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THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS

by Nicole M. Taylor

Twelve

Around noon, when the sun came out again, Mona's children discarded their shoes and their socks, their trousers and their smudged shirts, and swam out towards the drowned ship.

The wreck had been there much longer than the children had been alive. It was slick with green algae in some places and rippled and scratchy where it had rusted. Mona's son liked to swim down and stare through the gaps in the twisted metal underneath the water. Mona's daughter liked to crawl up on to the top where part of the vast stern protruded. She stretched her little body out across the flattest part and let the sun dry her hair.

The briny smell, the dusky organic odor of all the things that live in deep water; it reminded the children of their mother. Mona's daughter licked her lips, tasted warm wet salt.

"Look," said her brother, bobbing easily on the surface. His bare legs looked green through the water. They bunched up under him, angular like a frog's. He pointed towards the shore.

The sheriff was there, along with Mrs. Barlow, who taught school. They stood in front of the blackened outlines of the lighthouse and pressed their flat hands over their eyes for shade. Mona's son swam towards his sister until he could cling to the metal sides of the wreck, his little palms spreading out whitely.

"They're gonna take us away," he said.

His sister slipped down, a light little splash beside him. "If they do," she said, "I will be with you." Her hand stretched out for his.

* * *

Three

Mona boiled the hacksaw three times. "Do you think that'll be enough?" She pulled the tool out of the pot of bubbling water with a pair of metal kitchen tongs.

Beatrice just stared at her, uncomprehending. "He's gonna die," she said slowly, as though Mona were dumb, as though she didn't know.

"Maybe," said Mona. She deposited the still-dripping hacksaw into a folded brown towel, gentle as a mother with a baby. "Get Mama's sedatives and the leftover needles," she told Beatrice, who shook her head and pressed her cold hands to the back of her neck as if holding herself down to the earth.

Mona had already crushed up the capsules that their mother had left behind and mixed them in with the thin broth she'd fed the soldier. He was unconscious now, breathing deep and steady. She supposed that was good.

Walking down that long hallway with the hacksaw pillowed in her arms, Mona felt clear and hollow and purposeful. Her hands seemed to move with no particular intelligence to guide them. It was like when she climbed up to fix the light: just a task; just another repair to be made.

In the room, in the dark, the soldier was sweating into her pillows and her sheets, which had never known a man's skin before. There was a damp impression all in the shape of his body. His forehead was warm to the touch, and the skin around his ruined leg was burning. The long bone below the knee was shattered; it protruded in hard white angles, stuck fast into little pools of yellow infection. The skin all around it was puffed and red, and when Mona touched it—even with just her fingertips—the soldier twitched and cried out and ground his teeth together.

Beatrice came with needles in her hands, vials in her pockets. "Should we... should we give him something? Whiskey?" She set the needles down on the sideboard with a nervous clatter.

“Nothing to give. Except that,” and Mona nodded her head towards the vial. It used to make her mother’s voice slow and tongue heavy. She would lie down on the sofa and look around the room in a lagging loop, her eyes somehow grown thick. Mona didn’t know if that would be sufficient for the soldier, or for the work she needed to do. But there hadn’t been a supply shipment in four months; if they had whiskey to give, it was a secret to Mona. She stared down at the last space of cool, pale skin just below the soldier’s knee. There, she thought. When a fissure or a crack appeared in a lens, one had to find the edges that were still whole; those were the only parts it was safe to touch. One had to remove the whole thing.

She rested the saw gently on his skin, at an angle like it was a block of wood. He did not move, his face did not change. She pressed down slightly until she could see the teeth of the hacksaw depress his clean skin. Wood did not give in that way; metal was never so pliant.

“I can’t do this,” said Beatrice, wrapping her tanned arms around herself, holding on to the ends of her long yellow hair. She looked very young and very vital, sunlight creeping uninvited into a shuttered room.

“You are not doing anything,” Mona pointed out. As usual, Beatrice turned everything into yet another chapter in the grand drama of her life. Beatrice screwed up her mouth at

Mona, as if she could read her uncharitable thoughts in her face. Maybe she could; Mona had never been a great one for subterfuge.

“I can’t watch this,” she said.

Mona had always hated the way Mama and Dad used to coddle Beatrice, pet her and let her play the baby. So she surprised herself a little when she said, “go, then.” Beatrice looked at her, all big-eyed gratitude. Neither could help the way they had been made, Mona supposed. But it was a kindness as well; Beatrice was lucky to always have someone to take care.

Mona could hear the sound of the waves on the shore outside, and she could hear Beatrice in the hallway breathing shallow and making soft retching noises. She pressed the hacksaw down hard and began to pull it back and forth again in a methodical, industrious way.

The soldier squirmed; weak, narcotized. He made a sound that might have been a sluggish scream. The hacksaw tore rather than cut; his body fought her at every stroke. The muscle in his leg grabbed at the teeth of the saw and resisted. It felt to Mona like swimming against a strong current, all of it so much harder than it should have been, than she had imagined it would be. Only when she finally hit the solid foundation of his bone did she get good purchase. It made a grinding, scraping.

Her forearms ached; blood soaked down her sheets, into the mattress. It was thin and almost black.

Once, she looked down and saw that his eyes were open, lily like her mother's eyes. His mouth gaped open, his lips trembled. But what words he had died somewhere inside of him, and no sound came out.

* * *

Four

One morning, Warwick Shue woke up, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and stood up. He tumbled almost immediately to the floor.

The dark-haired sister, Mona she was called, appeared in the doorway like a dour shadow. Her pale, expressionless face didn't change, and she did not make any attempt to go to him, save to reach out with one hand and rest it on the curve of the doorknob.

Warwick was grateful.

His "good" leg was weak from long weeks of bed rest. It quivered underneath him as he raised himself back up on the bed. It was absurd, but he couldn't help but think of Friday night dances before the war, when he was just a boy. Margot Pellis resting briefly in his arms like a sparrow, and his legs had shaken just like this. He had held her so still and so stiffly because he was sure that a twitch, an exhalation, would send

her flying. Margot Pellis. She might as well be dead now. He would never see her again.

He rested on the bed and breathed raggedly, bending his head down and tilting his face away from Mona's bland, watchful gaze. Eventually he looked up; she was still staring at him.

"Could you do with some breakfast?" she said.

"I could," Warwick answered.

The next day he awoke to find an antique wooden wheeled chair sitting at the end of his bed. He moved towards it in the new way of locomoting he had adopted, half-crawl, half-hop, leaning heavy on his hands. The chair was old but solid. Probably weighed as much as he did. He touched the curved armrest; it felt sort of slick, as though it were some organic, sweating thing.

Warwick did not like the chair, not at first, not ever. He felt small in it. He clattered, he creaked, he crushed the dirt and the grass in narrow rows behind him. Were it a choice, he would not have used it. Gotten around instead with crutches or simply laid in his borrowed bed day in and day out, but he found out later that Mona had scavenged it from the house of some rich old man whose only son had gone to war and left him all alone to die. She'd rolled it over a mile and a half of tall grassland and rocky shore to bring it back to the light and to him.

Each morning after that, Warwick climbed into the chair. Smooth, familiar underneath him like an extension of his broken body. Mona took to going for strolls with him, out along the raggedy swell of land that the light sat upon. They remarked occasionally upon the sea. The industrial grey of it, the surprising white green froth, high waves. The calm that became ominous.

Warwick learned to depend upon the constancy of Mona's hands, always waiting there on the raised back of his chair. He learned to anticipate the sounds of her footfalls next to him. One morning, he told her how he had come to be shot, by his own superior officer. Stealing a boat, running away. A coward. A coward like with Margot Pellis, who he had never touched, save for that one dance they'd had, where he'd held so still that afterwards his arms had ached with it.

"So," said Mona when he had finished his tale, "you can't ever go back?"

Warwick felt a rare, absurd urge to laugh. She spoke as though she'd actually feared he could.

The first time they slept together, Mona helped him from his chair. She positioned him carefully; she scrupulously avoided his truncated leg. She asked him if he hurt, told him to be very careful or he could open up his stitches. Warwick lay underneath her where there was no air.

* * *

Six

Of course Beatrice ordered the dress from a catalogue. Mona had tried on several occasions over the years to teach Beatrice how to sew, but Beatrice had no patience for pricked fingers and strained eyes and Mona's biting neutral voice in her ear. The endless litany of all the things she had done wrong.

The dress was made of lemon-colored silk, a bit more garish than it had appeared in the picture. Few women could have carried it off, but Beatrice was exceptional. It was cut low in the front and very low in the back and when Beatrice folded her legs over one another, an enterprising individual could see all the way up to the top of her stockings (one tan, one beige, so close in color that no one could tell the difference, unless they looked very close indeed).

Beatrice sat at the bar and folded her legs.

The social scene on the island was nothing to speak of these days. Before the war, Beatrice's mother had made all her clothes, and that had been sufficient. They had loved her, boys and girls much richer than a lighthouse keeper's daughter. They flocked around her, bought her gifts and competed for her smiles. Invited her to every party, and never seemed to notice that she didn't throw parties of her own.

But, of course, they were gone now. Dead, if they were boys; moved away if they were girls, and lucky girls at that. Some, of course, lingered. Little widows not yet twenty-five and already saddled with children, households. Ghosts from a war that everyone was doing their damndest to forget.

Beatrice was not invited to parties anymore.

It was not fair. The war had come for Beatrice and for the rest of them when she was so young. And it had taken everything, like the leeching tide. She'd never had time to be a girl.

There were parts of her, though, that were still young and comely. Beatrice slid her legs slightly against one another, explored the contours of one knee with the inside of the other. Her stockings caught slightly with a hissy sound.

There was a man at the end of the bar, and he was looking at her. He was green-eyed, tall; long hands, articulate fingers. She liked the look of him. She drew her own index finger around the rim of her glass and looked at him without appearing to look at all.

His name was Anton. He wore a military officer's jacket and thick dockworkers' pants; they scraped and pulled, tangled in with her mismatched stockings outside against the bricks of the bar. Eventually pants, stockings fluttered and fell, half inside-out like outgrown skin, all pooled at their ankles.

Anton was... silly. When he lifted her up, pressed her back hard against the gritty bricks, he said “up we go,” in a child’s sing-song. Beatrice smiled.

“Oh,” said Anton, soft, as though discovering something small, secret, and beautiful that might run away or perhaps evaporate if he didn’t take the most tremendous care. “I like that.” He touched her mouth.

Beatrice tilted her head back, presented her throat for kissing. Anton obliged, and she circled her legs around his waist, locked them together at the ankles. She might, she had decided, like to keep him.

* * *

Eight

“Put your hands to work.” That was what Mona told her.

The advice remained the same, no matter the person or the heartbreak. Mona would say it was because good advice was ever-applicable. Beatrice would say it was because Mona was never really listening anyway.

She took Beatrice up to the lantern room with her, set her to work oiling the myriad little clockworks that the great central lens required to pivot and turn. Beatrice knew the work well enough not to bother looking down. She knew what she would see: her own fingers blackened with grease, just like Mona’s.

“They don’t even need these fucking things anymore,” she said. Her voice had gotten so colorless these days. “Anton—” she choked. She wondered if it would ever leave her, or if she would spend the rest of her life feeling sadness twist in her like a corkscrew every time she said his name, or remembered his smell, or looked at his picture next to her bed. “Anton says that they are building ships now that have powerful communication devices. They won’t need to look for a light.”

“They’ll always need lighthouses,” Mona answered her, always so calm, always so patient. And didn’t she need to be patient, with a sister like Beatrice? “And they’ll always need people to keep them.”

“Daddy never wanted this for us,” Beatrice insisted. She dipped her index finger and thumb into the thick grease, rolled the squared edge of a cog absently between them.

“Daddy died,” Mona said. “That’s how war is. It takes from all of us.”

Mona was polishing the lens. Beatrice found herself fascinated by the movements of her sister’s hands. They were purposeful and they were strong, efficient. They did not waste time or space or effort. They did not forget or mistake. It suddenly seemed to Beatrice that her sister would be much easier to live with if someone would just cut her hands off, clean at both wrists.

“Didn’t seem to take much from you,” Beatrice said. Mona had the skillful hands, but Beatrice had a knowing tongue. “Got rid of Daddy and gave you a job and a house of your own. Drove Mama away, but that was all right, because who wanted to take care of that old bitch anyway? Hell, it even brought you a man. And hobbled him so he couldn’t ever run away.”

“Beatrice.” Mona might have said her name a bit more sharply than usual, or perhaps Beatrice only wanted that to be the case and it was her wishful thinking interfering. “What are you going to do about your belly?”

Beatrice swallowed; the back of her throat tasted as though she’d taken a lick of that thick black grease. “I...” she began.

“You’re not going to try to raise it on your own.” It wasn’t a question. A scenario too outrageous to be suggested, even amongst a list of the most remote possibilities.

“I thought—”

“I doubt that,” Mona said, but her voice was not unkind. She was never unkind, of course. She did it all for Beatrice’s own good.

“But you said—”

Mona wasn’t going to let her finish a sentence. “That was before, when you had Anton. Beatrice, you cannot even do for yourself, let alone a child. You were lucky to find Anton. Do you

really think you'll find another man who'll tolerate you? Whore doesn't age well, and you are not a child anymore."

Beatrice had known, of course, that Mona thought these things. But it was another thing entirely to hear them in her sister's measured, reasonable voice. She sounded as though she were ordering wheat flour from the supplier. She sounded as though she were describing the essential nature of the world for someone who was very young or very stupid. The sky was blue, rabbits ran fast, and Beatrice was a whore.

"I think it will be for the best if we don't tell the child anything." Mona leaned forward and made a clucking noise with her lips pursed. She reached into the guts of the light, fingers delicate, fingers certain, and pressed against the smallish cogwheel that that Beatrice had forgotten about. Stiff and unlubricated, it barely moved as she pushed it. Mona held up her finger, clean and dry, before her sister's eyes and did not say anything at all.

On their way down the breathless-tight, curled staircase, Mona rested her hand briefly on Beatrice's shoulder. "I think you'll make a fine aunt," she said.

* * *

Five

Warwick wasn't waiting up for Beatrice.

Of the two of them, Mona was the early riser. The list of daily tasks required to keep the lighthouse functioning and keep food in all of their bellies seemed to grow a bit longer each day. She worked, as they said, from dark to dark. She was lying alone upstairs in their marriage bed.

Ever since the war, Warwick had been a troubled, restless sleeper. Stairs gave him difficulty, and dreams offered little reward. And so he often dozed downstairs in the old, genteelly ragged armchair that he was given to understand had once belonged to his dead father-in-law.

Beatrice usually stumbled in sometime around three or four. If he was awake and she was lucid, they might have a brief conversation.

More often, though, she hummed nonsense songs and danced in a tuneless, liquid way, touching her hips with her fingertips as if to guide them to and fro. She smelled like other people's cigarette smoke and that strangely intimate, uniquely feminine odor that perfume takes on when it co-mingles with sweat.

It was the only time Warwick saw her laugh anymore.

"I broke a heel," she said one night, limping awkwardly on the damaged shoe. She was wearing a dress the same blue as her eyes, and it had slipped down over the curve of her shoulder. She was one of those rare women who could carry off

dark red lipstick, even smeared as it was now. It looked like someone had popped her a good one in the mouth. Maybe they had. Maybe she had deserved it. Beatrice had a way... well, Beatrice had a way.

“I don’t remember how,” and her forehead creased up like a child’s. She sat down on the ottoman in front of Warwick, tugging her shoes off one at a time. Warwick politely moved his foot, but she grabbed it back, grinning at him and resting it in her lap.

She seemed fascinated by a little red thread of darning on the toe of his sock, and she picked at it with her fingernail. “Did Mona do this for you?”

Warwick nodded; he couldn’t seem to move. Even his breathing grew shallow and tentative. Was he afraid? Of Beatrice? Not that silly girl-child.

“She’s such a good little wife. I don’t even know how to use the sewing machine. So good at taking care. Knows what’s best.” Her hand moved gently up his foot and into the cuff of his pants, drawing odd, curling designs on his bare skin with her long fingernails as she went. She looked up at him with her jewel-bright eyes.

“I remember the day you came here,” she said, and stretched along the short distance between the chair and the

ottoman, resting her hands on either arm of the chair. “I remember thinking that everything was going to change.”

Unlike Mona, who seemed mostly frustrated with her expansive hair, Beatrice always wore hers down and it covered them both thinly now, like a fragile veneer of gold. Warwick thought about that first day, how he had thought her a mermaid, glittering and shimmering and yellow like the sun.

“Do you think I’m pretty?” asked Beatrice. Warwick was very conscious of the distance between the two of them. It was three inches, or maybe two. Beatrice allowed her arms to grow loose, relaxed. She lowered herself down upon him with a sigh. He smelled the liquor on her breath. Her dress gaped open, released a warm gust of air that was somehow equal parts wonderful and obscene.

“Yes,” he said, because it was the truth.

“Do you think I’m prettier than Mona?” and she looped her long, pale arms around his neck. Warwick loved his wife. He loved her serious eyebrows and her strong arms and her lush mouth that smiled so rarely and radiantly.

“Yes,” he said. Because that was also the truth.

“I would have kissed you,” said Beatrice, pressing her face to his and just brushing the side of his mouth with her painted lips. “If she hadn’t gotten there first.” He could feel the flutter of her lips, the tremor of blood in her throat. “I would have

fucked you,” she whispered, and her voice was like the sound a seashell makes when you hold it up to your ear.

She was his mermaid girl once again, and she moved through his hands like water, like sunlight, like air.

* * *

Eleven

Mona’s children awoke to her hands, cool and dry and salt-smelling, on their little foreheads and their fragile throats.

“Up, little ones,” she said. They stared at her, hair mussed, nightgowns spilling white around them. “Put your shoes on, and your overcoats” They were good children, they had never failed to obey their mother and they knew the punishment for answering back.

She took her daughter’s hand in her right hand and her son’s in her left. “We are going outside,” she said, leading them out of the open door of their room.

“Shhh.” It was little more than a gasp as they padded down the long hallway. The girl craned her neck; looked around the curve of her mother’s hip, at her brother on the other side of Mona. His eyes were as wide as she knew her own must be.

Mona paused, just for a moment, to look in the open door of Beatrice’s room. She was sleeping, rolled on her side and facing towards Mona and her children.

Her mouth was faintly open, her hair was in her face. She frowned even in her sleep now. She shifted very slightly; made an indistinct noise, as though she could feel Mona's stare upon her. A man's arm crept over her middle, smoothed the comforter against her body.

"Come on," Mona mouthed. She guided the children outside and did not bother to shut the door behind them.

The three of them stood in the sand for a long time and watched the fire, which had begun with an oil lamp left carelessly on the spiraled wooden staircase of the lighthouse, consume the whole of the tower. It inched and then dashed, across the roof of the little keeper's house where the children had spent all their lives. The girl gasped into her brother's shoulder.

It was a frightening, lovely thing, the way the great lens refracted the firelight and sent it out over the water. Mona's son held tight to her hand; it was warm and dampish from sweat that he knew had to be his own. He was never afraid when his mother was with him.

Mona backed the children down the beach when the smoke started to drift out towards them. The sand was still warm from the day's sun, and Mona laid her children down upon it. They blinked sleepy eyes at her, clasped one another's hands. She sang to them, the songs that her own father had

once sang to her, in the days when she and Beatrice shared a bed. She remembered lying close beside her sister, warming winter-cold hands in the hollowed small of her back. Absently braiding and unbraiding Beatrice's long yellow hair when neither of them could sleep.

“Mama,” her daughter asked, “will you stay now?”

“No,” Mona said, “just until the morning. And then you must learn how to take care.”

* * *

Seven

Everyone told Beatrice she would have to get used to telling Anton goodbye.

“He's a soldier,” Mona said, “that's how they live.”

Warwick agreed. “You enlist, you spend the rest of your life taking orders.”

Beatrice resisted the urge to point out that he wouldn't know a whole hell of a lot about proper military protocol. Mona had told her of Warwick's deserter status in sisterly confidence.

“He's ashamed,” Mona said. Beatrice was thoughtful enough to not shame him further with her knowledge. Not Warwick, with whom she had some secrets of her own.

“And you wound up getting shot,” Beatrice answered instead. “What would I do if Anton got shot?” And that was a point upon which no one had any advice at all.

Before Anton left, he kissed her mouth and her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. “My Beatrice, you are my favorite place. I will come back as soon as I possibly can,” he told her.

Beatrice cried like a child. And, like a child, she went to Mona. She laid in her sister’s bed, in the smooth unoccupied place where Warwick never slept, and wept until her face burned. It was shame, or misery.

“Shh, shh, shh, little sister,” said Mona. She stroked Beatrice’s long hair, tangled and untangled it with her fingers. She smiled a little. “It will all come out right. Just work on that baby in your belly and don’t worry about Anton, he’ll be back.”

She wiped Beatrice’s wet cheekbones with her thumbs. Her hands felt familiar on Beatrice’s face, the rough parts ticking slightly against her skin. “You take care of you,” Mona said, “and I’ll take care of you and, together, we can manage it.”

* * *

Nine

The boy looked like Mona. He had her dark eyes and hair, her patrician nose and her mouth that seemed to bend uncontrollably into a frown. On his little face, all those things that made Mona look hard, matronly, or storm-clouded, made him look like a tiny sage. He didn’t speak much, either, and that helped. It was some trick of blood, but to Beatrice, it

always seemed as though the natural world was agreeing that she wasn't made to be anyone's mother.

Beatrice had discovered that she actually required very little sleep, and she spent most of her nights awake. Mona wouldn't tolerate a rattling clattering in her house, where her children were trying to sleep, so Beatrice just laid very still and watched the moonlight come in the window. Transformed, each month in a predictable pattern.

She slept now in a room she still thought of as her mother's, where the woman had moved after she started having headaches every day instead of once a month, after she and Daddy had stopped sleeping in the same bed.

Every so often, she would hear small, furtive movements in the hallway outside her room. She would listen to the sound of shuffling childish feet, almost drowned out by just the sound of her breath. It was always him, the boy. He had bad dreams; Mona called them night terrors. She was attempting to break him of the bad habit of creeping into her room at night and curling himself against her to sleep.

Beatrice would listen as he hesitated at his mother's door. He shifted, one foot and then the other, weighing his mother's wrath against whatever horrors pursued him out of dreams. It always ended just one way. Mona, whose hearing was very acute, always opened the door and looked down at him, little

boy with her eyes and her hair. “Again?” she would say, sounding as though he had failed her. The boy would say nothing and, after waiting a moment so that he might consider all of his insufficiencies, Mona would sigh and let him in. To lie beside of her in the only place he could seem to sleep easy.

There was all sorts of taking, of course. Beatrice waited a cautious length of time before leaving her own sleepless room. She was much older than the boy, much quieter, and she knew all the weak places in the floor.

She went to Warwick, and he accepted her the way he always did, with a kind of wonderment that delighted and disgusted her. He looked at her, he touched her as though she were some perfectly ripe fruit with soft bruisable edges. He kissed her politely, like it was a privilege. It was pathetic, and Beatrice had realized, slowly, that she could no longer do without it. She bit him and scratched him deeply, hoping to leave marks, scars if she could manage it. But, of course, she was not so foolish as to imagine that Mona did not know. She had always known. It was just one more allowance she made for Beatrice and her many flaws.

“Do you ever think about what our lives would be like if Mona wasn’t here?” Beatrice asked him one night. She laid her head on his chest and when she spoke, her mouth sent a

fluttering vibration through his skin, into his veins, all the way to his heart.

* * *

Two

Everything was an amusement for Beatrice. Everything was for Beatrice. And that was why she was always going to have so much trouble.

“If they’re coming from the mainland, they might have new magazines,” she said, standing up in a half-crouch to stare out the top of the light for what had to have been the five hundredth time.

“It’s a military lifeboat,” Mona told her, resisting an eye roll. Beatrice was nearly eighteen now, she was quickly becoming ridiculous.

“Soldiers read,” Beatrice said and smiled.

“If we’re lucky,” Mona reminded her, “it won’t have anything in it at all.” Beatrice made as if to stand up again but sat back heavily instead.

“I still think it could be something good. Maybe it’ll be a soldier. Maybe he’ll be handsome.”

The boat had been drifting towards them inexorably for the better part of the day. Mona knew the tides, and she guessed it would make shore around sunrise. They’d been

watching it all day, though, and they hadn't seen any sign of anyone on board, or anyone attempting to steer it.

"It's just wreckage." A day didn't go by when some detritus of war didn't wash up on the shore. When Beatrice and Mona were young, they used to go out along the shore, picking through it for the kind of things small girls treasured. Mona always watched her sister closely, making sure she didn't pick up any pieces of glass or metal too shortly at sea to have had their edges worn off.

"I'm done with this," Beatrice said, turning aside in a sulk.

"No," said Mona. For a moment, it startled her how much like their father she sounded. "You're not," and she pointed out a small cogwheel Beatrice had failed to see. "This isn't a toy, Beatrice. The things you do to the light matter. They matter for more people than just you."

Beatrice spread a fine layer of black grease over her pinched fingers. Her eyes flicked to the window again and again.

Neither of them slept that night.

Beatrice met her at the kitchen door that morning with a long boning knife in her hands. She was strangely pale, except for a slash of excited red high in her cheeks. "I thought... just in case," she said. Mona, who had tucked their father's antique pistol into her apron pocket, nodded.

Beatrice smiled; it was brittle and wavering. It reminded Mona of the first tentative rays of sunlight emerging on the end of winter. How they came through the windowpanes all watery and uncertain. It had been just the two of them for so long, Mona realized.

Mona reached out, touched her sister's shoulder almost hesitantly. "You be careful, Beatrice."

Mona's little sister ran heedless down the gray shore, which was just beginning to grow light. She climbed up on top of the boat where it had stuck fast in the sand. "Mona!" she cried, bending curiously over the hollow sloped bottom. "There's a man in here!"

The first thing Warwick Shue saw when he came back to life was a mermaid. She was made of gold, and her hair looked like ribbons. She peered down at him with eyes like jewels, and she said "Hey? Hey, are you alive?"

"Yes," breathed Warwick, and he had never been so happy to be so.

* * *

Ten

If anyone had asked him, Warwick would have said that he murdered his wife because of Beatrice. He knew what he was to her. It wasn't even lust that brought her to him, but just boredom and meanness and a certain kind of selfish need that

was strangely attractive. At least she had wants, at least she required something of him. At least he had things left to give.

And when she climbed on top of him, wordless, mask-faced; scraped his skin and bit his flesh, Warwick did not feel fragile. At least for a time.

And Beatrice was still beautiful. The little lines that flowered and unfolded at the corners of her eyes and mouth made her look not old but intricate, detailed. Her bones had grown a little sharper with age, and the heaviness in her hips and her breasts gave her a settled look. But of course mermaids didn't grow old, they just grew lovelier and lovelier until you couldn't look at them directly anymore.

No one asked questions when Mona died. The lighthouse was a bit like its own country, surrounded on three sides by rocks and water. One door, one huge window like a rotating eye. The sisters were more like rock formations than women, pale and cragged and faintly dangerous. The man... well, he was nothing to speak of. They said it was pneumonia, when Mona drowned in her bed, and the island didn't think much about it at all.

Everything stopped whenever Mona was ill. Beatrice made a desultory effort at keeping up the light, but soon the accumulated weight of all the things she had forgotten to do or had simply not wanted to do rendered the whole venture

seemingly meaningless. The children ran wild, neglecting chores and playing all day in the sea like little brown frogs. Dishes piled, dirt gathered, laundry went unwashed. Mona lay in her bed at the top of the stairs in a fever.

The sun came in the window and lit her up. Her pallid, careworn face. Her hair so grey now. Warwick carefully climbed from his chair to the bed, put the full weight of his body on her chest. She stirred a little, opened and closed her mouth, fishlike.

He stuffed a white washrag deep into her throat until the white of the cloth was nearly invisible. Her eyes trembled open. In close succession he watched uncertainty, fear, and then a panicked desperation flicker across her face. As he poured the water into her struggling mouth, she made a pitiful choking noise, and Warwick nearly lost his nerve.

On those rare nights when they shared a bed as husband and wife, often she would entangle her leg with his own. Mona would rest her little foot in the hollow of his larger one, in the place where his own missing limb might have gone.

She couldn't breathe. She moved her limbs as though they were under heavy water. If he stopped then, pulled the cloth from her throat, she would live. She would rise up and take care of them all again. She would forgive him.

No. She would not forgive him. Mona never forgave. She took her recompense every day, in little razored words and flat disappointed looks. In the cool, competent way she took tools, delicate things, complicated things, out of his hands. So certain that he could do nothing but break them. Mona always knew best; Mona always knew what to take. Even when no one had asked her.

It would have been better if his boat had dashed against the rocky shore, tossed him into the sea and drowned him. It would have been better if he'd never come to this bitter place and never seen these ugly, ugly sisters.

After he was done, he went to Beatrice and cried, which was a thing he hadn't done since the war. She touched his hair and his face, perfunctory.

"Shhh, shhh," she said, in the way one might comfort a child whose fears are inane but must be forgiven, as all is forgiven the young and the weak.

* * *

One

On Saturday, Mona decided to show her sister the wreck.

Beatrice was uncertain; she waded forward and then back when the waves began to look threatening. Mona, meanwhile, swam in impatient circles around her.

"Get your head wet," she demanded, "you'll be fine."

Beatrice crouched down to her collarbones. She looked to Mona, who rolled her eyes and paddled over.

“Here,” Mona said, reaching out and taking Beatrice’s smaller hand in her own. “Hold on and follow me.”

“Okay,” Beatrice said, lifting her feet off of the bottom one at a time.

Mona set out, kicking hard and stroking with one arm. Behind her, the small weight of Beatrice disrupted the water, sent rippling vees out behind them.

“Mona,” she cried, “I’m swimming! Let me go!” She flailed her free arm wildly, churning water and turning it white with air bubbles.

Mona laughed. “Beatrice,” she said, “don’t be stupid. You’d drown without me.”

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THE DREAMS OF WAN LI

by Andrea Stewart

The smoke swirled above us in the shapes of dreams. Despite the urgency of my task, I slowed to watch. An incorporeal lion, its mouth open in a silent roar, careened through the air after a rabbit. I knew which patron's dream it was; he dreamt the same thing each time he came to the smoke-room, night after night. I did not know what it meant, if it meant anything at all.

Wan Li darted in front of me, her hands and feet pattering against the wooden floor. I reached to seize the back of her shirt, but she flowed beneath my hand and then turned to give me a wry grin. A girl, yet she was quicker than me.

Little rat. This was always a game to her, gods take the consequences. Someone coughed behind me, but I ignored the sound. There was only a little time left before the dreamers awoke, and I'd squandered enough already.

Men and women lay on lofted beds around us, their heads and shoulders enveloped in the smoke. Their coats and sheets spilled over the edges, and for some, their purses did as well. Though I crept across the floor with all the speed I could

manage, Wan Li would get to the blue purse before I could and would again win our nightly contest. The few coins I'd collected dug into my palm.

And Chen would cut the tally into my back. He'd cut Wan Li thrice, and only once deep enough to scar. I'd never counted my tally. I'd asked Wan Li to do it a few months ago, but she'd reached a count of ten before her fingers found my ribs and tickled me until I'd begged for mercy.

The slippers of one of Chen's flower girls appeared in front of me and I swerved, losing more ground to Wan Li. Chen always told us to stay close to the floor, to remain unseen, but I needed only a few more coins. I held my breath and stood. The smoke hazed my vision. It danced along the ceiling in shapes my gaze couldn't follow; it curled around the necks of the flower girls and sought entry beneath the rubber seals of their masks.

The men and women on the raised beds didn't look at me, too enraptured by the shapes that wisped from their noses and mouths. The flower girls—three of them—swayed from patron to patron to refill pipes, to open the windows a crack to let some of the dreaming smoke escape, and to lie with those whose money had drained to the pittance that would only allow them the pleasures of the flesh.

I couldn't fail. Not tonight, not when I needed only a few more coins to please Chen. It was the anniversary of my mother's death and I would cry and that always made things worse. Chen's tongue cut deeper than the knife. "She died because of you," he'd said last night. That knife of his parted flesh and his words parted my heart. "It's too hard, taking care of a son, when you're a flower girl. She had work to do and you weighed her down."

With a few long, quick strides, I made up the ground I'd lost. I dropped below the smoke ahead of Wan Li. The purse hung in front of my eyes. I reached for it and then, swollen with overconfidence, breathed in before breathing out.

The dreaming smoke slid into my lungs. It tasted sweet, like fruit and fresh-cut flowers. It was a brightness in my chest, a pearl, and I wished I could hold it there forever.

I breathed out and the smoke took shape. A celestial dragon, with a sphere clutched in its jaws. And there, on its back, was a boy.

The boy was me. *I* was on the dragon's back, its red scales soft and cool beneath my hands. It roared as it carried us through the smoke, through the fog and clouds. We wove through the mountain peaks where the gods dwelt, so closely I could smell the peach blossoms.

And then the dragon turned its great head and offered me the sphere between its teeth. It was a pearl. It was my pearl, the one I'd held within my chest. I extended a hand to take it.

“Ling. Ling, wake up,” a voice hissed in my ear.

My head rattled against the floor. Wan Li was shaking me. I still had my hand out, and it reached past her shoulder, towards the smoke. “I almost got it,” I whispered.

Wan Li retreated and I sat up. She had one of her hands in a fist and I knew it held the coins I needed. She'd slapped, kicked, and bitten me to win on prior nights. I could do the same to her, could leap at her and pry her fingers from the coins that should have been mine. But the glory of the pearl still held me rapt.

“You're not to breathe the smoke,” Wan Li said. She slid a foot in my direction. “Chen will be angry.”

The dream faded from my head and my gaze focused on her hand. Now. I should attack her now. Instead, to my shame and embarrassment, I began to cry. “He is always angry. I will never earn out my tally.”

“Shhh,” Wan Li said, as if she were the elder by a year and not me. She hesitated and then crept nearer, until I could see the pupils in her dark eyes and count the strands of hair that fell across her forehead. “Some of them are waking. Here—” she pressed a few coins into my palm, “—take these. I have

enough. Neither of us will be tallied tonight, and Chen will not have to know you breathed the smoke.”

Before I could thank her, or even ask her why, she turned and scampered towards another patron.

When Chen called us to his office that night, I kept my gaze on his wide sandaled feet. He smelled of smoke and grease and sweat. He asked us for coin and we held out our hands.

Though neither of us had lost, Chen snorted. “We were busy tonight. That’s all you gathered? Wan Li, I expected better from you. I should add to your tally just for that.”

I risked a glance at her, but she said nothing, her black lashes low over her cheeks.

“You’re a sad and worthless pair of bastards, you know that? Filthy, ugly, stupid bastards.” His tirade continued as he compared us to rats, to cockroaches, to parasites. And then he took the coin, shook us a little to make sure we hadn’t hidden any on our persons, and pointed us in the direction of the kitchen.

We half-skipped, half-ran for our dinner, our arms intertwined, our rivalry temporarily forgotten. The cook served us each a plate with noodles and cabbage, and a cup with a small bit of water in the bottom. We slurped it down, exchanging grins. “When I am grown,” Wan Li said, elbowing my arm, “I will build a huge palace.”

A palace? I only wanted to keep my tallies low. “You shouldn’t aim so high. You’re poor. You can’t build a palace.”

“I’m smarter than you. I will find a way. My palace will have a pool to swim in. If you’re lucky, I will let you wet your head in it, so you can flatten your ugly hair.”

I took a pebble from the counter and popped it into my mouth, sucking on it to alleviate my thirst. “You won’t be able to swim. Your feet are too large. They will carry you to the bottom.”

This eventually graduated into sharper jabs—about intelligence, guesses about one another’s fathers, and the habits of our mothers—until the cook yelled at us to shut up.

But Wan Li never mentioned the smoke or the coin she’d given me, and neither did I.

* * *

Two days later, I met my first death-dreamer. He came in from the dusty fields a little past noon. His back was curved like a snail’s shell, the joints in his fingers swollen like the nodes in a spear of bamboo. He leaned heavily on his staff, it and his feet beating out a one-two-*three* against the wood floors.

Chen received him in his office, and Wan Li and I made a pretense of sweeping the floors a little ways down the hall. The smoke-room patrons were stingy with their coin, but once in a

while other visitors would hand us one or two, and if we were double-lucky, Chen wouldn't see, and we could run to the market to spend them on sweets or toys. We watched as the man lowered himself into the chair Chen indicated.

"What can I do for you?" Chen asked with a small tilt of his head.

"I have heard you keep rooms for death-dreamers," said the man. "I wish to rent one." He reached to his side, lifted a sack, and then spilled the contents onto Chen's desk.

Neither Wan Li nor I could see the coins from our vantage point, but we looked to one another, wide-eyed. We knew the sound of coin, and this sounded like a lot.

Chen leaned back in his chair, his hands spread over the top of his belly. "How long?" he asked.

"Until I die," the man said.

The chair creaked as Chen hunched over the desk. He picked a few coins out of the pile. "The smoke will cost you the most. And I'll need to assign one of the flower girls to tip water and food into your mouth, and to change your bedpan."

"What is he asking for?" Wan Li whispered to me. "What is a bedpan?"

I'd never met a death-dreamer, but I'd seen one carried out of the rooms on the second floor, his body limp and unseeing. "It is a bowl."

“With food?”

“The sort of food your mother liked to eat.”

Though she didn't know my exact meaning, she frowned and flicked dust at my eyes. I blocked her attack with my broom.

Chen, done sorting, spoke again. “There's enough here for three months.”

The man sighed. “It is all I have. I haven't left anything for my sons. Three months won't see me to my death.”

“Perhaps we can still come to an arrangement.” They bargained and bartered until they'd agreed on four months.

The man stood and made his way down the hall. Wan Li and I shrank to the walls, afraid to touch him or his brown clothes, as if age was a disease we could catch.

He laughed at our expressions. “One day, children, you will look as I do. And then you, too, will wonder where the time has gone, and you won't be able to draw a line between when you went from a youth to a bent old man.” His mouth curled downward as his voice softened. “And there will be nothing left but to dream, because the gods have abandoned us.”

“They haven't,” I cried out. Chen still made us pray, still had an altar well-stocked with incense.

“No? Then tell me why my fields have dried, why the earth is cracked and hard, why little grows but the dreaming poppy.

When you are old, you will see that gods are a thing for children.”

Wan Li, emboldened by me speaking, took a step toward the old man. “I will never grow old.”

He moved more quickly than he looked capable of. In the next moment, he had her chin in his hand. “You are still a bud, little one. But even flowers wilt.” He let her go and reached into his pocket. “I said I had nothing else, but here.” He pulled out four coins, giving two to Wan Li and two to me. “A person never tells the truth when they bargain. Save it. When you are old enough, use it to take the dreaming smoke, fresh from the pipe. Then you will know what I mean.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Chen rise from his office chair. He would scold us and beat us and maybe even tally us for our impertinence. And he would confiscate the coins, ostensibly to pay for our upbringing. Still, I couldn't help one last question.

“What's your name?”

“Bao,” he said. “I am—was—a farmer.”

Wan Li grabbed my hand before I could say anything else and we dashed away, our coins held fast. We ran into the kitchen, separating at the door, and then found one another again in the alcove where we slept.

Chen thundered after us, his footfalls making the walls shake.

“We should keep running,” I said, though I wanted nothing more than to crawl beneath my blankets and hide.

“No,” Wan Li said. “What’s the use? He will find us. There is nowhere we can go.”

She was right. Chen came upon us, his belly heaving, sweat beading at his brow. He held out a hand. “The coins he gave you. Now.”

I dropped mine into his open palm. As Wan Li had said, what was the use?

Chen turned to her and she lifted both her hands. They were empty. She did not smile, did not give him the wry grin I was used to seeing. Her face was pale, her mouth slack, as if she had no idea where the coins had gone.

He lunged for her, grabbing her by the hair, shaking her until her teeth chattered.

I did not hear the clink of coin.

“I saw him give you the coins,” Chen said. “Where are they?”

Wan Li kept her silence. She did not speak as Chen forced her to her knees, as he lifted the back of her shirt, as he drew the knife. Only I, who knew her so well, saw her thin shoulders tremble.

He carved a line into her back, next to the scar—the longest tally I'd ever seen. It would leave her sore and aching for days. And I stood in my blankets and did nothing, Wan Li's words repeating in my head. *What's the use?* I wished I was the boy on the celestial dragon again, reaching for the pearl. I wished I was not here.

* * *

Bao's money ran out before he died. At the end of the four months, Chen and the flower girls carried him from his room, the smoke still wafting from his mouth, and dumped him in the alley.

I heard his groans from the windows of the smoke-room until, three days later, I heard them no more.

* * *

I sliced the poppy pod with my knife, watching as the sap oozed out. Chen had moved me to the fields two years ago, when I'd turned thirteen. Another of the flower girls had given birth, and her son, now four, would be trained to cut purses. Wan Li was small, had always been small, and still worked the smoke room at night.

I gathered the dried sap from the pods I'd cut the day before and hesitated before dropping it into the basket. Sometimes I thought of taking a little for myself, of hiding it to sell later or to smoke, but Chen offered coin to any that saw this

happen. I worked side-by-side with three other men, and we all cast suspicious glances at one another.

Chen no longer cut tallies into my back. Working the poppy fields was the only way he'd given me to earn them out, and with the number of tallies I had, it would take me until I was gray. I wondered if the other two men had tallies, or if they had been born free and worked so they could return to a home, a hot meal, and a bed—all things they owned. Or perhaps they worked for the dreaming smoke. Many did.

I leaned my head into the smoke room when I had the chance, to dream of the dragon and the pearl, and to forget, for a time, the parched and scratchy feeling in my throat. But the dream wasn't as clear as it once was; now clouded by practicalities. Plans for a patch of land I could call my own, for growing green things, for paying off my tally while I was still young enough to find a girl.

The sweat trickled down my brow and onto my hands, cutting dark paths across the dust. I'd grown calluses on my fingers, but they did not look like Bao's. Not yet.

When I was finished, I went back to the den. But on my way to my room, I heard voices in Chen's office.

"Turn around, girl. Show us your back." An old woman's voice.

I stopped in my tracks, laid the basket on the floor, and put my eye to the crack between door and wall.

Two women sat in chairs, their backs to me—one gray-haired, and one black-haired. Chen leaned against his desk. All three of them regarded Wan Li. She faced away from me as well, and as I watched, she slipped the neckline of her shirt off one shoulder, and then the other.

Her shoulders were still thin, but something about her skin, the way her muscles moved beneath it, made my breath catch in my throat.

She had only three tallies—one short, one long, and another short. The long one ran from the top of her shoulder blade and then curved towards her spine.

“I have earned out a tally already,” she said.

“Such smooth skin,” said the younger woman, “and a good, pale complexion. Don’t send this one to the fields, Chen. It would be a waste.”

The older one lifted a hand and traced the path of the long tally through the air. “So few tallies! She must be swift, and obedient. But this one—so long and deep—she has some fire in her, some spark. It will serve her well.”

These words, they made no sense. Praising the tallies? I could see Wan Li’s bowed head as if it were yesterday, Chen’s

hand tangled in her hair, the knife digging into her flesh. How could this be good?

“Give us this girl for three months, and we will make a fine flower girl of her. The best,” the younger woman said.

I picked up the basket and fled to my room.

* * *

Later, after Wan Li had collected her coins and given them to Chen, I confronted her.

“You want to be a flower girl?” I said as she walked past my open door. “You want to wear the mask and lie with patrons?”

She froze and did not look at me. The light from the lamps outlined her face, showed me her parted lips. Her black hair brushed her shoulders as she shook her head. “No, I do not.”

“Then why? There must be another way to earn out your tallies. There are only two left for you. You can work the poppy fields, as I do.” We still ate dinner in the kitchen together, and she still spoke of palaces, though they had become less and less grand through the years. The insults between us had eased.

She looked at me then, her expression inscrutable. “I don’t want to be a farmer like Bao,” she said. “I don’t want to grow bent and gnarled. Working as a flower girl is easy money. I will pay off my tallies more quickly.”

“And then you will leave, and I will be alone.” I wasn’t sure I’d spoken the words aloud until she stepped towards me.

“Ling,” she said. I could smell the smoke in her hair. She pressed her palm to my cheek, and already it was softer than the skin of my face. Her lips brushed against mine, so quickly that I registered only a brief moisture and then nothing at all.

She was gone.

I decided, in that moment, that I didn’t want just any girl. I wanted Wan Li.

* * *

They came for her the next morning—the one woman gray and the other young. Wan Li took only a small satchel with her and let them each take one of her arms, as though she were a prisoner. But she walked from Chen’s place of her own free will, so I was not fit to rescue her. I watched from the window, certain she did not know.

When she reached the end of the street, she turned her head, looked straight at me, and gave me the wry grin I knew so well.

My heartbeat quickened, like the beat of a cutpurse’s hands and feet against the floor.

* * *

Chen called me into his office two months after Wan Li had left. He did not indicate the chair across from his desk or

incline his head at me. He only asked that I shut the door. As soon as I did, he spoke.

“I grow old, Ling.”

It was the truth, so I did not countermand it. His jowls sagged, his eyes sagged, even his belly now covered his belt. His hair was gray and thinning; it stuck to his pate with his sweat.

“I have tasted the dreaming smoke,” he said, “but I don’t want such an end for myself. I wish to keep my wits for as long as I can.”

“You are wealthy,” I said. “You own a dreaming den.” Both facts—I would not offer my opinion unless he asked for it.

He lifted an eyebrow as he moved a lion figurine on his desk, from the left side to the right. “That is precisely why I must keep my wits. As soon as I lose them, there will be someone looking to take advantage of me. But I am growing old.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I need someone to watch out for me.”

I said nothing, only stood by the door. I’d learned at a young age that there was little I could say to Chen that would not make him angry.

“You know,” he continued, “I did not start out as the owner of a dreaming den. I started out cutting purses and working the poppy fields. It’s how I know how many coins you can take

before a person, dull with smoke, notices. It's how I know to offer money for those who catch others stealing the poppy sap. I do not have any sons, Ling—at least none who know me.”

I'd have wagered he had a good many sons that didn't.

“I want you to watch over me, Ling, in my elder years. If you do, I will sign over ownership of the den to you before I die.”

My legs stiffened; I was sure they had taken root in the floor. And then words were spilling from my mouth. “Me? But I have so many tallies! I will not work them off until I am old. You don't even like me. Why would you not choose someone else?”

He rubbed his hands together on his desk, and some of the skin flaked away. “I have known you all your life. There is no one else I trust. If you do this, I will erase all your tallies.”

Was this what Wan Li had meant when she said acting as a flower girl would be easy money? This, too, would be easy—easier than working the fields, at least. I hated Chen, couldn't stand his smell or the way his black eyes squinted when he smiled. But if I did this, I could have what I wanted—sell the den for a mountain of coin, buy some land where the soil was not so dry, and Wan Li would not have to be a flower girl.

“I'll do it,” I said.

We shook hands, and I felt as though I had finally become a man.

* * *

Wan Li came back changed.

She still had pale skin, large eyes, and black hair. But her skin was powdered, her eyes outlined to look even larger, her hair combed until it shone and then braided into an intricate knot at the base of her skull. Her gait was no longer swift and silent; it was slow, languid, and she swayed like a tree caught in the wind.

She was beautiful, but she was not the Wan Li I wanted.

Everyone moved to the sides of the halls as she passed—not because they feared her touch, but because she moved with such grace. None wanted to interrupt her passage.

Chen welcomed her with open arms, kissing each powdered cheek and then kissing her once, firmly, on the mouth.

If I had not promised to care for the man, I would have hit him.

I clenched my teeth as Chen offered her a coin for this pleasure—a symbol of her new station in the dreaming den. All those watching applauded, and Wan Li kept her gaze on the floor, as though she were embarrassed.

If I did not stop her, she would be lying with strangers in the smoke-room tonight, heedless of those who might be watching. So I made a show of stepping forward to take her satchel, as though she were now too delicate to bear it herself. She let me carry it, and I followed her through the halls and to her room.

Chen had placed a mask on the floor just inside the door. Wan Li picked it up, put it over her face, and looked back at me. “There, Ling, what do you think?”

If she was grinning, I couldn’t tell. The filters covered her mouth. All I could see were her eyes. The glass made them look even larger, like a bug’s. “You don’t have to do this.” I stepped into her room and closed the door. “Chen made me an offer. If I look after him in his old age, he will sign over the den to me before he dies.”

She let the mask drop to the floor. “You? Owner of the den?” Her hand gripped my arm. “How much longer will he live?”

I shrugged. “Ten more years? Twenty?”

“Too long.” Fingers dug into my skin. “We should poison him, and then the den will be ours.”

It took more than a small effort to pry her loose. “No. I gave him my word. And if I try to kill him, he may die before he

can sign the den over to me. He will die eventually, and before my tally is paid off.”

She placed the mask on her bed, demure once more. “I have only two left.”

“Be patient. Work the fields with me.”

“No. You speak as if that will solve our problems. You saw Bao. He had a farm; he worked the fields. And yet he still came to take in the smoke as he died. There is no happiness out there.”

“He was dying.”

She drew herself to her full height, her hands curled into fists. “We are all dying. The land around us is dry, the cities are shrinking. What do we have left?”

I placed a hand on her cheek, as she’d done to me three months ago. “Wan Li.”

Instead of leaning into my caress, she sat on the bed and placed the mask in her lap. “Maybe things will be different when Chen is dead. But for now, they must remain the same.”

I had no reply for her, so I drifted from her room, wandering the halls of the den. When the flower girls descended to the smoke-room, masked and dressed in identical gowns, I could not tell which one was Wan Li.

* * *

Chen grew ill six months later. As I had promised, I abandoned my work in the poppy fields to care for him. He would not take food prepared by any hand other than my own, so I went to the kitchen. The cook—still the same man as when I was young—showed me around the cupboards and the sinks and the pantries. “Every good kitchen has its secrets,” he said, his thin, gray beard moving with his words. “I have shown you half of mine.”

“The other half?”

“Some are in the food preparation, others are not mine to tell.” He showed me how to cut the cabbages, shipped in from the North where the ice melted and formed streams. He instructed me in how to slice pork—a rarity those days—and how to boil the bones until they made a broth.

I took the soup to Chen and spooned it into his trembling lips. When he was done, I patted his mouth with a handkerchief. He only glared at me.

“If I die from this, boy, I won’t give you the den.”

The spoon dropped from my fingers, landing in the bowl with a clatter. I almost protested, until I remembered Bao’s words. A person never told the truth when they bargained. I had to get him to change his mind. “You won’t die,” I said. “I am watching over you, Chen.” I affected kindness and comfort when inside I seethed, ready to scream like a boiling kettle.

I kept my temper in check as I fed Chen each day, as I helped him in and out of bed, as I wiped down his wrinkled limbs with a damp cloth. He had me bring the incense to his room and guided me in praying to the gods for his health and happiness.

He recovered within a month, and when he could sit up by himself, he reached a hand out and touched my shoulder. “I am sorry I doubted you, Ling. You are a man of your word.”

I didn’t throw off his fingers as I wished to. I bowed my head. “I am watching over you, Chen.”

Some of the incense was still lit, and I prayed, in my heart, that Chen would die while I was still young.

* * *

“You are avoiding me, Ling.” Wan Li stood in my doorway. She wore her flower girl gown—a deep blue satin, cut low and tied at the waist with an embroidered white sash.

“Yes,” I said. I sat on my bed and removed the dusty shirt I wore for the fields. When I leaned back, my spine cracked. My time with the poppies was spent bent over, slicing the pods and gathering sap.

She watched me. “Why?”

“Because I can’t bear to look at you like this. This is not what you want.”

Her hips swayed as she moved closer. “Do you know what I want?”

I closed my eyes as she brushed the hair from my forehead, as she sat beside me. “No.”

“I’ve tasted the dreaming smoke. Some of the patrons like someone to dream with them. But my dreams—they are impossible.”

When I opened my eyes, she was leaning in close, her gaze fixed on mine. “Are you sure?”

As an answer, she pressed her lips to mine.

I imagined she was wearing a simple gown—not the flower girl dress—and kissed her back. But her hands moved like someone else’s. They traveled over my back in wide circles; they tickled the length of my spine. She put her palms on my legs and slid her hands upward.

This was the way a flower girl moved. The image in my head dissolved and I drew away. “You used to dream of palaces. Is this what you dream of now?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

It was a lie—I knew her too well. “Tell me your dreams.”

She reached for me again, but I stood and retreated until my back touched the wall. I must have caressed her face as we kissed, because dust marred her cheeks.

“Tell me yours,” she said.

I did. I told her what I'd seen in the smoke—the celestial dragon and the pearl. And then I told her about my plans—about the patch of land, of growing green things, of being free, of her at my side while we were both still young. I spoke of happiness.

She rose from the bed and went to the door. “Both of our dreams are impossible.”

* * *

Chen began to walk with a cane. It reminded me of Bao—one-two-*three*. But though Chen's body had begun to fail him, his mind was as sharp as ever. He had me take over some of his more menial tasks. I counted the coins from the flower girls and the cutpurses under his watchful gaze. I wrote the amounts in the ledgers, I oversaw the kitchens, I made sure the refined amount of dreaming sap matched the raw amount.

And he began to have me fetch things for him—food, water, and flower girls. He paid the girls like the rest of the patrons did and then took his cut.

One night, when I was seventeen, he asked for Wan Li.

I didn't go immediately from the room as I usually did. “Who?” I said.

“Wan Li.”

Something in my mind shifted, as though the door I'd kept shut on my anger now opened just a crack. "Pick someone else."

"Why not her?" Chen said. "She has only a little left of her tality to work off. This would help. She could be free soon."

"Pick someone else, and I will fetch her."

"Ah, Ling. You love her, don't you?"

My throat closed; my words dried up.

Chen's face, a map of wrinkles, softened. "I don't just pray for my health anymore. I pray for heavy rains, I pray for an end to the dust. Do you still think me selfish?"

I'd never told him what I thought of him. "Yes."

He barked out a short laugh. "And you are right to do so. I pray for these things because I want to know the world will continue after I die—that there will be something left of what I've done, and that people will remember me because of it."

"You could move to the North. You could grow things other than poppies. If you want the world to continue, this might help."

"I am old, Ling. This is all I know." He sighed and shook his head. "Bring me Xian. I will not ask for Wan Li again."

* * *

"I am free." Wan Li passed me in the kitchen. She wore a simple brown gown, embroidered with white flowers at the

neckline. Her face was no longer powdered, but it was radiant with her smile.

“I heard.” I leaned on the counter, waiting for the cook to finish with Chen’s meal.

Wan Li stopped, did a half-turn to face me. “And you didn’t come to see me?”

“I didn’t want to say goodbye.”

“Ling.” She gave me a wry grin and pressed her palm to my cheek, with none of the flourishes a flower girl gave. “I will not go far. I will be patient.”

I grabbed for her hand, but she’d already withdrawn it. “We will do it my way?”

“Yes,” she said, “patch of land and all.” She held up a pouch. “This is the last I owe Chen.” She had to get on her tiptoes to kiss my lips now, but she managed without any help. “Meet me in my room, tonight, while I pack, and we will plan.”

* * *

If I’d had any money, I would have bought her fruits, or dried fish, or trinkets. But I didn’t, so I plucked the thin flowers that grew from the weeds in the street and bound them together with some string. It was the best I could do.

As soon as night fell, I went to Wan Li’s room.

When I knocked, she didn’t answer, but I put my ear to the wood and heard soft sobs. “Wan Li?” I slid open the door.

She sat on her bed, her brown dress torn, her face bloodied.

I stood over her before I could register that I'd moved, the flowers now crushed in my hand. "Who did this to you?"

"I went to pay off my tallies," she gasped between sobs. "He said he wanted something to remember me by, but I hate him, and didn't want—"

"Who?"

"Chen."

I stormed from her room, casting the crumpled flowers to the ground. He'd given me his word; he knew how I felt. I was going to tighten my fingers around his fat neck. I was going to kick him in the groin until he would never again have need of a flower girl.

I threw aside his office door so violently the walls shook, and then shut it with the same rancor.

Chen sat at his desk, his reading glasses on his nose, his finger still holding his place in the ledgers. "Ling," he said. "What—"

I leapt over his desk, seized his walking stick, and began to beat him. He fell to the ground and his glasses shattered. "You gave me your word!" I cried out. He replied in a wordless moan. "You hurt her, you filthy bastard! You're a cockroach. A

parasite!” All the insults I’d heard from Chen now spilled from my lips.

Blood flowed from his nose and mouth, and I couldn’t stop beating him. He had cut me as a child—far too many tallies for such menial wrongs. He’d wanted to keep me as his slave until I was an old man. He’d let Wan Li become a flower girl.

He deserved to die.

I hit him until my arms tired, long after his cries had ceased. He was a bloody mess on the floor, his face no longer recognizable.

I cast the stick aside, panting. “I am watching over you, Chen. Now and always.”

Someone slid open the door. The cook.

“Gods!” he gasped out. “You’ve done it.”

I expected him to run down the hall, to alert the den to this murder, to attack or apprehend me. Instead, he went to Chen’s body, seized the arms, and dragged his body out to the hallway.

Was anyone watching? Did anyone care?

Wan Li appeared in the doorway, her lip still swollen, but her face otherwise clean. I took a step towards her, but she shook her head.

“I am sorry, Ling.”

She shut the door and locked it.

* * *

I was trapped in Chen's office for a full day. A full day while the sounds of fighting came from the hallway. I pounded on the wood and yelled, but no one came for me. Wan Li—what had she done? There were no windows in the office, so I watched the water-clock on Chen's desk, the buoy rising through the hours.

And then, at last, the cook opened the door.

The silence in the den was eerie. Something had happened and I wasn't sure what.

"She wants to see you," the cook said. "Wan Li."

I stepped into the hallway. There was blood on the walls and floor, but not much. "Where?"

"She's in Chen's old bedroom."

I knew where it was, though I'd never set foot inside. I went up the stairs and turned right. I didn't knock this time; I opened the door.

Wan Li lay on Chen's bed, a pipe in her hands. She inhaled the smoke and then puffed it into the air. I couldn't see the shapes from the door, but they danced about the ceiling before they disappeared.

I shut the door behind me. "I killed him."

She closed her eyes and breathed—in, out. "Yes, I know."

A foreboding began in my heart, and it crept down my limbs and made me tremble. "What have you done?"

“I’ve freed us both.” She didn’t look at me.

“Tell me.” The forcefulness of my words surprised me as much as they must have surprised her.

Her gaze snapped to mine. “I own the den now. The cook gets a cut of my earnings—he always has. Remember when we cut purses? I hid coins. I hid them in my mouth, under my arms, between my legs. And I gave them to the cook for safekeeping.” She took in another breath of smoke and wisped it out. As soon as the smoke disappeared, she spoke again. “I wanted to save the money to buy my own den when I was old enough. That’s why I became a flower girl. I was good, Ling. I hid more coins. Chen never found them.”

Chen had kept his word. “You tricked me,” I said, my voice flat.

“Ling.” She reached a hand into the air, trailing it downward as though she were touching my face. “Come closer.”

I obeyed, my feet numb.

She pulled a sack of coins from behind her and let it fall to the floor. It landed heavily, with a thud and a clink. “When you told me what Chen had promised you, I realized I didn’t have to buy a den. I could take one. All those loyal to Chen are now dead. These coins are your cut, and I erase your tallies.”

I took the coins because they were coins and I had nothing else. I did not even have Wan Li. My heart sank into my feet, making them heavy as I turned to go.

“He wouldn’t have kept his word to you,” she said.

And then, in a whisper, “Do you wish to see what I dream?”

I pivoted back. I wanted to cut her with my gaze, to make her feel how she’d wounded me, deeper than any tally. “What do you dream?”

She wrapped her lips around the pipe, took in a deep draw of smoke, and then exhaled. The smoke formed. Two figures walked together, hand in hand. Wan Li and I. The smoke traveled further, forming a house, and then a field with sprouting greens. The shapes dissipated, swallowed by the air.

My mouth grew dry. “This is what you dream? Why the deception? We could have had it, we still can. Sell the den and come with me, to the North. The soil there is still moist.”

Her fingers stroked the length of the pipe. “I told you I did not want to grow old and bent. The land is dying. How long will you grow your plants? In my dreams, we are young forever. You have forgiven me for everything. The work in the fields is light, and we spend days in one another’s arms. Can you give me this?”

I wanted to throw the coins at her, to pry the pipe from her fingers. I bowed my head, tears making my voice thick. “No.”

“Then stay with me, and I will give it to you.” She drew in more smoke and exhaled it in my face.

I should have stayed strong, but I could see the shapes in the smoke—the two of us.

I breathed it in, the taste of flowers on the back of my tongue. Wan Li was with me, next to me, her hand in mine. I held her, kissed her, stroked the long black hair over her back. The land around us was green and wet, the fog low on the mountainside, as I’d seen it in paintings. I wished it were as easy as this. I wished it would last forever.

It dissolved, reforming into the dragon—so faint I could barely see the curve of its back, could barely see the brightness of the pearl. And then it too was gone.

Wan Li lay on the bed in front of me, the dreaming pipe at her lips.

“It’s not real.” I stepped back, before I could breathe any more smoke.

She gestured to the walls, the pipe, her fingers lingering on the curls of smoke. “This is all I know, Ling. This is my home, my palace. You may grow your plants for a time, but one day there will be nothing left but the dreams.”

I let her have the last word, because I knew she wanted it. I packed nothing, taking only the coins. I left.

* * *

It took me two months to travel far enough North. I used most of my coins to buy a plot of land, and some I spent on seeds. Cabbages, peas, carrots, and greens. I did not buy poppies.

Digging holes in the soil was hard work. It was colder here, and though there were streams from the mountains' melting ice, there was also frost. My fingers were not like Bao's, but they swelled at the knuckles after a day's hard work.

On the second morning, I opened the packet of peas. They were round and pale green, like wrinkled little pearls. The memory of the celestial dragon and the pearl flashed through me—as strong as when I was a boy.

This dream was not impossible.

I was no longer the boy on the dragon. I *was* the dragon, and this seed my pearl. The land reached for it. I took in a breath and held it, savoring the taste of air without dust or smoke.

I dropped the seed into the hole and covered it with the earth's embrace.

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