you’re telling,” Kenji said.

“Did I not say as much?”

We stood together near the center of the old house. Due to its state and the bright moonlight, we could see the approaches to the mansion in all directions. On the far side of the mansion

was an outbuilding I hadn't been able to see clearly before, but in the gloom it was hard to tell much about it. The rats had fled, so there was nothing stirring anywhere and no sounds save our own voices, the creaking of old wood, and the chirp of crickets. Not even the ghosts were in sight.

"You can't tell me what we're looking for or who your patron is. Fine. What about the story of this place and those two ghosts? That's history, not a confidence."

I shrugged. "It was during the Fujiwara Regency, if you must know. A time of great unrest and uncertainty. As a member of that clan, Fujiwara no En, the governor of this province, was recalled to the Capital to support the Regent. He took his household and most of his *bushi* with him. The item I'm seeking was left behind."

"And the two ghosts?"

"Also left behind. Two trusted female attendants of Lady Fujiwara remained with some of the older servants to maintain the house, as no one knew then that the family would not be returning. I think you can guess what happened next."

Kenji looked glum. "Uji."

For more than a hundred years the town of Uji had harbored bandits that preyed on travelers on the southern road to the old Capital at Nara. This was not to say that all members of that village were thieves, but a significant portion were and

had remained so by family tradition from ancient times until the present.

“Just so. As the local Governor, En could be depended on to make a show of force on his departure, but I’m afraid he had no more tactical sense than the average locust. His procession passed through Uji, so the entire town knew of his absence. A dozen or so of the worst lot decided to seize the chance and joined forces to attack the compound directly. They quickly overpowered whatever guards remained, if any, and ransacked the house. They found little save some rice, furnishings, and ordinary cloth and did not believe the two attendants when they told them there was no gold or any other valuables. In their anger and frustration, the bandits murdered the remaining servants, then brutalized the two unfortunate women before slaying them as well. Or so the story is told.”

Kenji nodded. “So they died to defend their lord’s property.”

“Actually, they died because their pitiful excuse for a master didn’t properly consider their safety, and because the bandits were foolish and greedy enough to believe that a Fujiwara would have left anything of real value behind, despite his haste.”

“Your opinion of the Fujiwara clan and this man in particular is duly noted. Nevertheless, he left the item you

seek.”

I smiled. “True. But remember—he did mean to return. Regardless, now this is a cursed place, and the attendants’ miserable, wretched spirits guard in death the compound they could not defend in life.”

“There is some justice in this, that those bandits and thieves would pay the price for the past crimes of their village.”

I almost laughed. “You think these poor fools were from Uji? Hardly. As the primary cause of the curse, they know better. Those bones we saw are the remains of outside treasure-seekers drawn by the stories of this place, and that is the common fate of all who enter here.”

“Except for us. We survived,” Kenji pointed out.

I smiled again. “So far.”

I know it was wrong of me to savor the look of fear on Kenji’s face, but some temptations are not to be resisted. I didn’t have long to enjoy it, however. As I was glancing out toward the rear of the house, I saw a shadow that did not belong.

The moon was still high, and I noted the shadow cast by the house and another by the outbuilding that still stood in the near courtyard about ten paces away from what was left of the far wall, but there was a third shadow, roughly man-sized, that had apparently been cast by nothing. It had been approaching

the house, but I think my attention alone had stopped it. Now it stood, wavering, like the surface of a cold, dark stream.

“A spell of protection, if you please,” I said. “There’s work to be done.”

Kenji took his prayer beads from around his neck. “Spells? Do you think I am some sort of Chinese *yin-yang* magician? I am a monk, and I invoke the protection of holy writ. You also know I do not work for nothing, Lord Yamada.”

“And *you* also know that if I die, you die,” I said. “How does that weigh against the needs of your purse?”

Kenji sighed and scratched his shaven head. “Heavily, as you damn well know.” He began to chant. It might have been a passage from the Diamond Sutra; I was not pious enough to know one book of Buddhist scripture from another, but Kenji, despite his flaws, knew nearly all of them and could recite the appropriate passages at will. Which he was doing now. The shadow moved away from us toward the outbuilding as we stepped out onto the rear veranda, always keeping the structure to its back, or such I judged its back to be. It was hard to be certain with something so close to formless.

I drew my *tachi*. “Follow me.”

I stepped down into the wild meadow that had once been part of the rear gardens of the compound and advanced steadily toward the shadow, which continued to retreat,

wavering and reforming, until it finally began to take a more solid shape. Kenji never paused in his chanting, but if the thing decided to attack, I was far from certain that either my sword or Kenji's *sutra* would be enough to dissuade it. Even so, I believed I was close to discovering what I needed to discover to complete my mission, and I wasn't about to stop now.

We were finally close enough to the outbuilding to see what neither Kenji nor I had been able to see before. The structure was neither a storage building nor a separate studio of the type some noblemen occasionally built after the Chinese fashion. It was a shrine, strongly built of stone with glazed tiles for the roof, which explained why it was still standing.

Our shadow stood in front of the shrine, but it wasn't a shadow anymore. A child of about twelve years of age stood before us, normal in almost all respects except that, like the two female spirits, his legs ended at the knees and were replaced by what appeared to be a trailing mist. Kenji was startled out of his chanting.

“Lord Yamada, who is that?”

“If I am not mistaken, it is Yamada no Kasuke. My elder brother.”

“Your...?”

“Come, Kenji-san. We are leaving.”

I put my sword away and turned back toward the house. I

set a quick pace. It took Kenji several moments to catch up with me. “Wait, I don’t understand! Where are we going?”

“Away from here. I must think about this.”

“Your brother?!”

“My brother.”

On my way into the house I had noticed a small bronze plaque with the wisteria design of the Fujiwara clan spiked onto one of the posts bordering the veranda. The plaque was no wider than my hand. I paused to pull it off the post, and the nail broke off as I pulled it loose. I tucked the plaque into a fold in my overjacket and kept walking, Kenji on my heels, until we had left the ruined compound far behind.

* * *

Kenji and I reached our temporary lodgings at the small temple south of Uji just before dawn. The monk on the night watch seemed very surprised to see us. His surprise did not surprise me.

“Our master will wish to speak to you,” he said.

“We will be pleased to meet with him at the noon meal,” I said, “if that is agreeable to him.”

When we returned to our room, I first checked to make sure that our belongings were as we’d left them, especially a large strong lacquered box fitted with a carrying pole. All was as it should have been. Kenji noted my attention.

“Did you suspect the good monks here would rob us?”

“I suspect that they’re not used to seeing someone make a foray to the Fujiwara compound and return in one piece,” I said. “No doubt property suddenly lacking an owner could be considered a temple donation. I think this has happened before now.”

“Well....” Kenji looked like he wanted to argue, but there was something else on his mind. “Lord Yamada, I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“An older brother. It’s not something I’d normally discuss. He died of a malady when I was seven. Such things happen.”

“Well, I can understand your reluctance to confront your own brother.”

“When the moment is right I will do what I must, Kenji-san. But matters must unfold as they should.”

He scowled. “Meaning what? And why would your brother’s ghost be lurking at a Fujiwara mansion that was abandoned decades before his birth?”

“Both are good questions,” I said. “Which must remain without answer for the moment.” Kenji started to speak again, but I cut him off. “Remember, Kenji-san, your coming was your own choice, not mine.”

Kenji just sighed. “What now?”

“Rest. Tomorrow evening will come earlier than either you or I might wish.”

* * *

We took our mid-day meal of fish, rice, and pickles in a place of honor with the abbot at the communal hall. He was a hale and quite jovial fellow, only slightly plump and no more than about forty. His priest-name, he said, was Rencho. There were, by my count, only seven other monks present, most younger than the abbot but cut from the same cloth, which made sense as the temple was a small one with no great reputation, and they were doubtless all native to that area. All were out of earshot. I did not think this a coincidence.

“I am pleased to see you both safely returned,” he said toward the end of the meal. All the talk before then had been news from the Capital and pleasantries. I had wondered when he would get to the matter at hand.

“Buddha is merciful,” said Kenji.

“Not always,” the abbot replied. “You might recall that our brothers warned you about that place. We call it ‘the Mansion of Bones.’ Many travelers have come to grief there.”

“Yet we have returned, as you see.” I paused to finish a bit of pickled radish.

“That place is cursed,” Rencho said. “Everyone knows that. I have no reason to doubt you....”

“Other than the fact that no one who enters that cursed place ever returns,” I said, trying not to smile. “Perhaps this will be more convincing than a traveler’s tale.” I reached into the fold of my overjacket where I’d stored the bronze plaque and produced it for the abbot’s inspection. “While I cannot prove that this old token is indeed from the Fujiwara governor’s compound, I think you’ll recognize the probability that it is.”

“Indeed,” said Rencho as his eyes opened wide. “I think it must be.”

I put the plaque away. “Our business at the compound is not yet concluded, but my friend and I must travel in a different direction after tonight, so we will take our leave. Our thanks for your hospitality.”

“May the blessed Buddha guide your steps,” said the abbot.

Kenji looked thoughtful but, for once, said nothing at all.

* * *

As night fell, we once more approached the haunted compound. I carried the large lacquered box in a bundle on my back.

The ghosts were out of sight, but they were there. If I had been blind, still I would have felt their misery. I did not know

how the evening would unfold, but I found myself breathing a silent prayer for success, for their sake as much as my own.

“We’re being followed,” Kenji said, keeping his voice a whisper. “The monks?”

I nodded. “Led by His Holiness Rencho the abbot. I did wonder when you’d notice. Or the fact that they were also eating fish today, as we were. Monks cannot do so without breaking the dietary strictures of their order, as you of all people should know.”

Kenji dismissed that. “And *you* should know by now that some monks grow tired of rice and pickled vegetables,” he said. “I know I do. What made you suspect them?”

“I didn’t, to the extent that I knew they would follow us tonight. I thought they were in league with the bandits, rather than being bandits themselves. It seems I was in error.”

I couldn’t attempt to judge how the monks were armed without letting them know they had been detected. Kenji had his staff and I had my sword, but chances were we’d be overcome by sheer numbers if it came to an open fight.

Kenji sighed. “Threadbare indeed are these times, when monks turn to lawlessness.”

I grinned. “Rencho is no more a monk than I’m a Lady of the Court. I wager the real monks were either killed or driven off long ago. What better disguise for bandits than monks in a

temple? As long as they are discreet in their activities, they have a secure base of operations. This 'Rencho' must be quite a leader, to keep that lot acting civil and at least mimicking the forms of piety."

Kenji was off on another stream of thought entirely, despite our situation. "Wait a moment. They know what little we have. Why are they following us at all?"

"I showed Master Rencho the Fujiwara *mon*, remember? He expects us to fetch out the treasure tonight. Surely we would not leave without it?"

"Are you're telling me that there *is* a treasure here?"

I sighed. "Whether there is an item of intrinsic value or not is irrelevant. The point is: those men following us *do* believe there is, and all the ones who died trying to find it before us *did* believe it."

Kenji's knuckles were white on his staff. "What do we do now?"

"We fetch the treasure, of course. Master Rencho expects to ambush us and take it when we try to leave. I would hate to disappoint him."

"As simple as that? Assuming there is a treasure, you don't even know where it is!"

"Of course I do. My brother told me."

Kenji just stared at me. "If this is how insane you get when

you're sober, the first thing I'm going to do if we get out of this mess is to buy you the biggest saké cask I can afford."

I grunted. "No more than enough to toast the Emperor's health, I wager. And my mind is as clear as an autumn sky. Allow me to demonstrate."

Kenji followed me through the echoing old mansion, though now we entered the ruin only because it was the shortest path to our true goal. We walked carefully on the rotting floor and out onto the rear veranda. My brother was waiting for us, standing between us and the small stone shrine. I took the bundle from my shoulder and set it carefully on the grass, then drew my sword and advanced on the image of my brother's ghost.

"If you want to live," I said, "leave now."

Kasuke stared at me and didn't move.

Kenji walked up beside me, his priest's staff in front of him. "And you call yourself sane? How dare you threaten your brother? And how do you plan to kill him if he's already dead? That's a trick beyond even *you*."

I sighed. "Kenji, you asked last night why my brother's ghost could be in this place. After some reflection, the answer is obvious—there is no reason he would be. He had no attachment to it, or even knowledge of it. Therefore, this is not my brother."

I addressed Kasuke's image. "You are skilled. You've stolen my memory of Kasuke and fooled my eyes into seeing my brother so that I would not attack you. It was sound strategy. It has failed."

I took another step and the image retreated. "Leave," I said. "I will not warn you a third time."

My brother's image was gone in an instant. There was a nearly overpowering stench, and then in its place stood an eight-foot ogre with red skin, black hair, and an iron cudgel. The monster roared and raised his club to strike. To his credit, Kenji did not flee. He did, however, take one step back and started chanting a *sutra*. I assumed it was one of protection, but I didn't even blink.

"So be it."

My blade was in motion before the cudgel even began its descent; I took two steps forward, made my best judgment of my foe, and chose my target. Fortunately, I chose well. One stroke and the fight was over. I did not congratulate myself on either my bravery or skill, as I knew I owed the victory to neither. All that had been required was to keep a clear head, and so I succeeded because I had not been drinking. The idea depressed me. I wanted very much to be drinking.

The ogre in its turn was gone. What lay on the ground dead from my sword cut was a little wizened creature not much

larger than a monkey, with a human-looking face but the teeth and horns of a devil. A very small, weak devil. I started to clean my sword before Kenji stopped chanting. Apparently his eyes had been closed the entire time.

“Lord Yamada, what...?”

“A *youkai*. Just some little shape-shifting monster with more skill than sense. I suspected as much as soon as I saw what appeared to be my brother’s ghost. As I said, my brother has no business either here or with me. Yet what I saw wanted me to believe it was my brother. So I took some time yesterday to ask myself why that was.”

Kenji stared at the pitiful little creature. “I retract my remark about your sanity...for the moment. What was your answer?”

“The answer was that I would never attack my own brother, alive or dead. What do you think you might have seen if you had been closer to this creature when we first encountered the thing yesterday?”

“I don’t know,” Kenji said, though of course he was lying.

I smiled. “I do. It would have been the image of something you couldn’t—or wouldn’t—fight. Quite clever, really. A skill that could potentially drive off even the most powerful attacker, if it was fooled. I wasn’t. The image of the ogre was simply a last resort.”

“But why the ogre at all? Why did it not flee, knowing its ruse had failed?”

I walked up to the small shrine building. “I think the poor creature had become attached to this, rather like a miser with its hoard. As those pitiful ghosts guard the compound, this creature guarded this shrine. That’s how I knew what I sought was here.”

I opened the door to the shrine. The moonlight caught the glimmer of gold. “Please fetch my box, Kenji.” He did as I directed, and I reached within the shrine and removed what lay within, placing it in the lacquer box. Kenji watched with more than usual interest.

“Kannon? A golden statue of the Goddess of Mercy?”

“That was what I was sent to find.”

Kenji let out a low whistle. “No wonder people have been getting themselves killed to search for this.”

I laughed. “Rubbish. No one had any idea what was here. They just knew that *something* was, and the guardian ghosts by their presence appeared to confirm this. Let’s be on our way.”

Kenji scowled. “Lord Yamada, aren’t you forgetting something? ‘Master Rencho’ and his murderous monks are out there waiting for us.”

“I have not forgotten. Let us greet them, shall we?”

Kenji sighed. “I retract my retracting. You are definitely insane.”

I didn't feel inclined to argue the point. Yet, despite his misgivings, Kenji went with me when I approached the open gate where the door of the compound had once stood. I judged the distance as best I could and stopped about twenty paces from the dark opening. In the weak lamplight I saw a faint glow from the top of each ruined gatepost.

Loyal servants of the Fujiwara, I ask of you one last duty. For what I am about to force you to do, forgive me. It wasn't a prayer, exactly, but it was the best I could do just then.

“Master Rencho. So good of you to come to meet us, but as I said, we will not be returning to the temple tonight.”

There was silence for a moment, but after a while a familiar figure appeared out of the gloom and stood just outside the gate opening. “Clever man, but you will not be returning anywhere unless you hand over what you've found. My men have the compound surrounded!”

I smiled. “Master Rencho, you and I both know that you have less than a dozen men. This compound is too large for you to cover all the gaps in sufficient force. My companion and I could slip out at any one of a score of places, and you couldn't stop us.”

He laughed. I heard cruelty and murder reflected there. “No, but we would see where you emerged. We know this area. We would track you down before you got very far and make you regret our exertions.”

That part was doubtless true enough, if he had in fact dispersed his men. I was gambling our lives that he had not yet done so.

“No need for threats, Master Rencho. Kenji, your lantern please.”

I set the box on the ground on its side with the lid facing Rencho, and placed the lantern in front of that just off to one side so that the glow illuminated the box without blocking their view of it. “Behold your prize.”

I opened the lid, and the lantern threw back the shine of gold. “Kenji, run!”

I was already away, and Kenji followed me, nearly blind in the dark. “Lord Yamada, what are you—”

He didn't get to finish. A roar had gone up from the front of the compound as several men rushed through the gap between the gateposts. So much for my insanity. Real monks would never have fallen for my trick. Bandits, on the other hand, were as predictable as the change of seasons. The gleam of gold drew them through the empty gateway, forgetting the curse, forgetting everything save their greed.

Also forgetting, as I knew they would, the two wretched but very deadly ghosts.

We heard the first scream before we could even turn around. I instantly regretted the backward glance I took then. The two formerly winsome ghosts were in the full power of their wrath. Their black hair struck blue sparks against the night; their white limbs had grown long and ended, not with delicate hands, but enlarged talons. Their teeth were as long and pointed as icicles, and they were, quite literally, tearing the bandits apart. They took down those few who had the sense to try to flee first, and then they turned on the rest.

“Kenji, hurry!”

Before we could get back, it was almost over. As one, the two vengeful ghosts turned on the only survivor, who happened to be Master Rencho, lying whimpering on the ground not five paces from the golden statue. Kenji started muttering a *sutra* as best he could, but he was winded from running, and I knew it would be too late. I had no choice. I reached into my robe again and drew out, not the plaque, but my original safe passage.

“In the name of the Emperor!”

Loyalty had kept us safe so far. I prayed it would again. There was a moment when I feared that it wouldn't be enough,

that all was lost, but the two ghosts stopped a mere pace or two from their victim.

I approached them, holding the symbol in front of me. “You know my authority. This man is my prisoner,” I said as I advanced. “Do not harm him.”

The ghosts resumed their usual appearances, along with the sadness that had come with it—the sadness I had felt at our first meeting with them. It was more overwhelming than even their fury, and I was not certain how long I could bear it. If I was right about what I was about to do, then none of us would have to bear it, ever again.

“It’s over,” I said to them. “The last item your master left behind has been recovered and will be returned to its rightful place. This I promise as a faithful servant of the Emperor. Your duty is discharged.” I kept my own doubts out of my mind and spoke with the certainty of command, of right, and then I held my breath.

“*Onegai*.... Please....”

It was the first time either of them had spoken. Both women reached out toward me, not in threat but in entreaty. At first I didn’t understand what they were asking, but then I realized what they wanted and I remembered to breathe again. I took the Fujiwara *mon* from my robe and held it out. “Go in peace and take this token with you, as proof of your devotion.”

They both put their hands on the bronze, and it floated away from me. In another moment they and the plaque had vanished.

“I guess we won’t need your services after all, Kenji-san.” I walked over to Master Rencho and kicked him, hard. “Stop your gibbering, man.”

The pain seemed to bring the man’s mind back into focus. Now his mind appeared to be focused on the tip of my *tachi*, which I was currently pressing into the hollow of his neck. “If I spare your life, will you promise to return to your temple and become the monk you’ve pretended to be? The temple will need new residents.”

He licked his lips. “I swear.”

“Then go.”

Master Rencho didn’t need a second invitation. He scrambled past the bloody rags that were all that remained of his followers and disappeared into the night.

“Now you’re trading insanity for foolishness,” Kenji said. “Do you honestly believe that creature will mend his ways? Most likely he’s running back to Uji to find more men!”

“Likely? I’m counting on it. He will return in force, but not nearly soon enough to catch us. We will travel east through the woods until we reach the Iga barrier, then north. We can pick up the east-west road in a day or two without difficulty.”

Now Kenji blinked like some night creature that had been thrust too suddenly into the light. “Counting...?”

“Master Rencho knows we’ve found the ‘treasure’ because he saw it with his own eyes. Unless I misjudge the man, within hours the entire village of Uji will know. Within days, the entire province and beyond will know.”

“And?”

“And they will return to this place looking for us. We won’t be here, of course. Neither will the ghosts.”

Kenji looked around, frowning. “Are you sure they’re gone?”

I was. There was no trace of their heavy melancholy about the place now. What sadness remained, as always, was my own.

“Quite sure. So the good people of Uji will be free to tear the remnants of this place apart, for all anyone cares. They won’t find anything. And no one else will come here to die. Or for any other reason.” I closed the lid of the box and picked it up.

“The Emperor sent you, alone, to destroy those bandits?!”

I smiled. “Hardly. I was sent to retrieve this item just as I told you. Nor did the Emperor send me here. I was, however, acting in his name. Not the same thing. You weren’t supposed to know that, by the way. If you tell anyone, I will kill you. I mean that.”

Kenji looked serious. “I know you do, so if it’s my death to speak, then I will know the full story of what I am not speaking about,” Kenji said. “Who sent you?”

“Princess Fujiwara no Ai.”

For a moment Kenji just stared at me. “The Empress?!”

I shrugged. “Yes, but more to the point: a direct descendent of Governor Fujiwara no En.”

“Lord Yamada, everyone knows that Princess Ai is proud, vain, and of most disagreeable temper. Are you telling me that she sent you out of the charity of her soul to lift the curse on this place?”

“Of course not. She knew of the statue’s existence, doubtless from a family tradition, and she engaged me to try and fetch it. I fear it was my idea that the statue’s removal could be the means to break the curse. Princess Ai could not have cared less. For my part, the plight of those two wretched spirits perhaps clouded my better judgment.”

“Then what you showed the two ghosts...?”

“...was the Imperial *mon*, the symbol of the Emperor. Against such authority, even their original master would bow. As attendants still in faithful service, they did the same.”

I removed the golden image from the box and casually tossed it to Kenji, who let go of his staff as he struggled to catch it.

“Lord Yamada, are you really insane—” He stopped. He held up the statue, feeling its weight, or rather lack of, in disbelief. “This isn’t gold!”

I smiled. “No, it’s gilded wood. A fine carving well-protected by the stone shrine, but a simple devotional image and no more.”

“And the rumors of treasure?”

“Rumors only, probably fed by the presence of the ghosts, who were obviously guarding *something*. No one knew of the statue, save a few members of the Fujiwara family, the two unfortunate ghosts, and that pitiful *youkai*. But, thanks to Master Rencho, soon everyone will know of it. They will tell stories of the marvelous golden statue plucked from the ruins of this place. They’ll know it’s no longer here and thus not seek it. And even if rumors of treasure persist those who come here will find nothing, suffer nothing save wasted time. I have completed my mission. And the curse on the Mansion of Bones is lifted. In all respects.”

“And the bandits?”

“At first I felt guilty for tricking the ghosts into dealing with them for us, but that was foolish of me. I was forgetting that the bandits of Uji were the physical and spiritual descendants of the people responsible for the ghosts’ suffering in the first place. What I did was no trick.”

Kenji scowled at the carnage around us. “No? What would you call *this* then?”

“A reward for devotion beyond the grave?” I smiled a grim smile. “No, Kenji-san. I call it justice.”

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HAVOC

by A.C. Smart & Quinn Braver

He was everything the stories claimed, only smaller.

I met him among the turbid shadows outside of camp, the golden watch fires seeming but a dim reflection of the laughter in his soot-smearred face. He hardly seemed to notice the mountain pony pirouetting beneath him, nor the swirling chaos of horses and men around. My heart tripped, then its pace quickened.

“The great bard, Marcoen!” Havoc grinned, his raven’s-wing hair tossing on the evening breeze and teeth gleaming in twilight. “We are in the presence of legend, brothers! Get him a horse!”

I could tell that this was to be one of his infamous raids, but I had no time to ask questions. His men obeyed without hesitation, saddling a horse for me and making sure I didn’t fall off, because Havoc had made clear I was to join them on their venture. But they knew I’d come across the lines from Cumbera, and Commander D’Strigides had been correct in his assessment of my welcome. Havoc himself might accept me at my word, but his followers were wolves. Were I to give them any cause to doubt, make any gesture scenting of betrayal,

Havoc would find himself apologizing to D'Strigides for my 'fatal accident.'

In no more time than it took me to blink, it seemed, I found myself included in an avalanche of horses thundering south along the military road through Roenish Mirze-side. Horses, and a few men...a dozen, I estimated, despite the dark and the constant movement, but more than twice that many horses. Everyone but myself led at least one spare on a line. I noticed quickly enough that the mounts carrying riders were the sturdy mountain stock Havoc favored, while all the spares were full-sized. But it wasn't until we were passing yet a third encampment, in the dark evidenced as the previous two times only by the bugling of officers' stallions, that I realized: the mountain stock were geldings, but all the spares were mares. And all the mares, including the one I bestrode, were in estrus.

Half a watch into the ride, our party left the road and angled east toward the Mirze River that separates Roen from her Cumberan adversaries. We dropped down a defile that led to a swift but shallow section of river between looming banks. The riverbed was paved with fist-sized stones, but the run had taken the edge off the horses' nervous energy and they were tired enough to be careful. So preoccupied were they that I might have been the only one of our party to feel terrified when we headed back north, downstream now, into deeper water

that picked us up and swept us away down a gorge at speeds rivaling a gallop.

Perhaps I wasn't as alone in my terror as I felt. The horses seemed pathetically grateful to stagger out onto the little beach we found just before the water downstream churned white against submerged boulders.

A stream had cut the gully that led us east. The horses struggled, fetlock-deep, up its course. By the time we found ourselves once more on level ground, among a scattered grove of buckeye, the horses were more than ready to stand quiet and blow.

We went slowly from there. The night was so dark, I found my way solely by dint of staying with the herd. Havoc must have been part cat to find his path. But, invisible in the darkness, the horses passed downwind on the southern edge of a Cumberan encampment—though it was only later events that proved this the case. I believe that was where I saw one of our party dismount and slip away north. At the time, I half convinced myself it was a trick of the shadows; a sliver of moon had just peeped over the Cumberan peaks to the east.

Still at a walk, our herd swung around to the north again and hooked back to the west. The moon rode thrice its span above looming crags by the time we once more approached the encampment, this time from the southeast. Without any signal

that I could detect, the herd increased its pace. Rested by the long walk, the mares were willing and able when pushed to a flat gallop.

We found ourselves among Cumberan tents, plowing through Cumberan watch fires...and sweeping up their picket lines, which had inexplicably become detached from their posts. The stallions of the officers were more than willing to join our remuda, while the mares and geldings in their company followed out of habit.

One of the newcomers swung into stride along beside my own mount, and a dark form clinging to its otherwise bare back flashed me a jubilant grin.

Havoc.

I loved him, then, as well as ever I'd loved The General. Well I understood the free rein his Roenish commander allowed him. I understood, too, the prevailing sense of frustrated good humor with which the Cumberan army viewed him, despite the 'havoc' he wrought upon them.

Once the Cumberan encampment had fallen behind, the men on the southern flank of the herd whistled and the horses angled north.

We reached the vicinity of the river with the thin moon high above us. Ahead I could see watch fires again, and the flame-lit façade of the twinned towers guarding either bank of a

ford. Their path cluttered by another Cumberan force, the horses thought to slow. But Havoc's men, with cries and whistles, drove them forward.

In panic, the horses lunged through the camp. Tents collapsed, and men and fires scattered. Then the spray flew as the herd hit the ford and plunged across.

"Roen!" shouted the raiders as the lead horses approached the guards posted on the western shore. "Roen!"

I feared the men on duty there would be run down. They held their post as their Cumberan counterparts had not. But the water had cooled the herd's vigor and they were willing to be shunted around the camp, to settle among the picketed steeds in the pasture beyond.

The thunder of hooves drummed on in my ears, in the stream of my blood. My lungs were a bellows and the air carried the bite of mint, of cool water in the face on a sere afternoon. The raiders whooped and called, and cursed each other with rough affection. Havoc's laughter rained on my soul like spring showers on the dry Mydicean lowlands.

We were still drunk on adrenaline, though the horses settled as if they belonged. A contingent of Roenish officers made an appearance. I recognized the banner of Duke Strigides, and realized we were back where we'd started at the beginning of the evening.

“We return the mares we borrowed!” Havoc hailed the duke. “These others we present to your brother, Commander D’Strigides, with our regards. He brought us a gift earlier this evening, the Bard Marcoen, and it is our honor to return the favor!”

Well. Travan D’Strigides merely guided me to prevent my wandering at will through Roenish territory. He trusts me no more than Havoc’s men do. But it made a great story, and who am I to interfere with another’s telling?

I collected my kit and rejoined Havoc’s party, in the dark before dawn, atop a low bluff overlooking the river. All were gathered about a small fire, where chunks of meat roasted on stripped willow twigs and tins of water heated on the rocks of the periphery.

“You don’t sleep?” I inquired, worn by my long day and the excitement of our adventure.

“Oh, certainly!” Havoc smiled, his back to the river and his comrades around him. The budding legend stretched booted feet to the fire and mended a stocking.

“When?”

“Sometime after dawn,” he allowed. “Whenever we get tired.”

He’s young, I reminded myself, feeling all of my two-score- and-five years.

“Great Bard,” he said, “will you share with us the news from Mydicea?”

Did he have memories of that far land? His speech bore the rhythms of its tongue, but he must have been very young when Daphed was recalled to accept the throne of Roen.

So I sang to them of the Adamantine Empire’s last days, news five years stale but something of which these men could’ve heard nothing more than rumors. Songs of the past these were, of the dead, and therefore harmless. I sang of Solanum Adamanté, Emperor Divale’s third son, raised as an assassin in the service of the nether god Datura; of how he crossed the lines to visit General Hanbel one night, promising victory. I drew pictures with my words of Solanum’s signal for the final assault: the fiery destruction of Datura’s temple on the heights above the walls, how it looked to us in the waiting army watching from without the city. And I sang, my voice roughened with grief, of the great General falling even as the gates to the city were thrown wide.

As I spoke, the laughter stilled in those eyes so like the trailing edge of dusk. Havoc gazed southeast, beyond the impassable Tonoman Mountains where a gilding of the year-round snow on the peaks gave first hint of the rising sun. I knew his thoughts weren’t on the war he now fought, but on the one he’d missed. The needle in his hands moved

unerringly, reweaving a worn heel, and the firelight glinted off a tarnished silver ring on the smallest finger of his left hand, his only adornment.

What a tragedy, I thought. The preeminent scout of the century missed the greatest campaign of the age by but a handful of years!

I told of the populace rising up, pulling down Lord Marshal Hellebore, and storming the palace. By the time the throne was taken, the entire royal family, down to Queen Aelania and her infant son, lay dead.

“They killed her?” While his comrades looked solemn, even grim, Havoc’s naturally pale face now looked almost translucent. The needle stilled. I recalled his reputation for unfailing chivalry toward the weak.

“Divale did it, or had it done. Not even applying a statue as a battering ram got us in the throne room fast enough. We could hear the queen screaming for the life of her child, but were too late.”

The violence shocked him. Or perhaps it was my tone, hardened by guilt and five years of retelling. He couldn’t know the tender wound it concealed.

“In the four centuries of their rule, the Adamantés fed thousands of innocents to their pet demon,” I reminded, fighting to keep my voice the gentle polished tones of a

storyteller. “Two more tallied are hardly worth mentioning. The queen was mourned, right along with General Hanbel. But it’s as well her child died.”

He just looked at me, innocent despite his reputation at war, a lad who hadn’t been born when I joined Hanbel’s campaign over two decades before. He might have been thinking of a beloved mother, a baby brother, and I had to explain.

“You cannot know, who weren’t on the campaign, the horror of Datura’s assassin priests. You’ve never wakened at dawn to find your shield-mate beside you, cold and dead, his heart gone to feed that dark god’s altar. You’ve never seen your commanders falling in swathes, your comrades turning against you mindless as ravening wolves.

“You have heard the song and know the debt owed to Solanum Adamanté. Without his efforts, the campaign would have failed. The Adamantés would yet rule, or at the least threaten, a quarter of the known world. But had he survived, our army would have seen the city razed. No man who participated in that campaign could have rested while even a drop of that bloodline survived.”

Silence.

A log broke, and newly minted sparks sizzled into the sky to hang among the hard diamond stars. The early morning

breeze blew from the south, cooling the land. The men waited, and I spared them my attention now because after my last statement, I couldn't look at him.

I found myself truly in the company of wolves, lean predators with nothing to lose, who watched me with eyes that glowed in the firelight. Such lawless men might as easily have become bandits, but had joined a mercenary company for money...and perchance to shed blood. I'd survived a full score years of the mud, fevers, disasters, and assassins that plagued the Adamantine Campaign. The entire world knew my songs and my name. Yet a word from this stripling youth and I'd have died.

Though he held only the rank of scout, Havoc claimed a loyalty as absolute as it was unquestioned. He held his band to a standard of conduct the Royal Guard of any country could envy. And the chaos he wrought upon his enemies was ingenious, devastating, and only in rare and truly deserving cases fatal.

The needle again nosed through the stocking's fabric, tugging the yarn after.

"You said 'we'. You saw the throne room? You were there?" he asked.

"My apologies. I have the tale from Dirk Alzarin's men. Three of them were with him in that final assault."

Silence.

A horse stamped.

“So Dirk Alzarin led the assault on the throne room,” Havoc said, his voice cool and calm as the river he’d dammed that spring to impede cross-border raiding.

I thought that would get attention. That same Dirk Alzarin, not a moon past, was assigned command of this border dispute by his older brother, Cumbera’s new king.

“He did. And by then not an officer survived who ranked him. He commanded the army, and through it the city and empire.”

“Why’s he here?” inquired a man to Havoc’s left, a Tonoman busily engaged in mending tack. “Why isn’t he Emperor of Mydicea?”

“That, I cannot tell.” Even having known Alzarin a score of years, I didn’t understand. “He established a ruling council of the guild masters and city officials, then took most of the army on a tour of the provinces. I go where the stories are, and the city was at peace. We ranged farther and farther afield, until nothing remained of that once vast army but the Cumberans and a few who owed Alzarin their loyalty. And eventually I realized we weren’t going back.

“You know what Dirk Alzarin found in Cumbera: a usurper on the throne, and most of his relatives dead by assassination.

King Glaive sent Dirk to command the front, dissatisfied with Duke Cudgel's waiting game."

"Or hoping some accident might befall the returning hero?" offered a swordsman to Havoc's right, sighting down the blade of a gleaming rapier and applying a strop yet again.

I smiled, as was my habit. I am but a chronicler, after all. The fate of nations and kings touches me not. I remind myself of this often.

"Dirk Alzarin could've been absolute ruler of the greatest nation in the known world, and he walked away," mused Havoc, the needle quiet in his hands. "It's a dangerous enemy you have brought us, great Bard."

"I have brought you nothing but tales, O Havoc," I replied serenely.

"Why then have you come?" He met my eyes across the cook-fire, and in the shadows of the mountains in the earliest dawn the dark blue of his gaze appeared pools of gleaming shadow.

I smiled.

"I go where the stories are."

* * *

I stayed.

Never, other than the days immediately following the fall of Mydicea, have I felt so alive as I did that summer.

Everything fascinated Havoc. He might lie on his stomach a watch or more observing a wasp burying a spider four times its size, or wade waist-deep in a meadow gazing rapt at leaves and flowers. We'd saddle up and travel all day down the valley, just so he could gaze on the trees or an outcrop of rock. Often these trips were on Cumberan soil...and came to nothing.

More commonly he would stop to help some peasant gathering wood, or repairing a roof, and our band would pitch in to see the task done. He'd listen enthralled to a child's tale or a granny's ramblings, and ask questions. Though he was a foreigner who had been on the front little more than two years, the insular valley folk considered him one of their own.

Everywhere he went, he asked for things. Children gathered fungi and flowers at his request, or reported wasp-nests to a beekeeper who collected them in tightly woven baskets made by farm wives. Huntsmen trapped polecats, cowherds gathered flux-weed and nettles, and lasses of every age bedecked gate trees with courting ribbons for him. But of this last, he was oblivious.

Havoc reported, every few days, to D'Strigides. Even that was at irregular intervals and never, as far as I could tell, at prearranged sites. We ranged at will, slept a few hours at whatever time of day or night we found a spot with suitable

cover, and carried only those possessions which wouldn't burden the stocky hill-bred ponies we rode.

And then some night we'd cross the river. Cumberan soldiers would discover that someone had insinuated flux-weed into their pottage greens, and in the dark end up with handfuls of nettles with which to wipe. Nosegays of dreamflower, hung in trees north of an encampment, would dry through the long summer days so the breeze inland, up the river in the early night, shook loose the pollen and spread it over the camp. Baskets, lobbed into a bivouac as supper was served, broke apart, freeing swarms of hornets. Spores of certain fungi, introduced into casks of wine, sent soldiers shrieking and stumbling in panic through the woods. And the polecats....

The gods spoke to me once, long ago. "Only your silence can preserve whom you most wish to apotheosize," they told me. In the brashness of youth, I discounted the geas. Then The General fell, and for five years I sang only of the dead.

Now, at last, I forgot my haunting guilt and my soul took flight once more. I had three new songs within the first fortnight, and two more by the moon's waxing. The price offered for Havoc's head was fifty crowns when I crossed the river from Cumbera to join Havoc's band. It went up to seventy-five, and then one hundred. Still we ranged the valley

at will, and the peasants in Cumberan Mirze-side were as free with their well water as were their cousins in Roen.

Roenish soldiers and peasants alike sang my Havoc songs, rollicking pieces that pulled tired men out of their seats and made a matron's heavy feet light as a lass's. Cumberan guards, on watch in the night, could be heard to sing them under their breath when no officers were about.

"Your songs will be my death," Havoc said to me, once. His bounty went up: one-twenty-five, one-fifty, and I wondered if he was right.

Fortunately, I didn't have to look far for alternate inspiration.

* * *

We swung through Rose Hill town about mid-day and stopped in the market, making camp shortly thereafter within easy sight of the north gate. Since we usually picked secluded areas to sleep, I deduced two things: we wouldn't be staying longer than for a leisurely meal, and we could expect company.

We rubbed fresh fish with herbs, coated them with clay from a convenient bank, and buried them among the coals, drowsing by the fire as we waited for them to cook. Sure enough, by the time the hardened mud was the only thing preventing the fish from falling apart, the lean form of Travan

D'Strigides appeared. He and Havoc spoke together a time, then he joined us for an early evening meal.

“Is it true what we hear about the Duchess Questre?” asked Vinaldi, a master swordsman from Alcora who was known to speak bitterly of a certain Alcoran prince. “That she’s managed to shame the Royal Council into more troop levies, and rides at the head of her own?”

“It is,” D'Strigides replied, dryly. “Thanks to her, we’ll be seeing more of the nobility leading their troops. Means we’ll be getting better supplies. The drawback is that the idiots will try to run the war. Between that, and Dirk Alzarin apparently missing the bloodshed of the Mydicean Campaign, we’re in for one hot summer here in Mirze Vale.”

“I wouldn’t worry much,” said Vinaldi, casting his shield-brother Zahn a grin. “The Duchess will keep them in line.”

The commander only raised his brows. I smelled a story.

“We’ve met her. Haven’t we, Zahn?”

Zahn, a squat Tonoman with the dark hair and eyes of the native population and a once badly broken nose, squirmed uncomfortably.

“Well?” I demanded. I could fairly taste a story on the air.

“Zahn tried to steal her horse.”

“You helped,” grunted Zahn, not looking up.

“We had horses. I suggested we lift coin to get us to

Kingsport where we'd be able to find employment. You went for the horse."

"You didn't see that horse!" Zahn glared at me, eyes flashing with passion and nostrils flared like one of his beloved steeds.

Zahn losing his head over a horse was something I could easily conceive of. He lived and breathed horses, and could ride anything with hair. It was Zahn who taught our steeds to leap off the lower cliffs into the river and swim across to a more sloping shore. This was the secret to our free movement back and forth across the flooded riverbed.

But I knew that story.

"You didn't succeed?"

"Wasn't but a handful in the party, all told. I held a crossbow on them and Zahn went for their purses. Except that he got distracted by that horse, Mist take him." Vinaldi grinned again at his friend, but Zahn just ducked low over his braiding.

"He grabbed the near rein and told the rider to get down. 'You're not man enough for a horse like this,' says he. Didn't realize it was a woman. Who'd expect to see a noblewoman riding astride in surcote and breeches? Wasn't 'til she spoke we knew our mistake. 'You're not man enough to take him from me,' says she, and kicks poor Zahn in the face!"

"You laughed," growled Zahn, "and let them ride off!"

“And a good thing, too.” D’Strigides let slip a wry grin. “She is a Justice of Roen, in the process of rewriting our laws. You might have gotten away with taking her money, but she’d have hunted you down and hanged you if you’d taken her horse!”

“We didn’t even get the money!” laughed Vinaldi. “But goddess of Glory and Horses, what a woman!”

“I’ll tell her you said so,” D’Strigides offered.

“You know her?” Vinaldi demanded. Zahn watched, tense, as if waiting for a serpent to strike.

“Strigides lands border Questre’s. Her Grace was engaged to my eldest brother before he was killed in the last conflict with Cumbera. Our families are close.”

“If I’m right, she was once engaged to Dirk Alzarin as well,” I said.

D’Strigides’ thoughtful frown was all I needed to confirm my suspicions.

“Was she?” Vinaldi demanded. Clearly the unconventional duchess had won at least one unworthy mercenary’s admiration.

The commander nodded slowly, his gaze never leaving me. “She was. But how you heard, I couldn’t guess. Not from Alzarin, surely.”

“From then-Prince Daphed, but at the prompting of Dirk Alzarin. Perhaps he felt the story of a woman who came of age outplaying her king at politics would inspire General Hanbel’s little daughter. Or it may have been some subtle jab at Daphed. I don’t claim to be privy to any private thoughts but my own.”

“And few enough of those,” muttered Zahn, to generalized laughter. I took a bow, acknowledging the point.

* * *

But the tales took root in the fertile soil of my brain. I presented my first paean in Her Grace’s praise several nights later. Within a fortnight, a squad of Dirk Alzarin’s finest was taken attempting to abduct the duchess from her tent in the watch before dawn. It was said she returned their leader naked, tied backward on a bony mule.

When I managed to converse with one of Questre’s officers, I found him and his men ready to rhapsodize without even a bottle of wine to loosen their tongues. She lived among them, they said, in a tent differentiated only by the Questre standard. She ate what they ate, and rode on patrol. What’s more, she did not pretend to know more of warfare than her veteran commanders, but listened in council and asked intelligent questions and, in most cases, only confirmed the strategies that were presented.

I admit it: I was minded strongly of The General.

Can you believe, for a moment I felt homesick for Mydicea? For the Adamantine Campaign, and the sand and the toil and even the assassins? But what I missed were the living legends I had immortalized and spent half my life in the company of, most of whom were now five years dead.

My second hymn was one of praise for Questre's wisdom, patriotism, and courage in the face of personal danger. I drew on local mythology, painting an analogy with a goddess of dawn who symbolized Hope in rising above the grey mists that so often shrouded the Mirze dale and mountains of a morning. Mists were symbolic of the grey-eyed god of the Dead who ever pursued the elusive goddess, and occasionally overcame her...but never for long.

I'd have to find another direction to continue my travels when my time here ended. Grey eyes were far from unknown in the royal house of Cumbera, and Dirk Alzarin himself fit the Mirze folks' description of Severan, god of the Dead, so well I felt confident that history played a significant part in the formation of this theology.

Dirk Alzarin's response was prompt and in force. Once more the duchess managed to escape the attempted kidnapping, this time by dint of having the faster horse. Too, her horse had the lighter burden by far, but I didn't realize that 'til later.

* * *

Commander D'Strigides appeared one evening when the sun hung in a baleful glare over the west hills. We were downriver, almost to the lake where the Mirze found its exit on the valley's north end, heading seaward. The biting flies were fierce. He'd never sought us in so isolated an area. Thus I knew his visit an urgent matter.

My eye went to the lad accompanying him, a slender youth in surcote and breeches with a deliberate stride. White-gold swans' down hair looked as if it had been cut short to be worn under a helm but allowed to grow out. The firelight picked out features too fair and fey for a lad of any age, and I empathized with the grim expression that sat so poorly on that delicate countenance.

The figure's left hand rested on the hilt of a light and business-like dueling rapier. That hand had been injured and was wrapped in cloth the same shade as the russet surcote. Only the quality of the cloth, and of the tailored riding boots, spoke of wealth...those, and the black diamonds glinting on the hilt of the dagger at her right hip.

By that dagger, I knew her. Only three existed. One was lost in the destruction of Datura's temple. One, Dirk Alzarin kept for himself. The third he'd bestowed upon a loyal liegeman who'd served him since birth. That was when I

realized Sergeant Henders had been the one assigned to capture the duchess that first failed attempt.

The Duchess Questre had to be near forty. She didn't look it. The only signs of her age were crow's-feet at the corners of her lilac eyes, and that happened young on pale-eyed foreigners in sun-bright Mydicea.

Vinaldi was the next to recognize her. It was his gasp of awe and dread that got the attention of the others. Zahn leapt up to flee, but Havoc caught his arm. Zahn and Vinaldi both stayed, obedient to Havoc's silent command, despite Questre's narrow-eyed recognition. She said nothing to them, but addressed me instead.

"So, you're the bard, Marcoen." Her voice held the music of the harp's plucked strings. She was a soprano, and I'd wager my gittern she could sing to make the birds cry in envy. Tonight, though, she spoke in a key suitable for a threnody.

"We share many of the same heroes," she said. Her glance sparked on Havoc, bringing a blush to his cheeks as his gaze skittered away. I'd never seen him nonplused before.

Envy thrust a knife at my heart. I parried it and nursed the wound.

For the sake of my art. I've done so many times, and the greater the emotion the more triumphant the ballad. But the pain never fades.

“Do you take requests?” she asked of me.

A song? I’d played for royalty before. None had discomposed me as much as she, but I nodded, knowing I’d find my voice when my fingers touched the strings.

“I request that you not compose anything about my nephew, King Daphed,” she said. “While he is worthy of such an honor, I greatly fear the consequences would not be to your liking or mine. For myself, I appreciate your work, dear Bard. But I could wish that I had never become the subject of your verse.”

I glanced at Havoc, who once more gazed at me steadily. He was still holding Zahn by the arm.

I remembered his words, and his ever-rising bounty.

I glanced back at the diminutive duchess, at hair rough-shorn too short for another’s grip, at the scarred throat and the wrapped hand that rested like a crippled bird on the hilt of her rapier. They say she levered away the knife at her throat with her own hand. I wondered for the first time at the damage done, and at how much blame I bore for having provoked that attack.

“I can make no promise, Your Grace. But I will give the matter sober consideration.”

She gave a short, sharp nod, accepting my concession. Then she turned her regard to Vinaldi and Zahn, before setting

her focus on Havoc, himself.

“These are your men?” she demanded.

“They are,” Havoc replied, this time meeting her gaze.

“You name yourself responsible for them, and for their actions?”

“I do.”

Again, that sharp nod of recognition, and she turned away. D’Strigides gave Havoc a solemn look before following. It was the last we saw of the commander.

Havoc released Zahn slowly. The horseman sank to the ground, eyes closed, dealing with his close brush with the Mist.

But Havoc’s eyes were on me, and troubled. “I have only my life to lose, Bard. If you must write songs about one of us, let it be me.”

I thought of my kidskin journal and the fragments of Havoc songs not yet completed. I thought of one hundred fifty crowns and the life of ease they might purchase. I thought of the duchess’ ragged hair and mangled hand, and again heard that whisper of the gods:

“Only your silence....”

* * *

Perhaps it was that we made our move before midnight, and the threatened rain had the Cumberan guards jumpy. The camp roused and we pulled back prematurely, leaving our tasks

undone. We didn't realize Zahn was taken 'til he failed to show at the rendezvous.

Havoc slipped away on foot, and we waited.

Rain came down in tubs and buckets, and the horses churned the ground to mud despite heavy leaf litter under the trees. Havoc never showed.

We returned to the Roenish side of the river, concealed by the pre-dawn mists, but kept watch from under the forest's edge.

We weren't disappointed.

The goddess of Hope set the Cumberan peaks afire and spread diaphanous veils of peach and blush, and a lilac like Questre's eyes, billowing overhead. Severan's mist lay like a woolly grey serpent between the riverbanks, rearing its multifarious heads above damp treetops and straining to reach her from the very flanks of the mountain peaks. And failing.

We heard hoof beats, muted thunder rolling through the dale, growing ever louder. From the mists, coiling over the field across the river, burst a glorious black brute. One figure strained forward over the horse's muscular neck, face flagellated by the whipping mane. A second, hunched figure, held on tight with bowed head and a black mane of his own flying.

Zahn never slowed as he took the approach to the river.

I can only tell myself that, in the fog, the horse didn't know how far down the water was. He gathered those powerful haunches and leaped from the cliff's edge...to be swallowed by the swollen serpent of mist, lost but for an equine scream of terror and an enormous splash.

Victor, the horse, came surging out of the water with Zahn sticking so close they might have been wearing the same skin. I recognized Victor immediately. Of Havoc, I saw no sign, nor heard splashing from the river.

Zahn slid from the steed's back, his movements stiff, pained. He patted Victor approvingly on the withers, and the stallion lowered its head to shake the water from its mane.

"Where's Havoc?" I demanded. It wasn't unlike Zahn to be distracted by horses while our leader drowned only a rod away.

"Here," quothe said leader, swimming silently to shore with only his head breaking the surface of the water, his hair streaming behind like black algae. He pulled himself up onto a rock at the water's edge and ran his fingers through his hair, squeezing out the water.

The local populace has a legend of a horse that lives down in the river, one that comes ashore to steal young maids. Some insist that the horse can become a man. I filed away the image for later use, perhaps in a romantic ballad.

"Where were you?" Vinaldi demanded of Zahn.

“How’d you get him away?” someone else tossed at Havoc.

“Of all the horses in Cumbera, did you have to steal Dirk Alzarin’s own?” I asked.

Vinaldi thumped himself on the forehead with the heel of his hand.

“Is it?” Havoc sighed, dumping water out of a boot. “I was afraid of that.”

“How’d you get him?” I inquired.

“The Cumberans were...enthusiastic,” Havoc said, his eyes straying to the limping Zahn. “We wouldn’t be able to move fast enough on foot. Take note: if you are captured you won’t be held for ransom. Zahn was chained to the courtyard wall of Mirze-March Keep, to be turned over to Duke Cudgel at dawn.”

My shudder had nothing to do with the night’s rain and morning chill. The Red Duke’s dungeon was notorious.

“How’d you get him away?” asked Vinaldi.

“I learned to pick locks as an apprentice,” smiled Havoc, unlacing his doublet and hanging it from a branch. “The guards took cover from the rain, just giving their prisoner occasional glances. We put Zahn’s cloak over a barrel. Through the rain, it looked just like him.”

Zahn snatched an oak gall off a limb and lobbed it at Havoc, who laughed and deflected it with a negligent hand.

Havoc started digging through his saddlebags and pulled out a dry shirt.

“The gate was the tricky part. I suspect they recognized the horse and opened for him out of habit.”

No chance, I thought, would anyone mistake even the two of you together as Dirk Alzarin. Even in the rain. A worm of doubt squirmed. Mydicea, and the tricks of perception attributed to Datura’s assassin priests, were too deeply engrained in my soul. I actually opened my mouth to question —

But then Havoc stripped off his shirt.

I lost all thought of Alzarin and the improbabilities of the story. That bared back, before he covered it with the dry blouse, was a network of ridged scar tissue. The gullies between were deep enough to bury a lass’s fingers.

How had he gotten such a beating? Beatings, for some of the scars were clearly older. He could’ve been no more than a child for those earlier ones. It was a wonder he’d survived.

Had he been a slave? It would explain the sheer joy with which he dove into every experience, the reason he drank life down like water on a summer day. But, no. Surely not?

He turned to face us, lacing up the yolk, and paused at our regard. Havoc raised his eyebrows, tilted his head, and waited.

“The scars?” I ventured, when no one else dared ask.

He relaxed visibly, and with a self-deprecating smile said, "I was an unsatisfactory apprentice."

It wasn't until fortnights later, when other events recalled my unasked questions, that I realized he'd let us see the scars as a distraction.

* * *

Havoc grew more sober after that. Not that his habits changed, nor our tactics. But I'd catch him watching us with concern, glancing around at the troop before calling a halt at mid-day, or ordering a change of clothes if someone got dunked during a night crossing. And he began encouraging us to talk about our plans, our hopes and dreams. One of the lads had a knack for carpentry, and Havoc found him a place among the Roenish army's engineers. Another confessed to a farmer's love of the land, and shortly found himself employed in the vineyards.

No one had to ask where Havoc was when he disappeared after Travan D'Strigides was captured by the Cumberans. But three days with no word left us wondering if our leader were in Duke Cudgel's dungeon.

It was a sober Havoc, indeed, who returned to us on the third evening. He declined to say where he'd been, but asked me how he might arrange a meeting with King Daphed to convey a message from Commander D'Strigides. All my

forgotten suspicions from the moon before swept like a flash-fire through my brain.

I made the arrangements he asked by offering to play for the court, and then taking Havoc along to the Royal encampment. Night found us in the great hall of Duke Setigera's Keep as his noble guests finished their evening repast. I sang of events that King Daphed would remember from his time on the Mydicean Campaign, of disasters large and small and the horror of Datura's assassins slipping amongst us unseen. Then I sang of the last offensive, of the fall of General Hanbel and Mydicea City. And I sang my Ode to Solanum Adamanté, of his great sacrifice, and saw not a dry eye in the hall...except Havoc's.

He gazed into the distance, absently turning the ring on his finger. I admit I was disappointed, but I could not help the desire to know his thoughts at such a time.

I planned to wrap up with a song or two about the present campaign. Under the gaze of the duchess, and mindful of her request, I couldn't sing 'Questre's Ride'. But 'Old Soldier' and 'Havoc's Band' set things up nicely. I introduced my inspiration, and gave him opportunity to deliver his message. It turned out to be on a scrolled parchment he produced from up his sleeve.

King Daphed turned grim as he perused the missive. The

Duchess Questre, when he handed it to her, might have been stone.

“Where is he being held?” King Daphed inquired, after solemn contemplation of the mercenary scout before him.

“In the hall occupied by the Lord Marshal’s personal guard; chained to the wall. He believes himself in no immediate danger, safe from Duke Cudgel.”

“This is by his hand?”

“It is, your Highness. He said you would recognize the necessity.”

“Do you?”

For the first time, Havoc paused. “He explained it, Your Highness.”

And just how had he had personal communication with a prisoner kept chained to the wall in the hall occupied by Dirk Alzarin’s personal guards? I knew those men. No chance would a stranger be permitted to slip into their private domain for a chat with their prisoner. Unless....

But, no. Another case of mistaken identity involving the too-distinctive Havoc was beyond all probability. The worm of doubt squirmed again. I quashed it, resolving to have a long talk with Zahn.

Silence.

Then, “Until such time as Commander D’Strigides returns to active duty on our behalf, you will report to the Duchess Questre on all matters pertaining to your activities.” King Daphed gave us three days to formally report.

It wasn’t ‘til we’d rejoined the rest of the troop and were settled by the fire that I managed to inquire as to the contents of the message.

“Unless it’s a secret,” I added, hoping he’d tell anyway.

“I don’t suppose it is,” Havoc conceded. “He requested King Daphed disallow Questre to offer ransom on his behalf.”

“I could see it being a bad idea to allow Dirk Alzarin any suspicion he holds one whom the duchess values,” I mused. “But why would she offer such ransom?” This was the secret, and Havoc’s answer was a long time coming.

“You are an honorable man, Bard,” he said, those dark eyes pinning me like a lance. “You’ve shown me that you care whether any words of yours might bring others to harm. I will tell you this, and you must breathe word of it to no one: Travan D’Strigides is Questre’s heir.”

Dirk Alzarin had in his hands the perfect tool to force the much-sought duchess’ cooperation, and he didn’t know it.

I couldn’t breathe. The significance of this filled my head; tried to squeeze out my ears. I bit my tongue and kept it inside.

The following evening we reported to Questre's camp. She made clear she'd leave our activities and planning in Havoc's hands, as D'Strigides had done.

And the story Zahn told in private contained a richness of detail his rescuer had left out, but differed significantly in no feature from the tale Havoc told us that first morning. It wasn't reassuring.

* * *

Why is it that a lass's scream draws no attention, but a man's brings on the cavalry?

Perhaps I'm pessimistic. Perhaps the cavalry was already on its way, having heard her cries for help. Perhaps we only got there first.

In the darkness we heard them coming. We finished off the last of the perpetrators quickly, and may have been a bit sloppy. Several of us took injuries, and Vinaldi hopped on one leg when Zahn brought his horse, but the eight culprits lay dead.

With no time for gentler considerations, Havoc swung the rescued lass up behind him. We lost our pursuit by ducking aside and waiting silent in the inky depths under the trees as they thundered past. Ever unpredictable, Havoc led us deeper into Cumberan Mirze-side, dodging patrols and encampments, to the Sisters of Light convent where they practiced the healing

arts. It didn't surprise me to find the gate trees festooned with ribbons.

Havoc waved us back and rode directly to the portal.

Repeated pounding brought a portress to the gate...and a bevy of novices to the walls, despite the early hour. Or maybe because of it. Life in a convent can't see a great deal of excitement, and a pre-dawn visitor meant something unusual afoot. Women peered from the walls, their faces pale blurs in the dimness.

The tearful lass kissed Havoc's fingers as he handed her down. I saw him pass his purse to the portress, and knew it contained a fortnight's wages. But I didn't see more of what passed at the gate because at that point Zahn gave a cry. I only realized Vinaldi was leaning in time to see him tumble silently from his horse.

He hit the ground without so much as a groan.

Zahn, dropping to kneel at his side, lifted Vinaldi's hand and bit off another cry. By dawn's milky light the hand was black with blood, having been pressed to an injury to staunch the bleeding.

When my hand touched his leg, I found it sopping and sticky. A nasty gash above his knee gushed blood. I pressed the lips of the wound together with my hands while calling for something to use as a tourniquet.

Half a furlong distant, Havoc heard me. He snagged a long, pale streamer from the gate tree, galloping back to dismount on the fly.

The ribbon proved to be a white one, half the width of my hand, made of silk thread woven with long pale hair, as I saw later. Havoc doubled it, wrapped it around Vinaldi's leg above the wound, tied it off, and tightened it by thrusting a stick through the knot and twisting.

The bleeding stopped, but now the big bronze convent bell was tolling alarm. The strident peal was bound to draw the nearest Cumberan encampment.

Havoc looked around, his face pale and eyes pools of desperate darkness. "Marcoen, hold him! Zahn, see to our horses! The rest of you, go! If we don't catch up, report to Questre. Move!"

No one questioned or hesitated. A few moments later, we were alone in a sunrise, silent but for a tolling bell and chorus of novices begging us to flee.

Havoc never noticed. He knelt, neck bent as if in prayer, with his hands spread over the severed tissues of the swordsman's knee.

Vinaldi screamed.

"Hold him!" Havoc ordered, and I applied all my weight and leverage to keeping our patient down and his leg still.

“Severan! Stop!” gasped Vinaldi, conscious again despite his death-like pallor.

”Be still!” snapped Havoc. With my help, the swordsman managed.

Havoc raised his hands from the wound, and Vinaldi whimpered. Havoc’s knife slashed a wider cut in the fabric of the breeches; he wiped clear the unbroken skin beneath.

And it was unbroken. Only a thin, reddened line remained of the crippling wound. Havoc loosed the tourniquet, then bade Vinaldi stand.

Vinaldi stood, though he swayed a bit. I felt hollow and shaky, myself.

Havoc stepped back, waiting.

Vinaldi shifted carefully, staring in awe at his knee. At last he swung the leg forward in a full stride, bent it in a swordsman’s lunge...and slowly, slowly dropped to his other knee, gazing fully on Havoc’s face.

“A crippled swordsman is a dead one, no matter how good he has been,” Vinaldi pledged as Zahn, too, fell to his knees in fealty. “My life is yours to command.”

“Live it well,” Havoc ordered. He raised his eyes to mine, then, bleak and tragic, awaiting my verdict.

For a word, a name from me, and he was dead. It all came together, his uncanny talent for passing unseen among the

enemy hosts, his penchant for miring the shreds of their morale. I knew who he was.

Solanum Adamanté, who'd slain a nether-god and toppled the ruling dynasty of the most powerful empire in the known world, all at the ripe old age of fifteen.

"We all believed you died," I said.

"I did."

I understood, then, the joy with which he reveled in being alive. No, he hadn't been a slave. Perhaps he'd been worse. Now, having survived the destruction of Datura's temple, he was free to be his own man, to create himself anew without the bonds of his heritage—but only if that heritage remained secret.

The bell ceased its plangent toll, but its damage must already be done. "We'd best go," I said.

Havoc nodded as Zahn and Vinaldi rose to their feet. As he gathered the reins of his steed, Havoc gazed in perplexity at the fluttering tails of smudged, pale ribbon in his hand. He glanced back toward the gate tree as if to return it.

"Too late," said Vinaldi, recovering a weak semblance of his usual humor. "Even if we kept it quiet, they've all seen." He gestured toward the top of the convent wall where the nuns were trying unsuccessfully to roust the novices.

"It's ruined," Havoc admitted. "Should I buy her another? How will I know who to return it to?"

“You don’t return it. You’re engaged!”

Horror washed over Havoc’s face. “You mean I’ve taken the token some girl has set out for her love to claim?”

Zahn snorted, and Vinaldi laughed aloud. “It was there for you!” Vinaldi guffawed, pounding his liege on the back and then carefully mounting the shaggy pony Zahn led over.

“They’re all for you,” I said. “Every ribbon in the valley! You never noticed?”

He stared at the limp ribbon lying like a dead thing across his palm, then in dismay up at the novices gathered, now silent, on the distant wall.

“Relax, my liege,” chuckled Vinaldi. “She must know you have no idea who she is and can never claim her. It’s the best kind of betrothed to have,” he tossed over his shoulder as he reined his horse away. “The kind you’ll never marry!”

* * *

It’s with irony that I recall those words, all these years later. The gods have a bitter sense of humor that it was Vinaldi who said them, poor man.

I’ve written no more songs of Havoc. My journal contains scraps and notes of his later deeds, his rise to nobility, his growing family, but I dare put none of it into song for fear I’ll lose myself in the trance of performance and something irretrievable will slip out.

For I know I have already said too much.

On the edge of the territories of the Mydicean Republic, in a tavern, sits a group of Hanbel's veterans who work for the Mydicean Council keeping peace. The night grows deep as a minstrel plays for the thinning crowd. To the last hangers on, he offers the latest of my creations to make its way south: a tale of a mercenary scout who's got the great Dirk Alzarin chasing his tail.

They know me, and they know Dirk Alzarin. They laugh in appreciation of the scout's cleverness, and comment on how I have woven in my experience with Hanbel's army being devilled by Datura's assassins.

Except...no killing. It almost sounds as if Solanum, the rebel Adamanté, is alive and applying his training....

They look one to another, suddenly sober despite the night's excesses. Silent.

Nervous, denying laughter breaks the mood and they drink deeper than ever.

May all my songs, forever after, be taken as a joke, if only to keep that laughter alive!

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A.C. Smart and Quinn Braver are the co-authors of “Hell Hath No Furies” in L. Marie Wood’s anthology Hell Hath No Fury and “Witch” in David Bain’s anthology Modern Mage, Ancient Magic. Smart, a sometime teacher, writes to prevent being over-whelmed by reality. Two cats allow her to cohabit with them; they come when called and are generally more obedient than students. Braver currently resides between the Smokies and Cumberland Mountains with her husband and three cats. She’s the Senior Creative Nonfiction Editor for Conclave: A Journal of Character.

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COVER ART

“Endless Skies,” by Rick Sardinha



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