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SANJI'S DEMON, PT. II

by Richard Parks

(Concluded from [Issue #38](#))

* * *

We didn't get much from the captured bandits. Yes, they were thieves. No, they had not attacked Lady Takara. Yes, there were the spoils of thievery in their storeroom; no sense denying the obvious. No, they had no idea how the cloth from Lady Takara's temple offering had come into their hands. Daiki finally grew frustrated and ordered them all bound on a line. As we rode back to the Sago Compound with the prisoners led on a rope and surrounded by guards, I pondered what little we had learned. It seemed to me that it might be far more than a first glance might reveal.

"Why lie about the temple offering and the demon and then tell the truth about all else?" I mused. "The penalty for banditry is death, as is the penalty for murder. They can't be beheaded twice."

"Because they knew that I would not be so merciful as the governor," Daiki growled. "I know they've hidden Sanji's

trophy somewhere, and they will tell me where. I will find the truth.”

“That is my intention as well. I just do not believe that the truth you’re looking for is to be had from these wretches.”

“Why not?” Daiki asked.

“Because, my lord, I think they’ve already told us the truth.”

Now even Kenji was staring at me. “Yamada-san, what do you mean?”

“Simple: Yamaguchi no Mikio and his followers did not attack Lady Takara. They couldn’t have.”

“Lord Yamada, are you saying the Lady Takara, my wife, lied to me?”

Now Daiki was glaring, and I knew his anger was more than ready to erupt in any direction, including my own. I proceeded carefully.

“On the contrary—it is the truth of her words that speaks on behalf of Yamaguchi and his followers. She stated that Mikio himself prevented his man from killing her during the raid. Why would he do that? What bandit is foolish enough to slaughter so many and let a witness to that slaughter live? More, make a *special effort* to let that witness live? Does that make any sense to you?”

“No,” he said reluctantly. “It does not. Unless....”

I finished. “Unless the entire point was to leave a witness. Whoever attacked your wife wanted it known that Yamaguchi no Mikio was to blame.”

“Whoever?” Kenji asked.

“Which brings me back to my first point,” I said. “You saw that ‘bandit stronghold,’ Master Daiki, just as I did. Yamaguchi had four men, at most, and they were a sorry lot. Nor was there bedding or supplies at the compound to indicate any more. Lady Takara’s party was attacked by at least a dozen, probably more. I saw the results of their work and would swear to that on my life. It is simply impossible that Yamaguchi is the culprit.”

I could see the doubt creeping into Daiki’s face, but he shook it away. “Nonsense! How else could they have obtained that cloth?”

“That question is more than fair, and at the moment I cannot answer it. But, with your indulgence, I may yet do so.”

“Very well,” Daiki said, “but I will warn you ahead of time that I am short on temper at the moment and not terribly fond of riddles in the best circumstances.”

Kenji leaned over. “I think Master Daiki is just about ready to turn his club on you. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

I smiled. “So do I. But I will need your help as well. I require a talisman of truth. Surely there is something of the

sort in that bag of yours.”

Kenji frowned. “As in to compel the truth? I have something that will serve the purpose.”

“Later. Before the truth can be compelled, first it must be revealed.”

* * *

As I hoped, the governor’s messenger was waiting for me when we reached the Sago Clan compound, and I took him aside to hear his report. Afterwards I nodded and turned to Daiki. “I need to speak to Yuichi again. Will you and Kenji accompany me?”

He frowned. “If you wish.”

I turned to the messenger. “Your name?”

“Nobu, my lord.”

“Nobu-san, follow us, please.”

I had two weapons, a sword and a short dagger. I chose the dagger and kept its hilt close to hand. We went behind the compound and approached the Sago family shrine. “Yuichi-san? I need a word with you.”

The old man poked his head around the door to shrine. “Ah! Master Daiki. I am so pleased to see you returned safely. What news?”

“The bandits have been caught, though their leader was slain. I’m afraid we did not recover our heirloom.”

“A pity,” he said as he emerged from the shrine, wiping the dust from his hands with a small cloth and awaiting our approach. “No doubt you will find it yet.”

“No doubt,” I said. I took one long step and trapped the old man’s arms with my left arm while I pressed the dagger blade against his throat. His body was as taut as a bowstring in my grip.

Daiki raised his club. “Lord Yamada, what is the meaning of this outrage?”

“If I am wrong,” I said through clenched teeth. “I will apologize with all sincerity. Nobu-san, will you tell Master Daiki what you just told me?”

Daiki scowled at the man. “Well?”

“L-Lord Yamada charged me to inquire of Ishiyama no Yuichi’s family when they had last seen him.”

“And their answer?”

“He has not returned home in over a month, my lord. They are becoming concerned.”

Daiki’s gaze narrowed. “Yuichi, what does this mean?”

The old man just glared, and continued to struggle. I nodded at the priest. “Now, Kenji-san.”

Kenji produced a slip of mulberry paper with exquisite calligraphy flowing down its length. He raised a single hand in

a blessing gesture and slapped the paper onto Yuichi's forehead. "Diamond Sutra. Let illusion be dispelled."

The old man's form *shimmered* in my grasp, like a mountain peak glimpsed through summer haze. Another instant and I did not hold an old man at all, but rather an *oni*. He was perhaps a head taller than myself, with red skin, gleaming tusks and horns, and black hair as coarse and thick as a horse's mane. He continued to struggle, and it was all I could do to hold him.

"When we think of shape-shifters, we think of foxes and *tanuki*, but demons have the knack as well, when they care to use it," I said.

Master Daiki's hands gripped his club so tightly that I could hear the wood creaking. "In my own home! Lord Yamada, how did you know?"

"I wasn't certain until Nobu returned, but it was the only answer that made any sense. We know that Lady Takara received a visitor, both she and Aniko confirmed that. Yet Tarou told me that no one entered your compound that day. If the visitor had come from Hino-ji as you believed, he would have come in the front gate. Since no one did, the only reasonable conclusion was that the visitor *was already here.*"

Kenji frowned. "But how did you know it was Yuichi, rather than one of the guards? Tarou, for instance?"

I shifted my grip, slightly. The demon felt like heavy as stone.

“The same way I knew that our shapeshifter wasn’t Lady Takara or Aniko. Demon-aura, Kenji. They can disguise their form, but their aura is one thing they cannot disguise.”

Kenji smiled. “Ah! Any one of us would have noticed that, including Master Daiki. And Lady Takara—”

“—was being tended in Mt. Hino Shrine. The priests there are neither fools nor incompetents. If Lady Takara had been a demon in disguise they would have spotted the deception immediately. Yuichi, on the other hand...Master Daiki, did you not find it strange that Yuichi-san’s lifelong fear of demons should suddenly disappear to the point that he not only no longer avoided your family shrine but hardly ever seemed to leave it?”

“The demon scent,” Daiki said grimly.

“Precisely. There, he was one among many, and so none of us noticed a thing. Clever, really.” I glanced at my glaring prisoner. “I think it is time you told us where the heirloom you stole is hidden. Kenji-san?”

The priest stepped forward again, this time with a different talisman. “Lotus Sutra. Truth.” He slapped the second talisman beside the first, though now he almost had to stand on tiptoe to reach the demon’s forehead

“Why did you cozen Lady Takara?”

“So the silly woman would remove the trophy from the compound for us, of course. The wards on this place are such that I could not do it alone.” The demon’s voice was like rocks grating together in an avalanche.

“I knew you weren’t working by yourself. Where is the real Yuichi?”

“In the privy. I must have shat the rest of him by now,” said the demon, grinning.

Master Daiki growled and raised his club, but Kenji put a hand on his arm. “Not yet, my lord.”

“Your confederates assumed the forms of Mikio’s band for the attack, and one of you placed the cloth in Mikio’s storeroom to assure their guilt. It was easily done, wasn’t it?”

“Very easily done,” said the demon. “Much like this.”

He broke free. I would have sworn that I had him under control, but he produced a surge of strength I hadn’t realized he possessed, and the force of it threw me back against the shrine wall, knocking the wind out of me. Everything went black for a moment, and when my vision cleared, there was much confusion and shouting. Kenji kneeled beside me.

“Lord Yamada, the demon has scaled the wall and escaped. Perhaps a binding talisman would have been more in order?”

I groaned and rubbed the back of my head. A knot was already rising. “You might have let me know that you had such a thing.... Where is Master Daiki?”

“Right here.” The man stood before me, leaning on his massive club.

I struggled to rise and made it on the second try. “My lord, there’s no time to waste! If you are ever to recover your family’s heirloom....”

He grinned. “Lord Yamada, I am grateful for your assistance in clearing up this matter, but you forget: if there’s anything I *do* know, it’s how to track a demon.”

* * *

Once Daiki was on the trail, it was impossible to keep up with him. We had been forced to leave our horses behind on the thickly wooded hillsides the demon had fled through. I took command of the remaining *bushi*, and we followed Sago no Daiki as quickly as we could, kept on course by following the crashing sound he made as he hurtled through the undergrowth. I was beginning to understand what had so terrified that first demon that day on the Hokuriku Road.

I glanced up the hillside and knew we had found what we were searching for. No less than a small fortress had been carved into a flat niche on the hillside. It was made of stone and mossy logs, difficult to see unless one looked, as I had,

directly at it. I paused long enough to let the straggling *bushi* catch up and then arranged them in a rough skirmish line. I had no sooner placed them in some semblance of order when I heard the crash of wood on wood from the hillside and realized it was Sago no Daiki breaking in the gate.

Kenji was still catching his breath. “Why...why didn’t he wait for us? Does he mean to take on the whole demon band on his own?”

“That’s exactly what he intends to do. Let’s go!”

The defenders had been alerted by Daiki’s noisy entrance. There were demon archers on the wall in a grotesque parody of *bushi* bowmen. Two of our number were struck and went down. I grimaced as another barbed shaft grazed my shoulder before our own archers cleared the top of the wall with their own volley. In a heartbeat we were through the gate, our swords drawn.

Dead and dying *oni* were lying in the courtyard. I spotted Daiki in the middle of a circle of demons. He had been struck twice by arrows, once in the left thigh and again in the shoulder, but the wounds seemed little more than an inconvenience. He howled like a wolf as he swung his great club here and there, batting down any demons who tried to close the circle. Before they could rush him properly, he

charged and took out two of the smaller demons with one blow as he crashed through their line.

“To Master Daiki!” I shouted, and a dozen warriors rushed to his side. The rest of our force scattered through the inner courtyard, battling the demons in groups of two or three.

It was impossible to judge the demons’ numbers accurately, but I counted at least two dozen, not including the ones already on the ground. They were all armed like men: some with bows, others with spears and rusty, nicked swords. For demons, it amounted to a level of organization and discipline that I hadn’t believed the creatures capable of achieving. I didn’t have time to consider my admiration before an *oni* charged me and I killed it with a slash across the throat. Another struck at Kenji, and we killed it together with sword and staff.

“Lord Yamada! Find that demon! We’ll deal with this.”

I heard Daiki’s shout from across the battlefield and knew which demon he meant. One or two of the outbuildings within the fortress were already burning, which explained his urgency. The largest building not yet engulfed in flames had the mark of a storehouse. I ran toward it, Kenji following close. When I got nearer, I knew I’d judged correctly. The door was massively thick but slightly ajar, as if someone had just gone in or out.

“Keep watch here. If you need help, shout,” I said.

“Depend on it,” Kenji said cheerfully.

A lit lantern hung on a peg just inside the doorway. I took it and held it up. At first I saw only what one might expect to see in any storeroom: casks of rice and sake, even bolts of rough fabric and racks of weapons. I knew beyond questioning that we had met the chieftain of the demons, disguised as the unfortunate Yuichi, and that this demon was much more intelligent than the usual sort. What I had seen within the demon’s fortress and now in this storeroom bore that out. Whatever he intended, this demon obviously had plans for his followers other than mere survival. So involved was I in examining the more mundane contents that I almost missed the silhouette at the end of the building, the very distinctive silhouette of a demon.

I raised my sword, but it did not move. I took one slow step forward and then another. I noticed that I was not seeing the red glow of its eyes in the lamplight, as I would rightly expect. I took another step and I realized that its eyesockets were hollow.

This is it.

Sanji’s demon sat on a rough seat of hewn timber, much like it would have sat in its place of honor in the Sago family shrine. Even with the demon seated I could tell that it had been about seven feet tall in life, with dull yellow tusks and black

coarse hair, though much of that hair had fallen out of its dried scalp over the years. It had obviously been an object of veneration for some time. Rather than the crude loin-cloth or rough clothing that demons normally wore, this one had been dressed in fine robes, though clearly the robes were very old. The cloth was ripped in several places now, practically in tatters, apparently due to its rough handling during the theft.

Sanji's demon resembled others I had seen before, but there were some differences. Rather than tusks in both top and bottom jaws there were tusks in its upper jaw only, and they appeared more like a tiger's fangs than tusks. I took a closer look, and the lamplight reflected on something like a design on its skin, now visible in a tear in its old robes.

A tattoo?

I leaned closer. Not a tattoo. Stitches. Very skillfully done. I examined the corpse and found others. I examined the teeth again, closer this time. I hadn't gotten far when I heard Kenji's shout.

“Lord Yamada, if you would be so kind...?”

I dropped the lantern. I raised my sword and rushed to the doorway.

Two of the larger demons were approaching Kenji. “Take the left, Kenji-san,” I said, and took up position on his right side.

The rightmost demon roared, but in pain, not rage. It dropped its sword and reached around as if trying to swat a bee. Then it fell to its knees, an arrow protruding from its back, before toppling face-first into the dirt. While its companion was distracted, Kenji crushed its skull with one sharp blow from his priest's staff.

"With all the talismans and whatnot worked into that staff, you hardly needed—" I didn't finish. The blow from above caught me completely by surprise, and I slammed to the ground as something large and reeking of demon-aura fell on me. Only then did I curse myself for not checking the roof of the storehouse.

I had dropped my sword. I tried to grasp my dagger but a taloned foot pinned my arm. I recognized the demon chieftain from the compound.

"You," he growled. "You ruined everything!"

He stabbed down at me with a long dagger, and it was only Kenji's staff, thrust between me and the demon, that blocked him. In its rage the creature swatted the priest's staff aside as if it were a twig. I struggled, but I was trapped, and the demon's second blow had already begun.

Then there was a loud swoosh, as if someone had thrown a tree trunk at us, and then a very loud and wet thud. The demon

flew off me as if it had sprouted wings. I heard it slam into the storehouse door and then silence.

Sago no Daiki leaned on his club, panting. Young and strong though he was, he was clearly near his limit. Both his arrow wounds were bleeding now, and his clothes were torn and mired in blood, both demon's blood and his own.

"That's twice I've been overpowered," I said, as Kenji helped me to stand. "I think I'm getting too old for such things."

Kenji just shook his head. "And yet you live still. Luck favors you, Lord Yamada," he said.

"If this is favor, then the Gods of Fortune have a twisted sense of humor," I muttered.

Daiki tried to catch his breath and didn't completely succeed. "Is...is it here? Did you find it?"

"It's here, Master Daiki." I looked behind me. The flames were already emerging from the eaves of the storeroom. "In there."

He cursed and stumbled to the door, which the demon's body was still blocking. He yanked its arm, and the demon's corpse fell several feet away from the building in a crumpled, bloody heap. Daiki grabbed the iron ring bolted to the door, but the impact of the demon chieftain's body had wedged the door against the frame and it would not budge. He tried to raise his

club again to smash his way through, but he was so weakened that the club fell out of his hands.

“Lord Yamada, Kenji-san...help me!”

We did try, all of us together, but in the end we could do nothing but watch the storehouse burn.

Later as we took stock, it was clear that most of the demons had been killed; a few had escaped but not very many. Our losses were heavy enough as well: five dead and as many again hurt, including Daiki. Kenji got busy binding up wounds and offering prayers to the dead. I cleaned my sword but otherwise tried not to move any more than I could help. There was little that I claimed as mine that was not battered, bruised, or aching.

Daiki sat down on an empty cask by the demon chieftain’s body. He was still a little shaky, but thanks to Kenji’s expert care the arrows had been removed and the wounds were no longer bleeding. We would likely both live, though we might not be proud of that fact for a few days.

“I feel I’ve let my ancestor down,” he said. “It was our family’s greatest treasure. It’s gone.”

“Your family’s greatest treasure is your reputation and honor. Both of which you have defended here today. The loss of Sanji’s Demon is unfortunate, but that is all.”

He sighed. “Yet there is this empty place in our shrine now. I will always be reminded of my failure.”

“Then perhaps it is time for a new heirloom.” I nodded at the stiffening body of the demon chieftain. “You can start with that troublesome fellow. I think it would be in your descendants’ best interests to remember him and what he almost accomplished. In case they ever feel the urge to underestimate their enemies.”

Daiki smiled then, faintly. “Perhaps you are right...who’s that there?”

A rather odd procession was making its way up the trail and through the shattered gates of the demon fortress. Abbot Hideo, in a palanquin borne by two young monks and flanked by two others, was being escorted in by the *bushi* we’d assigned to guard the path.

I didn’t let Daiki see me smile. *At last, the final lines of this poem are written*

The abbot surveyed the carnage in obvious bewilderment. Daiki bowed. “My lord abbot. You’re a bit off the pilgrim trail, are you not?”

“Well, I...what’s happened here?”

“This was a demon stronghold,” I said. “With the aid of the governor, Master Daiki has dealt with it in appropriate fashion. May we ask what brings you to this place?”

The abbot then told at least part of the truth. I'm not sure if he meant to or if it was just impossible to think of a plausible lie with such little warning. "Well...I received a messenger who said that he had information embarrassing to the Sago Clan. Naturally, I played along to discover who the miscreant was."

"Naturally," I said. "Then it was doubly fortunate for you that Master Daiki got here first, else you would have walked right into this demon's nest. In addition to saving my own life today, he saved yours as well."

"Well then," the abbot said, looking uncomfortable. "Umm...thank you?"

"You're welcome," Daiki said, then he turned to me. "You think the demon messenger meant the fact that my heirloom was stolen out from under my very nose? Did the chieftain need someone to gloat to, and chose Abbot Hideo?"

I smiled. "Yes, my lord. I'm sure that's what the demon meant."

* * *

Kenji managed to hold his tongue for the several days it took us to recover and begin our journey back to the Capital along the Hokuriku road.

"Such a pity," he said, "that the demons burned the storehouse before we could recover Master Daiki's property."

"Such a pity," I agreed.

He went on. “Though I am curious as to how it was managed. You were in there for several moments. The others didn’t see, but I did. The fire,” he said pointedly, “began on the inside.”

I nodded. “The demons didn’t set the fire, Kenji-san. I did.”

Kenji’s mouth opened, then slowly closed again. For a moment or two he just stared at me as we walked. “You know,” he said finally, “I didn’t really expect you to admit it.”

“I am not responsible for your expectations, Kenji-san,” I said.

“But why? Why did you destroy Sanji’s demon?”

“There was no demon. It was a fake.”

Kenji just blinked. “You are joking.”

“I am quite serious. A first-class fake, I grant you. Very skillfully done by a master artisan. Only a close examination would reveal the deception, but Sanji’s demon was no more than a clever arrangement of boar’s tusks, leather, and dyed horsehair.”

“No wonder he wanted it back so badly,” Kenji said thoughtfully.

“To the contrary—Master Daiki wanted it back because it was his family’s sacred treasure,” I said.

Kenji frowned. “You mean he doesn’t know?”

“Of course he doesn’t know. It’s only when the heirloom’s clothing is removed that the stitching becomes visible, and no one had touched those robes for centuries. I doubt the demon chieftain himself knew until after the theft. Before that, it was just a clever ruse to embarrass the Sago family. After he discovered the deception, well, Sanji’s demon potentially became so much more. That’s why the demon chieftain didn’t abandon his deception once the theft was accomplished. He had to wait for the Sago family’s utter destruction, and witness his triumph firsthand. As demons go, this one had pride.”

Kenji understood then. “If this information had become known—”

“It would have been the end of the Sago clan as demon-quellers. That’s why Abbot Hideo had been summoned to the mountain fortress. I have no doubt the *oni* chieftain intended to turn the fake over to the abbot and let the monks of Hino Temple do his dirty work for him.”

“You still haven’t answered my question. Why did you destroy the fake demon?”

I shrugged. “To protect my patron, of course. What other reason could there be?”

“Anyone else might believe that, Yamada-san,” Kenji said. “I know you too well.”

“You met Master Daiki,” I said. “You saw what he was and what his family has accomplished. Perhaps his ancestor was not the demon-slayer that he was reputed to be. Perhaps the real demon fell to a god of disease or simply left for a new place to terrorize. Perhaps Sanji, like his demon, was a fake and a fraud. But the clan he founded most definitely is not. That is what I chose to protect.”

“A lie,” Kenji said.

“No, the truth,” I demurred.

“That’s a contradiction, Lord Yamada.”

I shook my head. “Facts are whatever facts may be,” I said. “But truth? That is something we humans create, Kenji-san, and it belongs to us.”

Kenji just sighed. “Buddha be merciful.”

I nodded in agreement. “Someone needs to be.”

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Richard Parks lives in Mississippi with his wife and a varying number of cats. He collects Japanese woodblock prints but otherwise has no hobbies as he is, sadly, temporally

challenged. His fiction has appeared in Asimov's SF, Realms of Fantasy, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Fantasy Magazine, Weird Tales, and numerous anthologies including Year's Best Fantasy and Fantasy: The Best of the Year. His Lord Yamada story "The Mansion of Bones" appeared in BCS #19 and was one of Locus reviewer Lois Tilton's Top Ten Fantasy Stories of 2009. His third story collection, On the Banks of the River of Heaven, is due out from Prime Books in 2010.

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THE LEAFSMITH IN LOVE

by K.J. Kabza

The first thing Jesper noticed was her parasol, twirling like a ghostly pinwheel beyond the branches and webs. He was instantly intrigued. On previous occasions, when watching all the visiting women on the Red Path, he had often told himself, *If I were a Lady with a lacy parasol, I would be entranced by the decorative absurdity of it and play with it constantly, not stand there dumbly beneath it like a worm beneath a mushroom.*

Compelled by its beckoning clockwise motion, he wove between the trees and smithing with the skill of a hart. In minutes he was behind her, three paces from the edge of the pink gravel clearing. The bench opposite her was empty, and she was conversing with herself in a quite lively manner.

“Indeed,” she was saying aloud, “but I do not know their names. All I know is that I have truly never seen so queer a place in all my life. We could simply name them ourselves, you know.” The parasol slowed, paused, and began to thoughtfully spin in the other direction. “Oh certainly not! They would never come up with something suitable.” She laughed. “Zuhanna,

from whose head do you pull such ideas? They don't care a bit. It's clearly too splendid for them to understand anyway. If they would only open their eyes and look around—and around and around and around and around...!" With this, she tossed down the parasol, hopped up from the bench, held out her arms, and spun.

Jesper's heart quickened. Lady Zuhanna's eyes were closed in overflowing joy, her palms upturned to the sweet spring air, her quick feet pirouetting her in a rhythm that was almost a dance, savoring this one silly, spontaneous moment.

And as he watched her, Jesper, the Master Leafsmith of Holdt Castle, finally fell in love.

Around them, the Arboretum sang and rustled and clicked. Jesper's heart rose up, past the gleaming webs, the thousands of clockwork creatures on uncountable hybrid branches, the interlocking cogs nestled in the forest's crown. A flock of real birds rushed overhead, and a score of ticking dragonflies took flight; they settled around her blooming petticoats in a ring, baffled by the spinning laughter in their midst.

She tripped and fell.

Jesper rushed to her side and the dragonflies scattered. He knelt on the crushed feldspar and extended his elbow. "My Lady!"

Her face was red. Her fine hand settled on his arm, and she looked up at him in sheepish acknowledgment. A few of her

hairpins had come loose, and the careful fresco of braids coiled about her head had become paunchy and lopsided.

Oh—she was unspeakably lovely.

They stood. “Thank you, kind sir,” she said bashfully. “I’m sorry. I’m so clumsy, and I get so carried away.”

“Not at all. Are you injured?”

“No.” She did not remove her hand from his. She looked down and smoothed her ruffled frock with the other. “I’m afraid I cannot say the same for this silly old thing.”

“I am sorry.”

“I am so foolish. Have you seen where I placed my parasol?”

“It’s lovely. I mean, yes, it is over here.”

“Thank you.” She pulled away to fetch it, and the rhythm of Jesper’s heartbeat quickened, like that of a pendulum set too short. She picked up her parasol and blew on it, ineffectually, unable to disturb the pink dust or hundreds of tiny metal springs the smithing invariably shed. “I don’t believe we have met?”

Jesper raised a reverent hand to his top hat. “Jesper. Jesper Leafsmith.”

“A Leafsmith! O marvelous, delightful!” She held up her battered parasol and swiveled toward him. “You help keep this place, then?”

Jesper smiled and his body warmed. “My Lady, I have built this place.”

Her mouth opened. She said nothing, then mutely looked about her.

A proud flush crept over the entirety of Jesper’s skin. “I started with a section of ordinary Arboretum, a space near an abandoned ore mine. The webs you see, along with the occasional plant made wholly of smithing, are maintained with Animus distillate and Elementallic cleverness. I am no Elementalor myself, so the machines that grow themselves along with the wood are not wholly my province. But all the accompanying smithlife is mine.”

She took a step closer to him, her eyes shining. “Papa gave me a magnificun scope one St. Adelayde’s Day, when I was twelve years. I loved that scope. I’d take it to Papa’s swamp, and I would spend hours watching all the wiggly, squiggly things in a drop of water. Tell me, what is it like? To see that way always?”

Jesper felt a sweat prickle along his covered scalp and under his arms. She was lauding him with her eyes. “It is not always. Only when I wish.”

She took another step closer. “I have been wondering, Leafsmith. How do you make a clockwork ladybug? I would love to know. I am so intrigued.”

His knees begged him to sit down, but his feet were somehow affixed to the feldspar. “There are many ways. In brief, I take a living ladybug, look deep into it, and replicate the gross moving parts in tiny brass. I use a special branch of mathematica to calculate where to place static runes upon the moving clockwork, to channel the distant energy that powers it. But I have many machines to aid me, including a Sight Translationer.”

“A Sight Translationer?!”

“It is a rare mechanism. It requires Fractional distillate, which few alchemists are skilled enough to reduce.”

“Fractional distillate! Listen to you talk! There is so much about magics I do not know, and I have only three days to secretly learn it all, before we leave for home. Papa will only let me study Elementics back in South Tairee, and I am only any good with Earth.” She took another step closer; she had reached him now. Her parasol began to spin again, and her face warmed and opened like a sunflower. “So you must hurry and tell me absolutely everything you know.”

“I...”

“Shall we sit? These benches are so queer, with their little jointed feet. Are they able to walk about? That is awfully clever. Could we ride an ambling bench as we talk?”

“You may not, I dare say,” interrupted a voice, and Jesper’s body tightened.

Princess Kanna, clothed in a gown more intricately executed than any of her interpersonal machinations, stepped off the Red Path and into the gravel clearing. “You’re conversing with Jesper, sweet coz. Our dear Leafsmith has a mechanical heart, and it holds less feeling than a stone.” She laughed. The over-sweetness of the sound made Jesper’s teeth ache. “He only sits and visits with his Woodtinkers, in his cottage in the heart of the wood, which no courtesan is invited to see.”

Lady Zuhanna’s spinning parasol stilled, and a heavy veil of adult seriousness dropped over her face. “I beg your pardon, Leafsmith. I should not have been so nosy. Excuse me for being so forward.”

Jesper reached toward her. “Please—”

The Princess strolled forward and patted Jesper’s arm. “No need to pretend at manners, Leafsmith.” She waved her hand at Lady Zuhanna. “And you, shoo! Your Papa is looking for you. I’d stay down in the library as he says. You’ll get nowhere filling your head with butterflies and steam-powered rabbits.”

She curtsied. “Yes, coz. Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

Jesper watched her trod away over the Red Path, her body held stiffly, looking straight ahead at nothing, like any world-weary Lady at court.

For this, Jesper hated the Princess more than ever.

As soon as Lady Zuhanna had vanished from sight, the Princess slid close to him, running her palm up the length of his arm. Her breath in his ear sickened, like too much honey. “What is this I see, Leafsmith? You are a man after all? Or are you just play-acting? She is a plain, empty-headed fool. And so are you, for thinking you can freely insult your Princess by admiring her so.”

“Perhaps we two fools would make a good match, then.”

Princess Kanna hissed. She stood on her toes and forcefully pressed her ripe body into his, hugging his arm with her softness. “What madness do you breed on your lonesome in that secret woodland hut? All the men of this castle would slaughter their mothers, and rightly so, for but a single one of my smiles—all but you. You wound me, Leafsmith. All this time you’ve been saving your arrogant love, and you finally fall for—her?”

“I beg your pardon.” Jesper gracefully stepped away. “I seem to have somehow stood too close.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I do not appreciate being mocked.”

“No-one does, Princess.”

Princess Kanna put her hands on her hips and pertly swung them just so, a motion that made Gentlemen faint yet always left Jesper cold. “I deserve to be mocked least of all. You may not have her, Leafsmith, not as long as you dare to think her lovelier.”

“It is not wise to fall for me,” said Jesper gravely, feigning he had misinterpreted her jealousy. “Your father would never approve. You are the heir and I but a working craftsman, and twice your age besides.”

She bared her teeth. “Tell me I am the more beautiful!”

Jesper touched his hat. “We must not converse about such things. The court will talk. Good morning, Princess.”

She stamped her foot. “I order you to tell me!”

Jesper touched a solemn finger to his lips and slipped back into the trees where she could not follow.

He fled to his hidden cottage, his poor human heart throbbing with fear and desire. He would die before saying so, but in his secret and ungentlemanly opinion, the Princess was as desirable as a Witch-rash in a personal place. In one of his secret and ungentlemanly notebooks, he in fact cultivated a wicked collection of verse on the subject. He thought of writing some now, to strengthen his resolve, but what he truly wanted to do surprised him.

He wanted to make a ringauble, as a gift for her so enchanting cousin.

And why not? It might enrage the Princess dreadfully.

Whistling the preemptory Build, Jesper entered his adjacent greenhouse and began to search for something suitable to start with.

* * *

The ringauble was completed by sundown—a simple pot containing the sleeping bulb of a flower nestled in smithing soil. Lady Zuhanna's three-day visit did not give Jesper much time, but he knew that the Princess was watching, so he must wait to present it to her.

The next afternoon, during Princess Kanna's daily one-of-the-clock nap, Jesper readied a cloth sack and trotted to the southeast wing of the castle, where the Perennial Tower stood. He eschewed the locked door at its base, and like a love-struck boy, instead hid surreptitiously in the topiary.

He glanced about the deserted shrubbery, then retrieved a steam-powered condor from the sack and roused it. As the condor sputtered and clanked, Jesper placed a Scrygonfly and the lip of the ringauble pot in its talons, then issued his instructions in a sub-audible mumble. The condor flew up to the third-floor balcony and correctly placed the ringauble on a pedestal, but misheard Jesper otherwise and placed the

Scrygonfly on the edge of the roof without winding it first. Close enough—Jesper bolted from the bushes and fled.

He waited in his hidden cottage. He pretended to work on the blueprints for a hydroelectric mangrove, refining the nanodynamos in the xylem, but he did little other than stare at the lines. No-one else could make a ringauble quite like this, and when she saw it, she'd know who sent it.

When he felt the prickling behind his eyes, he attuned his sight so fast to the scene observed by the Scrygonfly's ommatidia that he saw nothing but gray static at first. Then, from the roof, he was watching the Princess' sweet cousin step out onto the balcony.

She bent to stroke a morning glory blossom, then noticed the ringauble. "Oh!"

Jesper's breathing quickened. She stepped to the pedestal and set her hands upon the ringauble's terra-cotta pot, her dark eyes dancing in curiosity.

The potting soil, a bricolage of microscopic gears watered with Animus distillate, parted with a whisper of clicks to reveal a steel shoot. Before her eyes, the invaginated tube grew and thickened and sprouted brass self-constructing leaves, and in twenty seconds, the top of the stalk swelled and darkened. Her mouth parted, as if she were burning to ask it a question.

The bud swelled to the size of a man's fist, then abruptly opened to reveal spiraling rows of stained glass petals, firing microscopic pistons, and droplets of molten gold dew.

She squealed.

"What on earth are you on about now?" Princess Kanna stalked out onto the balcony. "*What, Zuhanna?*"

"Oh! Look, look!"

The Princess pushed her aside and snatched up the pot. "This frivolous bauble? Pah. It's a trifle. It's presented to all our guests."

Lady Zuhanna reached out to it, mesmerized, and touched the edge of a brass leaf.

The music box in the flower's bulb tinkled to life at the contact, and the petals trembled as the ringable chimed the bars of a love ballad.

Lady Zuhanna's eyes went wide, and Princess Kanna let out a haughty laugh. "Oh, I see what's happening here. It's that foolish Leafsmith."

Lady Zuhanna, bewildered, pulled back her hand. "Foolish?"

"Oh yes." The Princess looked down at the smithing in her hands, the power of Jesper's love harnessed and turned into song by the runes on the terra-cotta. She knowingly shook her head. "Our Leafsmith has been secretly admiring me for years.

I suppose, if you are a simple craftsman, seeing a beautiful princess strolling about every day in your own backyard is too much. He has been making wanton eyes at me since I was thirteen years.”

Jesper gaped. That lying, miserable harpy!

Lady Zuhanna nodded, confused and crestfallen.

“He knew I’d come out here with you this afternoon,” the Princess continued, “because he knows our most honored Ladies always stay in the Perennial Tower’s Silver Suite. And besides which, he has these little mechanical insects that he sends to follow me about and scry on my comings and goings. I don’t know whether to feel amusement or pity.”

“He... he loves you?”

“Oh yes,” sighed Princess Kanna, in a tone as plaintive as it was infuriating. She indifferently set the pot, still chiming its love, upon a railing. “He gives these things to visitors all the time, but he only gives the ones that sing to me. This is the third this week. Though he’s usually not so insolent as to present them to me in front of other people. I suppose you must matter little to him.”

Lady Zuhanna bit her lip and nodded.

Beyond the ommatidia, the Princess yawned and went inside. Lady Zuhanna sadly touched the ringauble once more; it fell silent, and she slipped inside after a disappointed sigh.

The scene dissolved as Jesper's anger overwhelmed his focus. So the Princess would play this way, would she?

You may be quick on your feet, Princess Kanna, but you forget—my very profession is in miracles and engineered delicacy.

And my devices are far more clever.

* * *

Jesper made himself wait another precious day. Around ten of the clock the next morning, he walked the Silver Path to Arachnotropolis, where Kellin, Master Woodtinker, was at work. Kellin was frowning under his heavy beard and winding, by hand, a large number of spiders whose runes had become too worn to do any tapping. He didn't even look up as Jesper approached. "Master Fluffbrains. Come to lend me a hand today? Or are you still stuck on that mangrove?"

"Still stuck."

"Frivolity in a sea of frivolities." Kellin replaced the freshly ticking spider in its web, where it scurried about and rearranged the strands of metal to its ineffable liking. Kellin plucked a stilled body from another web nearby. "We can't even use a hydroelectric mangrove, you know. Rithick told me the drop in the river isn't great enough."

"A sapling, perhaps."

"No matter. What's news?"

Jesper cleared his throat. “The visiting King Ethin of Snow-on-High has asked that I give his daughter a lesson.”

Kellin stopped breathing for a moment so he could accurately insert his microkey. He wound the spider by rubbing his fingertips together a bare sixteenth of an inch. “The Lady Zuhanna? Poor man. At least she’s not destined for his throne. No amount of education, even if it culminates at Holdt castle, is going to get *her* head out of the clouds.”

“Yes, well, he seems to think it will do her good.” Jesper watched Kellin replace the spider and select another. “He asked that she receive an interdisciplinary lesson in Earth-Metal Elementics.”

“And you can’t do Elementics,” finished Kellin with a sigh. “Passing the knife, are we? That’s fine, it’ll get me out of this tedium.”

“Can you be at the seventh joint at one-thirty of the clock?”

Kellin set the wound spider back in its web with a grunt of assent. “Certainly.” He plucked another from an orb web. “Pardon me for not touching farewell, but if I drop this microkey, it’ll take an hour to spin one out again. Good morning, Jesper.”

Jesper touched his top hat. “Good morning, Kellin.”

Next, Jesper walked the Red Path until he came across an idle page boy, who was holding a stone to his ear and listening

to it tick. Jesper asked him to tell the visiting Lady Zuhanna at exactly one-ten of the clock that she would be late for her lesson at the seventh joint on the White Path if she did not hurry.

He then set a Scrygonfly at the seventh joint, and worst of all, tried to occupy himself until the timekeeping oak could thrum half-past one. When it did, he was already in position, within an iron Banyan tree seventy paces distant. At the sound of the oak, he attuned his sight to the distant scene.

Two long minutes later, the White Path crackled with the sound of running feet. Lady Zuhanna, out of breath, missing her hat, and one button at her neck undone, skidded off the path and stumbled onto the bare dirt. “Oh my! Good sir, excuse me, can you tell me where the seventh joint is?”

Kellin, who had been sitting on an ornamental rock, stood up and dusted off his palms. “Lady Zuhanna. Good afternoon.” He touched his top hat, a battered thing with a distinct dent in the middle. “My name is Kellin Woodtinker, and I have been told to give you your lesson.”

Lady Zuhanna dug in her clutch for a fan. She could not find one, gave up, and fanned herself with the clutch instead. A few strands of hair were stuck to her forehead, and Jesper yearned to carefully brush them back with his fingertips. “Yes,

about that. I seem to have forgotten I had something scheduled. Excuse me, I think I am late.”

“Only slightly. And if you’ve never walked the White Path, finding your way can be confusing.”

“Could you please remind me what I am here for?”

“Your lesson on Elementic Earth-Metal dynamics.”

Lady Zuhanna straightened and redoubled her clumsy fanning. “Oh! I thought I wasn’t—well—Papa must have—well! Splendid! Yes, oh yes, please do!”

Kellin nodded and, in his blunt way, promptly began. “This patch of bare ground, of which there are fifty in the Arboretum, is what we call a joint, or a place where the currents of elements cross. Common natural examples would be a swamp, for an Earth-Water joint, or in the center of a lake, for Water-Air.”

“Excuse me, have you seen my clutch?”

“Uh.... Lady, you are—”

“Oh. Yes. Here it is, obviously. I’m sorry, do continue.”

Kellin pointed at the bare earth. “The numbered joints in the Arboretum refer to the places where our subterranean network of living metal comes together in large bundles, like a sort of root or pipe, and nears the surface. It’s easier to get to this way; we can write runes in the dirt, speak the Power Tongue with no leaves to obscure our words, etc.”

Jesper had meant to let Kellin go on for several minutes, but he could make himself wait no longer. He drew a breath, stepped from behind the smithing, and approached the White Path. He rehearsed in his head. *Oh, Lady Zuhanna, I thought you were studying in the library. Kellin, something's come up—I'll take over now. No, you can go on, the lesson can cover something else. Well you see, my Lady, I wanted it to be a surprise. That's why nobody else needed to know we were meeting like this. Of course it's all perfectly innocent—I am just giving you a lesson.*

“First,” said Kellin, beyond the Scrygonfly’s transmitting eyes, “I’ll show you how to feel where the metal comes up through the earth. With a little practice, you don’t even need to feel; you can just sense. Anybody can do it, even those who don’t have the instinct for Elementics. We can find our joints this way in the dark, or any place where we have lots of webs growing up out of the ground with the trees.” Kellin knelt in the dust. “Place your palms on the ground... here.”

Jesper hastened his steps. He pushed through some loosened copper vetch and stepped onto the White Path. He prepared for the most casual near-sprint of his life, but before he could even begin, he was hamstrung by a frightened cry behind him.

Jesper whirled. Right at his back, feet clacking on the limestone, was one of his steam-powered wolves. But instead of ambling across the gravel and back into the forest, it went utterly mad, hopping forward and back, tail pinwheeling like a riled attack dog's. It jumped forward, teeth bared; the air rent with a scream and the ugly sound of ripping fabric; the wolf danced away with a mangled petticoat in its gleaming jaws, only to drop it and lunge back in.

Scrygonfly forgotten, Jesper lunged after it, legs firing like pistons and hands out and ready for *The Touch*. The Words were loaded on the tip of his tongue when, five steps from the unknown Lady, the wolf rocked back and let out its thin, piping artificial howl. Jesper threw himself at the smithing, his hat flying off, his palm connecting with its burning head, speaking the Words and feeling the beast grow slack beneath him, but nine more of the things, equally crazed, burst onto the path from the trees.

Something wet rained onto him, and he prayed it was only leaked oil.

He stood and lunged again at the nearest wolf. It snorted steam and danced away, mocking him with its lolling, multijointed tongue. Jesper used the Words to speak a lasso and snare its uncrushable neck. It fell, yelping; he pulled it

towards him, its steel body squealing across the limestone, before palming its head and speaking it silent.

“Oh, you brute, you horrid, horrid brute!”

Jesper’s anxiety flared up into full, burning horror. The maddened wolves had set themselves on none other than Princess Kanna, who was definitely not taking her customary afternoon nap, but was instead engaged in beating off her indestructible attackers with a small handbag.

She was unharmed, but her fine gown had been ripped to scandalizing shreds.

Jesper shoved into the thick of them, caring not a damn if they snapped at him and only thinking to cover the Princess’ shame. He tore off his tail coat and flung it over her. “Your Highness!”

And as suddenly as they had descended, the wolves bolted and vanished with a squeal and a hiss of steam.

Reddened and panting, the Princess curled up and pulled Jesper’s coat around her, the embroidered tails dragging in the dust. It still wasn’t enough. Under the remains of her gown, wholly half of her legs lay naked to the air. Face burning, he stammered something, stripped off his waistcoat, cringed and tried to further cover her. She feebly protested. He insisted.

He heard the sound of running feet, and a strong masculine voice crying, “Hallo!”

Jesper gasped, had no time to think, and flung himself over Princess Kanna to prevent anyone from seeing her exposed body.

Kellin, with Lady Zuhanna in tow, rounded a corner of the White Path. In a sudden hot moment, Jesper realized what they were seeing: a nearly-nude Princess, panting and flush, gown in savage ruins, with Jesper undressed, hatless, and pressing his body atop hers.

Lady Zuhanna's hands flew to her mouth.

"This is not as you think!" Jesper cried.

Lady Zuhanna turned and ran.

Jesper cursed, shouted, railed in unnamed tongues as Kellin rushed forward and stripped off his own tail coat. Jesper's ravings were joined by Kellin's cruel tongue-lashing: "Have you gone mad? What in Heaven's name are you trying to do? You could be executed for such indecency!"

Nearly in tears, the Princess interrupted. Breathless explanations were exchanged. Others in the Arboretum, alarmed by the cries, soon arrived on the scene. Gentlemen fell over themselves to help cover the Princess. Page boys were sent for another gown. Rumors ignited and went flying. And to the tittering onlookers, the smug, secret smile Princess Kanna gave Jesper before being led away was all the clarification they needed.

It cleared up some things for Jesper, too, and not at all in a way he would have liked.

Some hours later, after a forest-wide search, Jesper had his employees bring him all of his wolves for a thorough examination. Jesper inspected them in his greenhouse, alone. He'd tell the King that there had been a flaw in the engravings, causing the first wolf to both behave like the pack leader and persuade the others to engage in rough play with the wrong species.

He'd tell no-one, however, that alchemical analysis uncovered traces of six kinds of distillate—Summon, Wolf, Conglomerate, Mind-Read, Denude, and Goal-Disperse—and as Princess Kanna loved to boast, the only people with free access to distillate of any kind were those in the Royal House. But even if Jesper did tell someone, who would want to believe? The rumor of a forbidden daylight rendezvous was too outrageous to resist.

Jesper wrapped his lonely arms around a wolf and laid his head down upon its cool body. Lady Zuhanna would never consent to being courted now.

* * *

Jesper locked himself in his cottage and admitted no-one. His windows stayed dark and silent into the deepening evening

and throughout the clicking night. The next morning, it was the same.

He did not eat or sleep. Perhaps he worked, but it was better to call it mourning: he designed ringables, over and over, each more ostentatious and impossible than the last. He wrote her name in the Power Tongue, and spoke it, so she would feel an anxious longing pull at her soul, without knowing why. It was the best he could do.

Two hours past sundown, on Lady Zuhanna's last night at Holdt Castle, Jesper realized that this was not so.

He could do better. He was a Master Leafsmith, and in love, and at least one of these things was unstoppable.

* * *

The seeds were easy—in addition to those newly made, Jesper already had thousands, and three quick cycles in the Von Neumann Apparatus could multiply any of his stocks by nearly a hundred-fold. Stealing a ten-gallon barrel of Animus distillate should have been far more troublesome, but the door to the Royal Storeroom was left unguarded, and the tediously frequent repetitions of Princess Kanna's name in the logbook hinted at why. The locked Storeroom door would've stymied most thieves, of course, but the lock's secret inner workings were no match for Jesper's Leafsmith sight and skill. With a

few calculations and runes scratched into its brass plate, the lock opened of its own volition.

Once equipped, Jesper took the long way around to the Perennial Tower, his cartload of supplies tip-toeing behind. He stopped at the base of the structure, directly over a lone thread of submerged metal webbing. The empty night around him sung with crickets and sleepless clockwork. Though torches flickered on distant parapets, the nearby tower was dark. She would be sleeping.

A pity—she would have loved to see this.

Jesper beckoned to his cart. It stepped forward, and from it Jesper plucked a wind-up Ravenous. He set the greedy creature on the ground, and once it had eaten away the grass along with a good-sized hole in the soil, he locked its jaws and returned it to the cart. Then he lifted his nine-pound sack of indehiscent mechanacia seeds over the hole and poured.

He wrote the necessary containment runes in the freshly bared dirt.

Finally, Jesper positioned the cart above the hole and opened the tap on the distillate drum. In the Power Tongue, he said, “Grow.”

The seeds needed no urging. The distillate hit, the first roots plunged down, the web line was touched, and all Heaven and Hell broke free. The dirt blew apart with the force of it;

clacking trees under snapping leaves under tinkling loads of flowers rose up to the stars in a plume of percussive, frenzied song. Glass petals and iron twigs rained down. Living crickets fled. Jesper stumbled back and fell right on his rear, mouth momentarily unable to close, wondering if ten entire gallons had been strictly necessary.

A light blazed in her room.

A bronze leaf the size of a mixing bowl crashed to the earth by his feet; he scooped it up as he stood and placed it over his top hat as a helmet. Before his nerves could fail him, he grasped a still-growing branch and climbed.

He dodged rusted thorns, jagged edges of peeling bark, poison ivy covered in crushed glass. His hands grew black with oil; his soles grew scratched by the rough steel. The column of squealing life kept growing, reaching out vines to the Perennial Tower and anchoring them into the mortar, covering the windows and beyond with impenetrable brass clusters of fleur-de-lis.

Jesper reached the open window to her bedroom, hesitating, but even as he watched, a branch grew straight inside. He climbed along it and disembarked. The interior was bright with lamps. The bedclothes were pushed aside in a hasty awakening, though a cotton dressing gown was tossed over a

nearby chaise lounge. The wardrobe door was cracked, and the comb from the dressing table had been knocked to the floor.

The room was empty.

“Lady Zuhanna?”

Jesper turned in a baffled circle. He wandered through an open doorway into a sitting room, untouched and immaculate. Other than her cousin, it seemed she’d had no visitors. “Lady Zuhanna?”

Jesper doubled back and entered the washroom. The signs of her were everywhere—balled-up towel on the floor, discarded stockings draped over a changing screen, hairpins scattered everywhere like Arboretum springs—but she was nowhere near. He went again to the sitting room and through a second doorway into an antechamber. The cuckoo clock read past midnight. Jesper did not understand.

He stepped out onto the balcony off the sitting room, but the ringauble was gone.

He placed his blackened hands on the railing and looked down. The distillate drum had emptied; the cart had skittered back, out of self-preservation. The tower of clicking, interlocking steel was taller than the one he stood in, wobbling perilously in the favonian breeze.

Useless.

Jesper pulled off his leaf helmet, set it carefully upon the railing, and descended the tower via the inside stone staircase. Outside, he paused by his soaring marvel, watching it whirl and clack and expertly go nowhere.

The door behind him in the Perennial Tower opened, and a dozen castle guards came charging out. “Halt!”

Jesper turned to the forest and bolted, cursing his careless mooning, but perhaps he should have saved his breath for running. A pair of guards easily overtook him, and he went down, violently, onto the grass. They chained his wrists and hauled him to his feet. The rest caught up, and a gloved hand grabbed his jaw and forcefully raised his chin to let its owner get a look at his face.

“...Is that... Master Leafsmith?”

“How could you—did *you*—”

“What in Heaven’s holy name—”

They dragged him back to the Perennial Tower. Jesper hung his head. In the nearing castle, lights blazed up, and more guards stampeded closer. He was hit with a wave of polished armor and astonished inquiry, and the queries rose into an angry din of indistinct demands. There was no fighting against it. Jesper did not bother. By now, he had no honor left to defend.

The crowd around him suddenly quieted. Heads rose and turned, and the guards obediently pulled apart, like the sea at the nose of some great Leviathan. “I don’t give a care that my rooms are closer, next time, you fetch Father! Now where is the sniveling rat that has disturbed my rest?”

The last chagrined guard stepped aside. Princess Kanna, clad in a satin dressing gown, shoved past him. Her gaze fell on Jesper. Wrathful judgment blazed up in her eyes.

His idea, and only way out, made his crippled pride breathe its last. His heart numb with humiliation, he knelt in the wet grass at her feet. He removed his top hat and bent over until his forehead touched her tiger-skin slippers. “My sweet angel.”

The wrath on her face hesitated. “I... beg your pardon?”

Jesper let his tears fall into the soft fur, though they were not for the Princess; oh, not at all. “My sweet angel. My Princess. I beg you, forgive me. I have made an arrant fool of myself this night. I could hold back no more. I have been waiting too many long and lonely years, with too lonely and heavy a heart to keep silent for even one more day.”

“Keep silent?”

He lifted his head to be better heard over the uncomfortable shuffle of booted feet. The false confession was filth on his tongue. “My angel, have mercy. I stilled those

wolves for you on the White Path, but had Hell itself besmirched your innocence, I would have done the same. Has my steady, cold demeanor not told all? I love you. I love you, and I cannot have you. So I try, endlessly, to pretend. But after yesterday, when I thought I'd lose you to my own faulty lupine smithing... to my own mistakes....”

Her uncertainty melted, and her eyes opened wide in enlightened pleasure. “You... you try to pretend?”

The guards averted their eyes, shifted their weight, ashamed by his naked emotion. A few looked pained and nodded in knowing sympathy. Jesper could only plunge in deeper. “Of course! O Princess, have you never seen a looking glass? How can you bear your own beauty and power? The light of you consumes me. Your perfection is what I aspire to each time I sit before my drawing board. The whole of my Arboretum, sweet one, which so rightly bores you, is merely my feeble attempt to emulate... you.”

Princess Kanna grinned. She glanced down to retie the belt on her dressing gown, taking her time to fuss with the knot. “I thought so. I always knew there was something funny about you, Leafsmith. Did you really think you could fool me for much longer?”

“I did.”

She gestured in dismissal at the newly grown steel. “And this?”

“The strange consequences of my vanity. I have hid this thing for too dangerously long, and something ugly came over me. I planted this monstrosity, and I was going to ascend it and cut through the Perennial Tower to your rooms, but looking up at it, I realized what foolhardy thing I’d done, and I lost my nerve.”

The Princess nodded and combed her hair back with her fingers. “And my dumpy, thick-headed cousin?”

Jesper closed his eyes in pain, and the tears poured. “Only my misguided attempts to make you jealous, my angel.”

Princess Kanna laughed. “Well, I certainly hoped you’ve learned your lesson, Leafsmith.”

“That I am a fool?”

“And a rather pathetic one, at that. You are no different from any other man, after all. Guards, let him go. He did this out of love for me, which is laughable of course, but pitiable and understandable. Go to your wretched, hidden home, Leafsmith. Your shame, and what they will say about you in the halls of my castle, is satisfaction enough for me.” The guards removed the manacles and backed away. “You can clean up this frightful mess in the morning.”

Jesper nodded, not looking at her, and turned to go. He headed back towards the Arboretum and his lonely sanctuary, his cart following him at a respectful distance.

Once within the black embrace of the branches, he moved through the dark on the unnamed path. A handful of mechanical bats swooped by, the breeze from their silk wings icy on the last of his tears. From its place on the hill, the timekeeping oak rolled out a single great boom. Elsewhere, the Arboretum danced on, but the sounds felt rote and empty. These stones migrating across his path, those Nibblers mining a fallen tree for ingrown steel—this was not life. This was desperate, hollow artifice.

Jesper reached his cottage. A light he'd left burning shone through the slats in the shutters. He opened his door—there was no reason to ever lock it—and went inside.

He stepped in something that crunched.

“I am afraid that I have spilled quite a lot of your sugar,” said Lady Zuhanna.

Jesper's breath left him.

“I thought that I could use a cup of tea while I waited for you,” she explained, blushing while turning round to face him, “and that you mightn't mind since it would only be a few small tea leaves, but I couldn't find any tea leaves at all in your entire kitchen, and the last place I decided to look was behind the

sugar because at home that's where Ethy keeps them, and I thought perhaps you might too. But then I knocked it over somehow, and then those things came from somewhere, and now the sugar's crawling with them. Are they ants, or something mechanical? And where do you keep your broom? I've looked all over for that too."

Jesper still could not speak, too overwhelmed by the simple fact of her standing in his secret sanctum. As if she belonged there....

Lady Zuhanna nervously fiddled with a lacy appurtenance on her gown. "I'm quite sorry. Oh! How rude of me, to have you just standing there like that. Won't you come in?"

Jesper groped behind him for the doorknob. He pulled the door shut and stepped in further, feet crunching over spilled sugar intermingled with fragile clockwork ants, but he didn't care a damn about the ants. He cared that she wasn't leaving, but rather, breathing faster at his approach. And he cared, most powerfully, that she leaned forward, oh so slightly, when he set his still-blackened hands on her arms.

She looked up at him, eyes wide as a frightened kitten's. "I couldn't sleep. I didn't even get undressed; I just lay in the dark and thought and thought and thought, about the things Kanna said that did not fit together well, and about what Papa said when I showed him the ringauble you made, and I heard a

frightful noise and lit a lamp and remembered what Goodman Kellin taught me—how to see where the steel comes up through the earth—and when I saw what was happening outside, I knew what it meant, and I ran down the stairs, and... and... but you weren't... and then....”

Jesper's hands began to shake, or perhaps it was her who shook. He licked his lips and tried to speak, but the very breath stuck in his throat, even as Lady Zuhanna's flush deepened.

“And—” The pitch of her voice rose as she spoke, growing ever more panicky and frightened. “I looked at the metal in the ground, and I said to myself if *I* were a Master Leafsmith and I lived over a web like this but in a secret place, I'd be where there was no metal at all, and I followed... that is... I wanted to... I mean, your cottage—” Her lower lip began to tremble. “I'm so sorry—I just thought—”

Jesper kissed her.

The clockwork ants carried away nearly half of the sugar before they were willing to let each other go.

* * *

“You know,” said Lady Zuhanna cheerfully, as they walked arm-in-arm on the Silver Path to the castle, “my dress is now absolutely covered in these oily black marks. Perhaps you should have washed your hands before expressing your

intentions. Oh, look! The sky is turning light. You can just see it through the... the... my word, what is that, exactly?"

"It's a hedge maze. The solution changes, depending on where the spiders decide to weave their webs. A gap in the bushes one day becomes an impassable wire net the next."

She squeezed his arm, urgently. "You must make one for Papa and I that is twice as large."

"My Lady, it will be my dearest pleasure."

She did not lessen her grip. "And you must make us a timekeeping redwood. And a whole pack of wolves, and coyotes, and—and a herd of unicorns, with diamond horns that grow themselves. I am certain you will devise a way. And! Papa and I have a frightfully unattractive swamp. Can you do something to our swamp?"

Jesper rubbed his chin thoughtfully to hide his smile. "Could your father have use for some hydroelectric mangroves?"

"I am certain he could." The light in her eyes rose more brightly than the awakening sun. "And, of course, you must teach me every single thing you know about every single thing you do. And all about hydra-eclectic mangroves, and nightingales made of gold, and ferns that water themselves. Or oil themselves. Whichever."

Jesper squeezed her hand, his joy too overwhelming to articulate.

They exited the Arboretum. Lady Zuhanna pulled away and set her hands on his arms, as if instructing a child. “Now. You must meet Papa and I in two hours, right at the castle gates, and—you said all you needed to bring was seeds and a number of papers?”

“My stock, blueprints, and notebooks. All else is replaceable.”

“And we shall sneak you away and go for a long voyage on a ship, and we shall arrive in South Tairee—” her eager grip tightened anew as she spoke—“and you shall build us the most fantastical Arboretum that the world will ever know, and my elder sister can do whatever she likes about ruling the country someday, but you and I shall live in the same little house at the center of your new strange and magical woods for ever and ever and ever.”

Jesper’s eyes clouded with tears.

“Won’t that be fun?”

He kissed her again.

When he could finally bring himself to pull away, he hastily wiped his face and said, “But there is one more thing that you must do before we leave Holdt.”

“There is?”

Jesper nodded. “Before you leave to meet me at the main castle gates... touch the column I planted last night outside your bedroom window.”

“Touch it?”

Jesper pointed. From where they stood, the Perennial Tower was visible; Jesper’s accompanying creation, swaying precariously, sparkled in the new light. “Yes. Don’t you remember what happened when you touched the first ringable I made you?”

Lady Zuhanna’s lips curved into an impish grin. “If I’m not there to touch it a second time, that stupendous tower will just sing on and on and on until they figure out how to dismantle it, won’t it?”

“Well....”

She laughed. “Oh, Kanna will *hate* that. It’s the sweetest gift you could give to me. Stars, but my cousin is a great crashing tedious bore, isn’t she?”

Jesper laughed as well. The tireless Arboretum sang at his back, the sun climbed higher, and the lawn came alive with servants, page boys, guards, and curious Gentlemen and Ladies who had heard the furtive midnight rumors and come to gawk at the audacious result. “She certainly is, and I am more than glad to leave her. In fact, I’m sure I will miss nothing at all about this place.”

“Not even your old Arboretum? It’s so lovely.”

Jesper made a dismissive gesture. “It is mechanical and empty, a mere echo of the living. But my new Arboretum—that one will finally have a soul at its heart.”

Lady Zuhanna cocked her head. “How does one cultivate such a soul?”

He gave her one last parting kiss. “That, my Lady, is what *you* will be teaching *me*.”

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KJ Kabza’s work has most recently appeared in Flash Fiction Online, Brain Harvest, and Every Day Fiction, with longer work upcoming in Bards and Sages Quarterly. He encourages you to visit www.kjkabza.com for links to more.

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COVER ART

“Chinese Steampunk Village,” by Raphael Lacoste



Raphael Lacoste has been an Art Director on Videogames and Cinematics for over seven years; he worked at Ubisoft on such licenses as Assassin’s Creed. He won a VES Award in 2006 for his work on Prince of Persia and the Two Thrones. He currently works as Senior Art Director for Electronic Arts Montreal. View his gallery at www.raphael-lacoste.com.

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