



Issue #157, Sixth Anniversary Double-Issue •  
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[“The Sorrow of Rain,” by Richard Parks](#)

[“Heaven Thunders the Truth,” by K.J. Parker](#)

[“The Moon Over Red Trees,” by Aliette de Bodard](#)

[“Butterfly House,” by Gwendolyn Clare](#)

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## THE SORROW OF RAIN

by Richard Parks

The nature of rain spirits in my experience was that they tended to be gentle. Such a thing was hard to believe in the midst of a raging storm, with lightning burning the skies and thunder shaking the ground, but storms, as everyone knew, were really caused by the thunder god Raijin as he beat his massive drums in time to the music of the lightning. On a day like today, with the thunder god sleeping and the rain allowed to fall at its own gentle pace, the true character of the rain was easier to see.

As was the rain spirit herself.

I stood on the northern veranda of an obscure mountain shrine to the west of the Capital. I suppose the shrine had a name, but no one had seen fit to mention it to me. Other than the building's somber, high-peaked roof and two stone statues out front that represented a pair of fox spirits, the Messengers of Inari, there was little to identify the building as a shrine at all. There was an inner sanctum where an image of the shrine's *kami* was kept; I gathered from Kenji that it was only brought out at certain times of the year by the locals, for rituals to mark

the start of rice planting or the end of a successful harvest. Most of the time, as now, it stood unattended.

The priest Kenji emerged from the shadowy interior. “Lord Yamada, I didn’t find—” he began, but I held up a hand for silence. Curious, he followed my gaze and then saw what I was seeing.

“Oh,” was all he said.

She stood about thirty paces from us. The shrine was nestled onto the crown of a wooded hill overlooking the village of Aoiyama. The rain spirit had stationed herself at a spot where there was a gap in the evergreens and one could see the village below and the rice paddies beyond it. ‘Blue Mountain,’ the peak that gave the village its name, towered above all some distance away on the left. There was no sound except for the rain on the roof of the shrine and the clinking and splashing as the water flowed down the rain chains located at the eaves on the four corners of the building. The rain spirit, of course, stood bareheaded in the rainfall and seemed to take little notice of it, except to occasionally lift her hand and delicately lick a few raindrops from her pale fingers.

In appearance, and to one who didn’t know better, she seemed to be a young girl of perhaps sixteen. She was dressed as a shrine attendant, with wide red trousers and a white jacket, all soaked by the rain. Her hair hung down loose over

her shoulders and back, each strand dripping rivulets of water like the rain chains attached to the shrine's eaves. Her back was turned to us, so I couldn't see her face, but unlike the case with some spirits and *yokai*, I was reasonably certain that she did have one.

Kenji pulled a spirit ward from his robe, looked at it, then looked at the rain spirit, then back at the ward. He finally shook his head. "I don't think this will work on her," he whispered.

I kept my gaze on the lonely figure in the rain. "Of course not. She's neither a ghost nor a demon."

"But—" Kenji began, but I interrupted him again.

"She is a rain spirit, and a rain spirit is an expression of the will of the gods and a natural manifestation of this world, not some demonic apparition to be sent to hell or a ghost to be returned to the wheel of death and rebirth. We might not like what she represents at the moment, but as it is raining, we can't say she doesn't belong here."

"Assuming you are correct, and I believe you are," Kenji said as he tucked the spirit ward back into his robe, "what are we going to do?"

That was a good question, which at the moment I could not answer. Rain had fallen continually at Aoiyama for the past two weeks, with no sign of stopping. Heavy rain, early enough

in the season, wouldn't necessarily be a problem, but with harvest fast approaching, the need to drain the paddyfields was acute. Since there weren't enough workers to both harvest the rice and cart it away from the wet field during a downpour, the rice was likely to be spoiled and the entire harvest in peril.

When Kenji and I had met with Yoshimasa, the headman of Aoiyama village, the previous day, the old man had seemed surprised to see us, but once he knew our mission he was quite specific. "Lord Yamada, we have another three days, at most, to begin harvesting. Any longer and we risk losing everything. If there is anything you can do we are grateful, but it must be soon."

"Late summer rain of this duration is extremely unusual, isn't it?"

The old man shrugged. He looked tired and, to my mind, unwell. "I have only seen the like once before, when I was young." He smiled a little ruefully then. "Of course, that was a long time ago."

"Do you remember the circumstances?"

Yoshimasa looked away. "As I said, it was a long time ago. Lord Yamada, I cannot bring myself to hope, so please pardon my skepticism. I ask only that you do what you can."

I considered what he had said now as I regarded the rain spirit. “I believe that there’s something the headman isn’t telling us.”

Kenji used his sleeve to wipe away a drip that had fallen from the ceiling of the veranda onto his stubbly bald head. “One needn’t be Lord Yamada to ascertain that. A more pertinent question might be ‘why isn’t he telling us this something, whatever it is?’ The rice harvest in general looks to be poor this year. The area around Aoiyama isn’t in much better shape, even considering the rain, so if the crops fail here, too, we might be looking at shortages in the Capital itself, or even wider famine.”

“I was told it was Yoshimasa himself who petitioned the Court for intervention,” I pointed out. “He’s why we’re here, even though we were apparently not what he was expecting.”

Kenji laughed. “No, we’re here for want of anyone having a better idea. All the prayers and sutra readings initiated at the Capital have failed. As for his apparent surprise, well, who wouldn’t be? You are one man and I am one priest. How can we stop the rain?”

I had to concede Kenji’s point. “Even so, Yoshimasa understands the seriousness of the situation, that much is clear. So, yes, the question remains why, if he has any

information at all that might be helpful, would Yoshimasa choose to keep it concealed?”

“Perhaps he doesn’t think it is helpful.”

“Then why not tell us anyway, since there would be no reason to do otherwise? He is deliberately concealing something, therefore there *is* a reason. So whatever that reason is, it must be more important to him than the rice,” I replied. I continued to watch the rain spirit as I spoke, keeping my voice low so as not to startle her. I had seen monsters, ghosts, demons, *yokai* of all sorts in their multitudes, yet only a few rain spirits. They tended to be shy and were only drawn out into the open by such conditions as these. As I considered this, a new thought came to me.

“She always faces the village, have you noticed? I don’t think she’s looked in the direction of ourselves or the shrine even once.”

“Now that you mention this, I do find it curious,” Kenji said.

“I wonder if she would talk to us?” I asked.

Kenji frowned. “Even if she would, what would be the point?”

“Perhaps none, but Yoshimasa said that this happened once before. It occurs to me that this rain spirit may have come to the shrine on that occasion as well.”

Both Kenji and I had rain cloaks and hats of woven straw; they had been left to dry, or at least drip, leaning against the shrine wall on the veranda after we arrived. I didn't put mine on. Rather, I stepped out into the rain, bareheaded and unprotected, and I waited but not for long. In moments I was soaked through.

It was in this state that I approached the rain spirit. I walked down the slope until I stood at her level but about seven paces away from her on the right.

"Hello," I said.

At first I thought she hadn't heard me. But after a moment, and quite calmly, she turned to face me. I had been right in my estimation; now that I could see her face, what I saw was a pretty girl of about sixteen, or at least that's most of what I saw. There was more. Her mouth was a little wider than a human's, and her eyes were black as charcoal and showed no whites or pupils. Gazing into that beautiful but subtly inhuman face was a bit disconcerting, but after a moment she turned back to look at the village. Then she spoke so softly that I almost missed what she said.

"You're not the one."

"You're waiting for someone?"

"Why doesn't he come?"

"Tell me his name if you know it. Perhaps I can help."

“Yoshimasa,” she said. “He lives *there*.” She pointed at the village.

Now some things made sense. But more did not. “I know the man,” I said, “but why are you waiting for him?”

She laughed. The sound was something like rain striking a bell. “He’s waiting for *me*. He continues to wait. I don’t understand. I am here.”

“Are you making it rain?”

She looked at me, and she frowned. “I *am* rain.”

As if to prove her point, the rain spirit suddenly transformed into a shower of droplets and fell into the grass, leaving me standing alone, soaking wet, in a downpour. Her disappearance had not made the shower lessen even a bit. I made my way back to the veranda.

“Take off those wet clothes before you fall ill,” Kenji said.

I shivered and obeyed. There was no railing, but Kenji wedged his staff between an outer pillar and the shrine wall to create a makeshift clothing pole. He draped the separate pieces of my *hitatare* over it while I rummaged in my pack for my only change of clothes.

“Well. Was that little excursion worth the price?”

I sneezed as I was tying up my overjacket. That wasn’t really an answer, but it was the only response I could make at

the time. When I was in control again, I told Kenji what the rain spirit had said.

“He’s waiting for me?” Kenji repeated.

“Her exact words. I think we need to have another talk with Headman Yoshimasa.”

\* \* \*

That proved easier spoken than achieved.

“Master Yoshimasa is ill. He cannot see you now.” A formidable woman guarded the door to the headman’s house. She was small and old, but there was nothing frail about her. I had the distinct feeling that if I chose to ignore her admonition, I’d have to fight her to gain entrance—something I was not prepared to do. Yet.

“Kenji is a priest,” I said. “If your husband is ill, perhaps we can—”

She interrupted me, and I was too astonished to respond. “Master Yoshimasa never married. I am Kaede, his housekeeper. And what he needs now is rest, nothing more. I’m sorry, Gentlemen, but your business will have to wait.”

“I see,” I said, but I did not. I’d known loyal and virtuous wives who didn’t guard their domains as jealously as Mistress Kaede guarded hers.

Kaede was about to close the door when we were all startled by a young woman's scream from inside. "Mistress Kaede! Come quickly!"

Kaede rushed away from the door without remembering to close it, and I didn't hesitate. Kenji and I followed behind her as she in turn was led by a female servant who had rushed up to tug on her sleeve. Mistress Kaede noticed us and glared but clearly realized that the situation was now out of her control. We all followed the servant to Master Yoshimasa's rooms.

He lay on his bedding on the floor. His eyes were open, unseeing, and his breath came in ragged gasps. The servant knelt by the door and immediately began to weep.

"*Anata....*" Mistress Kaede rushed to his side and took his hand. "I'm here."

'Anata' was not a term that a housekeeper would use in referring to her employer, nor was her manner any less than that of a wife. I had known love in my time, of a sort, but not like this, not the unwavering devotion that allowed for no doubts, no fears, and no questions. Perhaps I did not know it for myself but recognized it when I saw it in Mistress Kaede. In that moment, old and dying as he was, I envied Yoshimasa more than I can say.

Yoshimasa did not stir or acknowledge her in any way. I glanced at my friend. "Kenji?"

The priest nodded and knelt on the opposite side of the headman's bedding from Mistress Kaede. He took his prayer beads in hand and began to chant a sutra. I think it was the Diamond Sutra, but it had been a long time since I had paid attention to such things and I was not certain. After what seemed a long time, Yoshimasa's breathing steadied, and his eyes slowly closed. Kenji ceased his chanting and took a deep breath.

"He is sleeping now," Kenji said.

"Our business will indeed have to wait, Mistress Kaede," I said. "But I do think it wise that we remain here for the time being."

Mistress Kaede was not happy about this but apparently could not think of a good reason for arguing with me. "We are grateful for your help," she said finally. "But I must ask you to please not disturb the master while he is resting."

That sounded more like a command than a request, but I brushed my irritation aside. "We will be very careful not to do so," I said.

Kaede spoke to the girl. "Mai, please bring refreshment for these gentleman. Remain outside in case you are needed. I have a pressing matter that I must see to."

They both bowed to us and withdrew.

“I wonder what business could be so important?” Kenji asked. “She clearly does not want to leave him.”

“I wonder that as well.” I glanced at the silent form of Master Yoshimasa. “Can he hear us?”

“I doubt it, so long as we keep our voices low. He really is asleep,” Kenji said. “But there’s something I must tell you—there’s a death spirit in this room.”

I looked around slowly. I had a talent for spotting ghosts, monsters, foxes, even demons in their disguised forms, but a death spirit? That was something more within Kenji’s purview than my own. “Where?”

Kenji nodded toward a corner of the room that was, perhaps, a little darker than the poor light could account for. “Over there. It’s quiet for the moment; that sutra has a calming effect on such creatures.”

“We need to do more than calm the thing. Can you banish it?”

Kenji nodded, looking unhappy. “Yes. I’m certain I can.”

“Then why don’t we do that?”

Kenji looked even more unhappy. “Lord Yamada, if I send the creature away, it will almost certainly take Yoshimasa with it. The mere presence of the spirit shows that the old man is *dying*. There’s nothing I or anyone else can do.”

I took a deep breath. “How long?”

Kenji shrugged. “Perhaps hours. A day or two at most.”

The serving girl Mai returned then, bearing rice cakes and some plum wine. She started to withdraw but I stopped her. “Mai, where has your mistress gone?”

The girl looked frightened. “I—I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. She’s gone to the shrine, hasn’t she? Perhaps to pray for your master?”

The girl bowed lower, but she did not answer, and I smiled then. “Don’t worry, I have no intention of causing trouble for you with Mistress Kaede. You may go.”

The girl hastily withdrew, and I kneeled beside Kenji. “You dare not banish the death spirit, but you were able to calm it, which brought Yoshimasa some respite. Can you go a little further and lull the creature to sleep?”

He frowned. “Perhaps, but the effect would not last. It would be a small delay, no more than that.”

“Then we must make certain that the time is well spent.”

Kenji looked puzzled, but he took his prayer beads again and began to chant softly. There were no quick results, and I was beginning to wonder if the matter was beyond Kenji’s abilities, but finally Master Yoshimasa opened his eyes.

“Lord Yamada—?”

“Good, you’re awake. Master Yoshimasa, I’m afraid there are some matters we need to discuss, and they simply cannot wait.”

\* \* \*

We found an old covered palanquin in an outbuilding; the thing hadn’t been used in years, but it was still serviceable enough. After brushing away the cobwebs, we helped Master Yoshimasa inside while Kenji and I served as bearers. He weighed surprisingly little, and we bore him up the hill toward the shrine with no trouble.

Mistress Kaede, of course, was already there. She was a pitiful sight. Her hair had come undone and lay in limp gray strands along her back and shoulders; her clothing was soaked. She held a rather wicked-looking kitchen knife as she stumbled about the grounds of the empty shrine.

“Mistress Kaede—” I began, but she wasn’t listening.

“How many times?” she muttered. “I kill her and kill her and she keeps coming back!”

“If you mean the rain spirit, then you can’t kill her,” I said. “Any more than you can slay a raindrop.”

Now she did look at me, and her eyes were wild. “The rain has to stop!”

“It will,” I said. “Very soon.”

“But she’s making it rain!” Kaede wailed. “She’s killing him!”

With an effort, Master Yoshimasa pulled himself out of the palanquin and leaned against it for support while Kenji covered him with an umbrella as best he could. “No, Kaede,” he said. “She isn’t. And it’s raining because of me.”

“Anata—” Mistress Kaede dropped the knife and rushed to his side. “You should not be here!”

He shook his head, and he smiled at her. “No, my Kaede. This is exactly where I need to be. This is all my doing.”

“Tell her,” I said.

Master Yoshimasa nodded. “She especially has the right to know.”

The rain spirit appeared again, near the veranda. She looked at us, impassive. Mistress Kaede eyed the knife she had dropped. “That one,” she said, and I thought for a moment she meant to retrieve the blade and try again, but Master Yoshimasa stopped her.

“No. It has nothing to do with her, except perhaps as an appointment to be kept. I was young and ignorant when this happened before, when the harvest was threatened. In my pride I thought it fell to me, and perhaps it did. No matter, I went to the shrine, and I found the rain spirit there. I prayed to her to make the rain stop, and I offered her my life in exchange.

From that moment on, my life was forfeit, and the agreed sign was that, when the rains came again, I would know the payment was due. I knew from the start that this constant rain, this flooding and drowning without end, was no ordinary rain, and that my time was over. I was a coward to let it go on so long.”

Mistress Kaede frowned. “I don’t understand. You said she had nothing to do with this.”

“She doesn’t,” said Kenji. “A rain spirit is *of* the rain but does not *control* the rain. It was the *kami*, the god of this shrine, that heard Master Yoshimasa’s prayers. That was the one who answered them, not the rain spirit.”

Yoshimasa nodded. “I prayed to the rain spirit in my ignorance, but it was the *kami* of our shrine who answered me. That was something I did not understand, until Kenji-san and Lord Yamada today explained what must have happened. Then as now, the rain spirit was a sign, not the cause. Even so, the bargain was the same, and I had resigned myself, but then Lord Yamada came....”

“You thought there would be no harm in letting us try,” I said. “I don’t think you realized just how... serious, your condition is.”

“I’m a stubborn old man,” Master Yoshimasa said. “I thought I had some time still left to me. I was wrong, and the intensity of the illness caught me off guard.”

“You must also be aware that Kenji’s and my own efforts were pointless. The rain would have stopped anyway.”

Yoshimasa smiled. “Not pointless. You have helped me, Lord Yamada. You and the priest Kenji, and I thank you both.” He turned back to the old woman. “As for you, Kaede, I’m going to use what time I have left to beg your forgiveness. All these years I let you think my heart belonged to another, that I had fallen in love with a beautiful spirit of the rain. It was easier than the truth, which is that my life did not belong to me, and I expected it to be forfeit at any moment. That is the real reason I could not marry you. I sought to spare you pain, and in so doing I caused you a great deal more, and for that I am truly sorry.”

There could have been tears in her eyes. It could have been the rain. “You’re a fool,” she said. “A human being’s life is always forfeit at any moment. Always. Most of us never know the hour, and yet we manage to live our lives anyway.”

“Fool that I am, I do know mine.”

Yoshimasa glanced up. There was a very small patch of blue sky to the west. “I think,” he said, “that I would like to go home now.”

Kenji and I started toward the palanquin, but he shook his head. “I can walk. If Mistress Kaede will assist me.”

She took the umbrella and held it up as Yoshimasa leaned against her. They started back toward the village together, and before they were quite out of sight, he put his arms around her.

Kenji and I retired to the veranda of the shrine. The rain spirit stood nearby this time, still looking toward the village. She stood there for some time, and then she smiled a sad smile.

“He came,” she said, and then slowly vanished as the sun broke through the clouds and the rain finally stopped. We listened to the last of it dripping from the eaves.

“I don’t understand,” Kenji said. “If Yoshimasa had no hope, why did he petition the Court?”

“I don’t think he did. I’m rather certain that was Mistress Kaede, trying to help him whether he wanted it or not. And, as I said, there was no harm in our trying. But it does explain why he was surprised to see us—or anyone.”

Kenji looked thoughtful. “Do you really think the *kami* of the shrine sent the death spirit to him?”

I started to pack my now-dry *hitatare* from where it had been left hanging on the temple veranda on Kenji’s staff. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Why would it? In essence, Master Yoshimasa offered his life for the good of this village and its harvest, and he honored

that bargain. He worked all his years to that purpose, forfeiting his own happiness as well as that of others. Yoshimasa thought the rain meant that his life was due, but *I* think that it was no more than a token from the *kami* that their bargain had been honored. His life isn't forfeit. It has simply run its course, and the gods of death come for us all."

"What about the rain spirit?"

"What about her?"

Kenji shrugged. "Just that she remembered him, after all this time. A creature such as that. Isn't that strange?"

"Strange? Yoshimasa prayed to her, Kenji-san. He *worshipped* her. It was in error, true, but he did it. What woman, rain spirit or not, is going to forget that?"

Kenji glanced toward the now-clearing heavens. "Spoken by a man with no attachments at all."

"As you well know, I was once attached to a woman, then to her memory, then to her ghost," I said. "With all proper deference to your judgment in such matters, I think I am better off as I am now. At least for a while."

Kenji shook his head. "You have a wounded heart and a poet's soul, Lord Yamada."

From a courtier, it would have been a compliment. From Kenji, it didn't sound like a compliment, nor did I take it as one. I hoisted my pack, and I handed Kenji's staff back to him.

“A trait I share with the soon to be late Master Yoshimasa,” I said. “It’s the mark of any proper fool.”

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*Richard Parks lives in Mississippi with his wife and a varying number of cats. His fiction has appeared in Asimov's, Realms of Fantasy, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Fantasy Magazine, Weird Tales, nine times in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and in numerous anthologies including Year's Best Fantasy and Fantasy: The Best of the Year. His Lord Yamada short story collection, Yamada Monogatari: Demon Hunter, was released by Prime Books in 2013 and will be followed by the novels Yamada Monogatari: To Break the Demon Gate in November 2014 and Yamada Monogatari: The War God's Son in 2015.*

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## HEAVEN THUNDERS THE TRUTH

by K.J. Parker

I was sure I'd come to the right place when I saw the hands nailed to the doorpost. I sighed. It shows the right spirit, I suppose, but there's no actual need for it.

There was no door-board. I walked in. Naturally, coming in out of the bright sun, I was as blind as a bat. "You sent for me," I said, to nobody in particular.

There was a disconcerting silence. "You're him," said an old man's voice, querulous, thin.

"That's right."

Just as well snakes have better night vision. She saw him, a little fat old man with a ridiculously abundant head of fine white hair.

I turned in his direction. He was looking me over. "I know," I said, "I'm very young. But we've all got to start somewhere."

He was frowning, so I thought I'd better do a trick quickly. If you can't grab their confidence straight away, it makes it all so much more difficult. So I sent the snake. There was a big earthenware jar in the far corner, covered with a cloth. She

crawled in under it, and I saw the jar was half-full of cornmeal. Not a lot to go on, so I told the snake to burrow deep, on the off-chance. It's depressing how many old people keep their valuables buried in the corn jar. We, I mean thieves, know it's the first place to look.

Then I smiled. "I wouldn't keep it there if I were you," I said.

He gave me a sour look. "Don't know what you mean."

"Let me see," I said. "It's ivory, about a finger and a half long, quite old, carved in the shape of a leopard sleeping on the branch of a tree. Worth about ten oxen. There's marks on one end, I'm not quite sure what they are. No, hang on, they're teeth-marks. A kid got hold of it at some point and chewed it."

Ah. I'd got him. "My father," he said. "When he was four years old. His mother hit his head so hard he was always slightly deaf in one ear, the rest of his life." He paused. "Sit down," he said.

There was one stool; three-legged, crude work. I sat down. The snake wanted to explore behind the jar—mice, presumably—but I called her back; she slithered up my arm and in through my ear.

"Thank you for coming," he remembered to say. "Can I get you some beer?"

I shook my head. “Not when I’m working.” The snake was looking round. It saw—well, the usual. Nothing helpful, at any rate. “Well,” I said, “you’re not being haunted, and you’re not ill. What’s the problem?”

He grinned. “I was wrong about you,” he said, “you’re a good lad. Honest,” he added, incorrectly, as it happens. But he wasn’t to know. “I think I can trust you.”

I shrugged. “You do what you like.”

“Have some milk.”

I don’t like milk, but the snake does. “Thank you.”

He got up, tipped some milk from a jug into a little gourd. It was quite fresh. “What’s the problem?” I repeated.

“My daughter,” he said, not looking at me. “She’s bewitched.”

Not another one, I said to the snake. She ignored me. “What makes you think that?”

“She won’t do as she’s told.”

You can see the difficulty, can’t you? Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the daughter in question is no more bewitched than my left foot, she’s just that age, or she’s fed up with being bossed around by her bloody stupid old father. So; she’s not bewitched, therefore I can’t unbewitch her, so I do nothing and the father goes around telling people I’m useless. Unscrupulous members of my profession deal with situations like that by

sending their snakes in the poor girl's ear and messing with her head, making her helplessly obedient. Sorry, but I won't do that. I don't know, maybe they're right and I'm just too young; I haven't started thinking like an old man, who'd see nothing wrong with it. "In what way?" I said.

"I found her a good husband. She wants to marry this young piece of shit." He shrugged. "She's never been difficult before. It's his family. They're none of them any good. They must've got a doctor to bewitch her."

I nodded slowly. "What other explanation could there possibly be?" I said.

I got a stare for that. "Well," he said, "what are you going to do about it?"

"The young piece of shit," I said. "How many oxen has he got?"

"Twelve." A world of contempt crammed into one little number. "Why?"

I smiled. "A doctor capable of bewitching a dutiful girl into disobeying her father, which is an incredibly difficult thing to do, trust me, would want at least ten head. I was just wondering how the young piece of shit could have afforded that."

Scowl. “Maybe the wizard is one of his relatives, I don’t know. I wouldn’t be surprised. They’re all garbage, the lot of them.”

My smile broadened. It was lucky for the old man I don’t practice my trade for free, or he’d have spent the rest of the day rolling on the floor clutching his guts. “If one of them was a wizard capable of performing that level of enchantment, he’d be a rich man,” I said. “Stands to reason.”

He peered at me through the smoke, which was making his eyes water, and I could tell he’d caught me out in the fallacy. Namely; that all competent wizards are rich. *You* claim to be a competent wizard, his eyes said, and look at you. True enough. But then, I’m still young.

Off you go, I said to the snake, and off she went.

“Anyway,” I said. “I suppose I’d better see your daughter.”

That made him laugh. “You’ll be lucky,” he said. “I don’t know where she is. I shut her up in the hut this morning and put an old woman outside to keep her in, but she cut a hole in the reeds and climbed out the back. Like I told you, she’s bewitched.”

I yawned, to give the snake a chance to crawl in through my mouth. “There’s a little lean-to shack,” I said, “next to the shed where you store your shields. Inside the shack there’s a pile of old furs and pelts, the ones your wives told you had been

eaten by ants and were ruined, but they've put them aside to sell to the trader for beads, which you're too mean to buy for them. She's lying under the furs, waiting for midday, when everyone's in the shade and she can sneak out without being seen. She's having a real job not sneezing, because of the dust."

He looked at me. Respect. Why is it I only ever get respect for the trivial stuff?

\* \* \*

We sleep a lot, in our profession. We have to. For one thing, living with the snake—just being alive, with the snake inside you—is exhausting, like carrying a six-gallon pot on your head wherever you go. I feel the weight of her whenever I stand up, it's a sort of shock in the knee-joints. No wonder so many of us are cripples by the time we're thirty.

Mostly, though, we sleep so we can dream. My old master—a fool, actually, but he'd heard a lot of wise things from his peers, who weren't fools—used to tell me that a doctor is asleep when he's awake and awake when he's asleep. I take this to mean that to us, the world you people live in is as insubstantial and illusory as the places you go in dreams are to you, while our dreams take us—well, home. Not sure I'd agree with that, but I'm too young to have an opinion.

It's in our dreams, though, that we meet and talk to our own kind. There's actually nothing particularly special about

that, we do the same as you but in a different way, but at least we have the advantage that we can consult or spend time with any of our kind, regardless of the trivial constraints of geography, or indeed whether they happen to be alive or dead.

It's the dead, of course, who give you the best advice, and why we're so very reluctant to take it, I really don't know. Take this business with the bewitched girl and the young piece of shit, for example. Only the night before, I dreamed of my old master's old master—for some reason he's taken a liking to me, though we never met, of course, he died before I was born; but I guess it's like the bond you often get between grandparent and grandchild. His own pupil, of course, was a bitter disappointment to him.

Anyway, there he was, sitting on a stool beside my head. "No good will come of it," he said.

"You always say that."

"True. And aren't I usually right?"

I sighed and rolled over onto my back. "Usually isn't good enough," I said. "You're supposed to know everything."

He laughed. He has this way of drawing back the corners of his mouth when he laughs, like a dog baring its teeth. It gives me the creeps, but I rather like it. I've tried it myself, but it makes me look silly. "I'm an old man," he said, "I forget things."

“Things that haven’t happened yet?”

“Those especially.”

“You were about to say something useful,” I reminded him.

He sighed. “I wish I’d had someone like me when I was your age,” he said. “To do all my work for me.”

“Balls,” I said, smiling. “You just complicate the issue.”

“Watch out for the broken spear-blade in the sand,” he said. “And remember, in this case, your worst suspicions will be justified. All right?”

“Why do you have to be so damn cryptic? Why can’t you just tell me straight—?”

“You’re going to wake up now.”

\* \* \*

“About my fee,” I said.

Maybe the old man was going deaf. “I warned her,” he said. “I told her, if I catch you one more time sneaking out to wipe the axe with that worthless little turd, I’ll kill you. She just doesn’t listen. It must be witchcraft.”

I felt the snaked wriggle uncomfortably inside my head. I know, I told her, but what can you do? “I was thinking,” I said. “I imagine you were looking for a dowry of, what, thirty, thirty-five head, which is what you stand to lose unless I can get rid of the spell. So in the circumstances, I’d say five head was perfectly reasonable, wouldn’t you say?”

Other doctors don't negotiate. Other doctors are, of course, older, with impressive reputations. "They're taking a long time," he said suspiciously. "Are you sure she was in the shack?"

Fortunately, that was her cue to arrive, escorted none too gently by two of the herdsman. We were sitting outside by now, in the sun; I'd had enough of the smoke and the smell of curds, so I'd told him it's easier to smell witchcraft outside in the fresh air. Which is true, incidentally.

"You see?" he said. "Just look at her."

Which I proceeded to do. That didn't take long. She was just an ordinary girl, nothing special; it made me wonder why the young piece of shit was bothered enough to risk a spear in the back on a dark night, but presumably it was love or something like that. She was nice enough, if you like them round-faced and flat-chested. I was rather more interested in the two men with her.

"Well?" he said to her. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Where's the point?" she replied; she had a deep, pleasant voice. "You wouldn't listen."

Not the two guards, they were just a couple of herdsman, unmarried men in their early fifties, of no account. I'm talking about the two dead men.

“Shut up,” he said, thereby proving her point. “This is the doctor. He’s come to sort you out.”

“I’m young,” I explained. “Give me twenty years, I won’t need introducing.”

One of them, of course, I recognised. The other one, a boy of about seventeen, was in fact slightly the more impressive of the two. They wore grey fur karosses, as though they were on a journey, and each of them held a spear and a kerry. The younger man’s spearhead was broken. I don’t think they realised I’d seen them. That’s an advantage of being young and not looking the part. Go on, I told the snake, and she slipped out of my ear and down my arm.

The girl was giving me a mildly hostile stare, as though I wasn’t really important enough to be worth hating. “He’s wasting his time,” she said to her father. “There’s nothing wrong with me, except I’ve got a pig for a father.”

The snake crawled up her leg—I saw her shiver slightly, which was interesting. Likewise the information, on which the snake was quite definite, that whatever her relationship was with the young piece of shit, it hadn’t reached the axe-wiping stage, or anywhere near it.

“Your father says you’ve been disobeying him,” I said. “Is that true?”

She grinned at me. “You tell me,” she said.

The snake came back and whispered inside my head, and I thought; Oh dear. This is going to get unpleasant quite soon, and I'm not going to get paid. I'll confess that I did consider lying for a moment or so, until the snake started hissing furiously and making my head hurt. Fair enough. The truth it would have to be. Unfortunate for the girl and the old man, but that wasn't my fault. And if they'd wanted to me to tell lies for them, they should've shown me a little more respect.

So, as soon as the snake had quietened down enough so that I could hear myself think, I turned to the old man and said, "I've got some good news for you. First, she's not carrying on with the young piece of shit, no matter what impression she's been trying to give you. The young man—" I was guessing a bit here, but I knew I couldn't be far out—"is in fact a friend of her brother, and he's been pretending he's screwing your daughter as a favour to his friend's memory. I don't know this for a fact, but I'm guessing they were in the same regiment, and your son was killed. Yes?"

No reply, therefore no contradiction. Fine. "The young piece of shit," I went on, "is acting in this noble and honourable fashion so that you'll believe that the child she's carrying is his. It isn't, of course. I'm sorry to have to tell you that the child's father was your late son. However," I went on, raising my voice over the low moans that everybody started making at once, "the

other good news is that this girl is not guilty of incest, since she and your son had different mothers, and you aren't her father."

As I said the words, a little spark of intuition lit up inside my head, and I realised what the dead man I'd recognised was doing there.

"Her true father," I went on, "is the one we aren't allowed to name, who died on the river-bank, among the tall reeds. So you see," I went on quickly, "there hasn't been any witchcraft here, so there's nothing for me to smell out or put right, so in the circumstances I'm prepared to waive my fee and say nothing more about it, and I would suggest you do the same. I think I'll go now," I added, getting to my feet. "Have a nice day."

\* \* \*

I don't know why we human beings profess to place such a high value on the truth. First of all, we don't. Value it, I mean. In fact, we all lie through our teeth all the time, we're the only animals that practice deceit with anything like that level of sophistication, which I guess is why the snake gets so upset whenever I'm tempted to bend the truth a little. Second; in my experience, nine times out of ten the truth only makes things worse, sometimes disastrously so. As in that case. And yet we profess to believe that the truth is the most valuable thing of all, to the extent that the king is always called Heaven-

Thunders-The-Truth; we call him that, to his face, because of course we aren't allowed to say his name.

Mind you, I think the old fool was completely unreasonable. If I'd been him, I think I might have taken a degree of pride in the fact that my daughter—all right, my adopted daughter— was of royal blood, even if her father was a traitor who got what he deserved, and not a moment too soon. Also, my professional ethics and a ridiculously conscientious snake in my head may oblige me to tell the truth, but he and his people suffered from no such burden. The whole thing could've been hushed up easily enough, and no harm done.

Instead—well.

\* \* \*

I was talking to my great-great-great-great-grandfather about cures for eye infections in cattle when something woke me up. I didn't have to see it to know what it was.

“On your feet,” said a voice above me.

Here's a curious fact for you. Nothing in the world feels quite like the two coils of flattened wire they wind round the base of a spear-shaft, presumably to stop the wood splitting as it dries. Maybe it wouldn't be so distinctive applied to your hand, say, but when you feel it on your neck, just below the ear, you know immediately what it is.

“I said,” the voice repeated, “on your feet. Are you deaf, wizard?”

You also have a pretty good idea what’s going on. It means the king wants to see you. “All right,” I muttered through a mouthful of sleep, “I heard you the first time.”

\* \* \*

They made me run, seven miles in the pitch dark. I hate running.

\* \* \*

“Thank you,” the king said gravely, “for finding the time to see me.”

You genuinely don’t know if he’s trying to be funny, or whether he isn’t actually aware of how a royal summons is carried out. He must know, surely. But in that case, why pretend otherwise?

Actually, I quite like him; the Great Elephant, Heaven-Thunders-The-Truth, He-Who-Eats-Up-The-World. He has shrewd, sad eyes and he speaks quite quietly. He’s the sort of man who, if he was someone else and you met him at a wedding or a clan meeting or something, you’d think, here’s someone worth talking to. Everybody he ever meets is scared stiff of him, of course—me included, it goes without saying—and with very good reason. I imagine he’s equally terrified, all

the time. On the whole, I'd say he copes better than most people would.

"You came quickly."

"Yes, Lord. I ran all the way."

A faint smile. "Such energy. You must be exhausted."

Another trick he has is saying something like that and then shutting up, dead quiet, and sitting there perfectly still, looking at you. Naturally, you feel you've got to say something just to break the silence, before it drowns the entire world. And anything you say will, of course, be tactless, disrespectful, wrong and held against you for the rest of your painfully short life. But I was dog tired—the snake bounces about in my head when I run, and it feels like it weighs as much as a grown man—and I couldn't be bothered. But then, I have the inestimable advantage of not fearing death. Well, not much.

"You sent for me," I said.

"Did I? Oh yes. I almost forgot. I'm very angry with you."

My throat locked solid. "I'm sorry to hear that. What did I do?"

He covered his mouth with his hand. "I gather my late brother had a daughter."

"Several," I said, without thinking. He looked at me; mild surprise, more than anything else. Several—six, to be precise, and he had them all killed. And quite right, too.

“One I didn’t know about.”

“Yes.”

“And now she’s dead.”

I chose my words carefully. “I believe so.”

He nodded slowly, as if what I’d said was the crucial deciding factor in a momentous decision. I caught sight of something out of the corner of my eye and quickly identified it with my peripheral vision. Then I woke up the snake and told her to get busy.

“The same woman who bore my brother a daughter bore him a son,” he said quietly. “Is that true?”

What a question. How was I supposed to know? Incredibly fortunate, therefore, that the king’s dead brother was now standing behind him, looking over his shoulder, with a look of mild disdain on his face. I lifted my head and caught his eye. He nodded.

“I believe so, Lord,” I said.

“So I have a nephew,” said the king. “Still alive.”

Another nod. “I don’t know, Lord.”

“Liar.” He said the word gently, the way a dog puts a dead bird in your hand. “He’s still alive. I want you to find him.”

Behind his shoulder, a brisk shake of the head and a ferocious scowl. I risked a wink. “Of course. Straight away. I’ll do my very best.”

There were two of them now; his late majesty the prince, and his wretched daughter, who of course I'd seen before. She was nursing a baby in her arms, as if to drive the point home. The snake, of course, was no help. She'd curled round the girl's ankle and was rubbing her head against her leg. Sometimes I swear that snake thinks it's a dog.

"When you've found him," the king went on, "come straight here and tell me. You'll be admitted right away, any time, day or night. You will not tell anybody about what we've talked about."

A statement of fact rather than an order. I called back the snake. "Lord," I said.

"Thank you so much for your time. I won't keep you any longer."

You back out of the king's presence, keeping your eyes fixed on him until he can no longer see you. As I retreated, I heard something scuttling overhead in the thatch. The other royal personage nodded to me just as I was about to heave myself out through the door-hole. I left the two of them together. Enjoy, I thought.

The guards outside, who'd brought me there, gave me a cold stare as though they'd never seen me before. I walked home, quickly. My feet hurt.

\* \* \*

There are worse lives, believe me. Shorter lives, too. I had six brothers, and now there's only me. My brothers went off when they got their call-up, and I never saw them alive again. They tell me they made a good end, in a splendid battle which we won, and they're quite happy and satisfied. Don't feel sorry for us, they say, we're sorry for you, stuck behind there in that rotten place. They, so they tell me, are soldiers in the army of Heaven. Fine.

The snake found me when I was eight years old, bathing in the river. She must've been lying on the bottom, dead still, pretending to be a root or a stick; I didn't see her. She glided up through the water and slowly coiled herself around my trunk—I remember, I was so scared I couldn't move or struggle, all I thought was, I hope it won't hurt too much being crushed to death. You can tell I was never very bright, even as a child.

Hello, she said in my head. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm going to be your friend. There's nothing to be afraid of.

(Three lies, one after another)

It was only then that I figured out what was happening. Hello, I said, can you hear me?

Loud and clear, she said.

Am I going to be a wizard?

At that age, of course, you don't know how to keep your thoughts separate from talking-to-the-snake. I don't want to be a wizard, I thought. I want to be a soldier like my brothers.

Fool, she said kindly. In ten years' time all your brothers will be dead. So would you have been, without me. I've saved your life. You should be grateful.

Oh, I thought; and that was all, really. I accepted my brothers' deaths, then and there, and I never said anything to them. Will I have to go away and live with a smelly old man in a cave?

It wasn't getting any better. I'd seen a doctor once, and I'd been terrified—as intended, naturally. Suddenly I had a picture of me as a terrifying, smelly old man, with bits of bone and skin and bladder sewn into in my tangled hair. I was grinning, and everybody was scared to death of me. All right, I thought, I can be that.

Fool, she said again. It's not like that at all. I'm going to make you clever and wise. Don't you want to be clever?

As I said, I was a particularly stupid child. Half-wit, my mother called me; here, Half-wit, fetch the water, wipe your nose, stir this. It'd've been much better if I was clever.

Yes, she said, much. Instead of being stupider than everyone, you'll be smarter. Wouldn't that be fine?

But wizards don't marry and have wives and children, I thought. That's a bad thing. I'm not sure why, but it is.

I could feel her shifting round in my head, like a dog making a nest in a blanket before it goes to sleep. Are you afraid of death? She asked.

I suppose so. I haven't thought about it much.

Are you sad when people die? People you love.

I don't know. It's never happened.

She sort of flexed her coils, and I could feel them pressing against the inside of my skull. I probably made some sort of whimpering noise, but she ignored me. It will, she said, believe me. Listen, I'm about to start making you clever. Death is nothing, it isn't important. It only matters because the people who are left behind, the people who love the person who dies, are very unhappy. In fact, it's the worst unhappiness there is. But a wizard can see and hear dead people just like seeing and hearing the living. You can talk to them any time you like. That's the most wonderful thing, love without loss; because love should be the best thing in the world, but because you lose the people you love, love is the worst thing; it hurts more than anything else, it's an enemy to be avoided at all costs unless you want to spend most of your life in pain. Except for wizards. That's why being one is the best thing of all, better than being

strong or rich, better even than being king. And that's what I've just given you. Isn't that wonderful?

I suppose so.

You suppose so. Now be quiet, I need to go to sleep.

\* \* \*

My life has always been a sequence of impossible tasks, and this latest one was entirely in keeping with the trend. Go away and find a boy whose name and location nobody knows—nobody living, at any rate; normally, that wouldn't be such a problem. Between them, my invisible friends and the snake would be able to handle a job like that. The impossibility comes in because the dead man who knew the answer to the question obviously wasn't going to tell me; more impossible still, because if I did find the wretched kid, the dead prince would be seriously angry with me. Between death by impaling for failure to carry out the king's orders and death by haunting for succeeding, there wasn't a lot to choose. I've said I'm not afraid of death, and that's true. Dying, though, is another matter. Dying slowly in great pain is something I actively try to avoid.

I slept badly that night, which was enormously inconvenient. When I finally managed to nod off, there was nobody there but my old master; a terrible sign, because although he's responsible for me, in this world and the next, he never could stand the sight of me.

“The king said, find this boy. You live to serve the king. You serve the king as the sandal serves the foot, it has no other purpose. Therefore you must summon the prince, against his will if needs be, and force him to tell you where the boy is. You have no choice in the matter.”

Stupid old fool. “Yes,” I said, “and if I do that, I’ll have the prince’s face inches from my own for the rest of my life, scowling and yelling at me. How long will I last? Ten days?”

He shrugged. “You don’t matter,” he said.

He was like that when he was alive. “There must be another way,” I said.

“There is not. When I clap my hands, you will wake up.”

“No, don’t do -” Too late. I sat up and found I was soaked in sweat. The snake shifted unhappily in my head. She doesn’t like the heat, which is really strange, for a snake.

Why me? I asked her. Because you’re young, she replied. That’s typical of her. Factually correct and completely unhelpful.

\* \* \*

I thought about it for the rest of the night and most of the following morning, and the more I thought, the more obvious it became. I was going to have to kill the king, and set up this unknown boy in his place. No other way out.

I really didn't want to. The kings of the House of the Spear, Great Elephants, Eaters-Up-Of-The-World, have been a pretty useless lot, but His current Majesty was one of the better specimens, and since he'd come to the throne, life hadn't got much better but it hadn't got spectacularly worse. This made him a Good King, and the odds were pretty overwhelming that this kid I was proposing to replace him with would be a complete disaster, like his grandfather, great-uncle, great-great-grandfather, and so on back into the cloudy realm of faint memory.

Furthermore, although I could think of half a dozen powerful lords who'd want him dead, all of them would also want to take his place, not see the royal spear and mat pass to some gawping brat of no relevance. Also, killing a king isn't easy, which is why we still have kings. In all probability, it'd go horribly wrong and I'd be killed. But that was a probability rather than a certainty; two certainties, as I explained earlier. It really didn't help one little bit that I liked the man. Oh, and I had three days, four at the most, before I'd be deemed to have failed in my task and executed. No pressure.

To kill a king (please listen carefully; I'm only going to say this once) you need three things: opportunity, the forbearance of others, and a weapon. Opportunity doesn't come much better than *come straight here and tell me, you'll be admitted*

*right away, any time, day or night.* The forbearance of others can take many forms, from active conspiracy to a guard falling asleep at his post; some you can plan for, others the snake can arrange, some are pure luck. The weapon? Spoilt for choice. Of course, you need one other thing. You need to want to do it.

Meanwhile, I had a job to do.

The snake has her own way of doing things; she doesn't tell and I don't ask. This time I let her go, then climbed up the mountain and spent the day sitting in a cave, my back, thinking hard about how to go about murdering the king.

Just as it was starting to get dark, she came back. She'd found the boy. He was in an army camp about a day's walk away to the south. Simple as that.

\* \* \*

Like so many people these days, I never knew my father. He went off to war, my mother told me, and that was the end of him. Of course, she wasn't my mother, though she never told me that. But the snake told me, bless her malicious heart, when I was nine years old. The subject came up in a discussion we were having about my future. We still talked occasionally then.

I don't want to go away, I remember telling her. I don't want to go and live a long way away, in a cave with a smelly old man. I'd miss my mother and my sisters.

She's not your mother. They aren't your sisters.

Liar, I said, and the snake hissed inside my head and swelled her coils until I was sure my skull would burst. Liar, I repeated. It's not true.

You know it's true, she said. Everything I tell you is true. Even if I wanted to deceive you, I couldn't. We're too close.

Even at that early stage, I knew that. So who's my real mother?

She lives a long way away. The man she's married to is not your father. She doesn't want to see you, ever. The woman who looks after you was given twenty head to take you away. She's fond of you, but she's not your mother. You have nobody, except me.

The snake doesn't lie, that's the thing. The snake doesn't love me. Love doesn't come anywhere near it. Love compared with what the snake feels for me is a rabbit standing next to an elephant. I am her soul, and she is mine. Unfortunately.

There; she didn't like me saying that. She tells the truth but doesn't always like hearing it.

So, one dark night, I took an old rusty spear-blade that had belonged to my grandfather, my mother's father, the father of the woman who wasn't my mother, and very quietly I sawed a hole in the reeds and crept out of the hut, across the cattle-pen, through a gap in the thorn hedge and away. I walked for three days, with nothing to eat and no sandals on my feet (I'd never

been more than an hour's walk from home before) until I reached a high mountain standing on its own in the middle of the plain. The snake showed me a kloof whose mouth was almost hidden by thorn-bushes and scrub. It was just before mid-day, and the shadow of the mountain made the kloof as dark as midnight. Well go on, the snake told me. So I threaded my way in past the bushes and called out, "Hello?"

My master was sitting on a stool in the middle of the cattle-pen; just sitting, his hands on his knees, his head a little to one side. He was a big old man with white hair in braids, and there were bits of things I didn't like to look at stuffed or caught in the weave. He must've seen me but gave no sign.

"Hello," I repeated.

He can't hear you, said a voice, and another voice laughed. Another one, a woman's, said, You must be the boy. Well?

"Yes," I said out loud, "or I think so. I've come to learn to be a wizard."

Several other voices laughed; a man's voice said, Not a wizard, a doctor. That's your first mistake.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't know."

That's no excuse, said the voice, and the female said, Leave him alone, don't pick on him. A lot of voices laughed at that. You need to learn, said the nasty male voice. If we're kind and gentle, you won't learn anything. But this—and something

slapped the side of my face so hard I staggered—will make sure you don't get it wrong ever again.

“Thank you,” I said.

They found that hilarious, but I'd said the right thing, and from then on, they were mostly on my side. Gradually, of course, as time went by, I got to know them all, though some were more friendly than others. Mostly they were doctors, long dead; they hung about the kloof the way old people hang about the smithy in the cold weather, for the company and to keep warm. Some of them never told me who they were, who they'd been, or even if they'd ever been human, and it's not the sort of thing you ask about. Mostly, like I said, they were good to me, and when they weren't, I probably deserved it.

Anything even vaguely like an education or training, I got from them; my master was pretty much useless, as the voices didn't hesitate to point out when they thought he couldn't hear them. He'd forget about me for weeks at a time, then suddenly remember and try and teach me something—but usually it was garbled or no use for anything or just plain wrong. The voices wanted me to kill him and take his place; as is only fitting, they used to say, which I didn't understand. I could see their point, but I'm not a natural killer; it's something I do rarely, and then only when I have to, usually when it's too late. That, they assured me, is a weakness that would hold me back and

ultimately bring me to grief. I hope they're wrong, though I have to say, they've always been right about everything.

But they taught me to see, and to listen, and how to make the snake do what I wanted. They told me the things the snake could do and the things she couldn't, and how to summon the dead and the other spirits. Does this mean I can order you about now? I asked, and because they couldn't lie they said nothing. They taught me how to herd the clouds and make lightning, how to smell for poison and witchcraft, how to heal injuries and illnesses, and how to hurt people. All useful stuff.

Then, when I was sixteen, my master died suddenly. It shows how useless he was, and how much the spirits disliked him, that his death came as much of a surprise to him as to me, and all the rest of us. He was sitting outside in the sun one morning, and a big lump of rock crumbled away from the side of the mountain and fell on his head.

No great loss, they told me, but I was sorry for him, even so. He was one of those people who shouldn't have been born with the gift but was anyway. He thought he was a much better doctor than he really was, and was therefore continually disappointed; needless to say, he blamed everybody and everything else, and so went through life in a constant state of anger and resentment. I buried him under the door of his hut,

and then it actually sank in. All this was mine now, I was the wizard of the Black Kloof, and I was on my own.

Which is why, as people are forever reminding me, I'm young to be a doctor. I'm ten times better at it than he was, and he never liked me anyway. But I miss him, even so. The snake told me once that the spirits loosened that rock and made it fall when it did. I choose not to believe her.

\* \* \*

My snake led me to the army camp where, I have to say, I was not made welcome. Members of my profession, even young ones who don't wear all the get-up, aren't popular with the military. This may be because unscrupulous kings over the years have used doctors to get rid of over-mighty generals with spurious accusations of witchcraft. If so, I don't blame them one bit.

I hadn't got the faintest idea who I was supposed to be looking for, let alone his name or a description or anything like that, but she slipped out of my ear and bustled along in front of me, and I followed. She led me to the smithy. It was going to be one of those days.

Smiths are another section of the community who don't like us. I can see why; we're too much alike. We say that a smith is a wizard without the talent. They don't say what they say about us to our faces, and nobody wants to tell us, but we

can guess. This particular smith was a big fat man, about fifty years old, with a headring gleaming with sweat and burn-scars all over his arms and chest. He stood in front of the anvil, wiping his forehead and holding a half-done spearhead in the red coals. Behind him, a lad of about my age was pumping a double bellows. “What do you want?” asked the smith.

A very good question. Fortunately, the snake was back inside my head and spoke for me. “You had a sister,” I said.

He froze, then turned and scowled at the boy. “Go away,” he said. The boy let go of the bellows handles as though they were red hot and ran out. “You,” said the smith, “make yourself useful and work the bellows. I don’t want to lose the heat.”

Anything to oblige. Needless to say, I don’t know the first thing about blacksmiths’ work. Curiously and fortuitously, the snake does. I got a nice smooth rhythm going. “I asked you a question,” I said.

“Who the hell are you, anyway?”

I smiled, took one hand off the handles and drew it round my head, like a coiling snake. Everybody knows what that means.

“A bit young, aren’t you?”

“So I gather. Well?”

I could see he was considering his alternatives, of which he seemed to feel there were two. The first, which I could see he

favoured, was bashing me on the head with his hammer and shoving my face in the fire. Reluctantly, he opted to go with the second.

“What about her?”

Behind him, I could see three women; one old, one middle-aged with a baby on her hip, and one young and very beautiful. “She’s dead.”

“I know. What’s it to you?”

“Your mother had a long nose and a pointed chin, and a scar just above her left eyebrow. You had a brother, but he died when he was a baby. But you loved your grandmother best, and she loved you.”

He winced. “All right,” he said, “you’re a wizard. What about my sister?”

Sometimes you just have to guess. “She had two children,” I said. “Their father wasn’t her husband.”

He grinned at me. “She had two sons and three daughters.”

And sometimes you guess wrong. “Her lover was the prince,” I said. “The one we can’t talk about.”

He looked at me, then down at the spearhead, which was starting to show white round the edges. Slowly he lifted it out and laid it on the ashes. “You can stop pumping,” he said.

I was glad to hear that. Bellows are more work than they look. “She married a man over by the White River,” I said. “He died recently, along with his daughter and all his household.”

The smith shrugged. “I heard he was a traitor,” he said.

“Maybe,” I replied. “It’s one of those words, the more people use it, the less it means. Now,” I went on, “the prince’s daughter stayed with her mother, but not the boy. What became of him, do you know?”

He wiped sweat out of his eyes. “No idea,” he said. “The boy was the older of the two, by a year or so. Because of who his father was, she sent him away as soon as he was born. Then the prince started the war and got killed, so none of us wanted to know any more about anything, if you get what I mean. Who else knows about this?”

“Nobody,” I said. “Just you, me and the snake. She won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

“How about you?”

“Oh, I do as I’m told.” That made him grin, in spite of himself. “Why should I want to tell anybody, anyway? You don’t know anything, you just said.”

He’s lying, of course, the snake told me. Yes, I told her, I’d guessed that.

“I haven’t heard anything about the boy since he was born,” he said firmly. “I wouldn’t know him if I met him in the road.”

“Quite,” I said. “And how could the boy be a threat to the king if nobody knows him and he’s got no way of proving he’s got a claim to the throne?” I paused for a moment. “Some people might say that’s a pity,” I said.

He stiffened, like a splash of hot lead falling into water. “Don’t talk like that,” he said.

“Why not? Nobody here but us and the rats in the thatch. There’s some people who might say, no matter how bad this boy is, he couldn’t be worse. Pointless, of course, if he can’t even be found.”

There’s something unnerving about the sight of a huge man, strong as a bull, terrified. “Now who would say something like that?”

“Oh, people I’ve talked to. Quite a lot of them, actually. They’re saying, nobody wants another civil war, not like the last one, and there’s not many who’d be willing to march out and fight in one, and who’d blame them? But if, heaven forbid, the king was to fall down dead, through illness—” I paused, and smiled. “Or witchcraft, even. He’s got no sons, he’s always been very careful about that, no brothers, no living relatives of any sort, so who’s going to take his place? The country needs a

king, someone's got to do it. And if there's a nephew—" I shrugged. "I think a lot of people would rest easier knowing there's an heir to the throne, don't you?"

He looked at me like a drowning man. "What did you say your name was?"

"It's not a very interesting name," I told him. "Even if I told you, you'd have forgotten it a moment later. Talking of names," I added.

He looked away. "He didn't have one," he said. "I told you, they got him out of there practically as soon as he was born. What he's called now I have no idea."

"But the people you sent him to," I said. "They had names. Most people do."

"I don't remember."

I smiled. I didn't want to. I quite liked the man. "I'm a doctor," I said, "I have medicines for a poor memory. And other things too, of course."

He's going to say it, I thought. He said it. "Are you threatening me?"

"Yes."

They never expect you to say that. He actually shuffled back a step or two, as if that'd do him any good. The sight of so much cowardice made my skin crawl. "Leave me alone, will

you?” he said, raising his voice (but it came out as a rather louder whine). “I don’t know anything.”

I hate doing this sort of thing. “Maybe not,” I said. “But it’s all right, I’ll know if you’re telling the truth. I’ll send my snake into your head, and she’ll tell me if there’s anything in there or not.”

I can’t do this, of course. Nobody can.

By now he’d retreated so far he was backed up against the anvil stand, with nowhere to go. “Please,” he said, “it’s my sister’s boy, if they find him they’ll kill him. He’s all that’s left of her. Please.”

I’m not sure I’d have had the heart to carry on if he hadn’t made a spectacle of himself by grovelling. But all I could feel was contempt. “That’s enough,” I said. “Now, the more you can hold still, the less damage she’ll do. You really do need to cooperate if you don’t want to spend the rest of your life sitting against a wall somewhere.”

“All right,” he said. I could hardly bear to look at him. I wanted to squash him, like a nasty insect. But he told me a name. It hit me like—well, like the rock that had fallen on my master. It crushed me flat. Like an idiot, I said, “Are you sure?” or “Say again?” or something like that. He repeated the name; also her father’s name, and where they lived. I think I said,

“Thank you, I’m sorry,” or something of the kind, and then I stumbled out into the light, not looking back.

\* \* \*

Well, so much for that idea.

The thing is, I don’t go looking for trouble. Some people do. Some people delight in the thunder and the stamping and the shouting and the screams of dying men. Some people can only find peace in war; without fighting and conflict, they’re like newly-planted seedlings in dry weather, drooping and parched. Some people can only live if there’s death all around them. I guess it must be the thrill. I’m not like that.

So all the stuff that continually pounds down on my head and in through my ears, like rain after thunder, is wasted on me, and I think that’s a shame, when there’s so many people out there who’d really appreciate it. I’d much rather stay home in the kloof and cure oxen with fly-bites and redwater fever. A man could get old and fat doing that, and people would be pleased to see him. But I think she’d be bored stiff. I think she likes the other stuff. It’s the only explanation I can come up with, at this moment.

\* \* \*

I had to abandon the plan because the name the smith told me was my mother’s, sorry, the name of the woman I used to

think of as my mother, and the place he named was where I grew up, before I came to live in the Black Kloof. Ridiculous.

I'd been living back in the kloof about three months when I had a dream. I was lying curled up on my mat, and all these terrifying old men came again and stood round me in a ring, looking down at me and frowning, as if they couldn't quite bring themselves to believe I was true. At first I was scared of them, but they kept on staring and muttering, and I knew that sort of thing was rude, so after a while I stopped being scared and got annoyed. "What?" I said.

One old man, who seemed really put out about something, said, "So you're him, then."

"Me?" I said. "I'm nobody. I'm not important. Please go away."

They looked at each other, and one of them said, "Are you quite sure? He looks so—" He didn't finish his sentence, and the others just shrugged.

"What?" I repeated. "What are you talking about? Is there something wrong with me, or something?"

Then one of them laughed, but it wasn't a funny laugh. "You know what, son," he said, sounding as though I'd just spat in his beer, "it'd have been better for everybody if you'd never been born. Come on," he added, to the others. "There's nothing

we can do about it, that's for sure." And then they all started to walk away, and I woke up.

I couldn't kill the king and put the prince's long-lost son on the throne because that long-lost son was apparently me. So the plan was out of the question; for many reasons, but principally because I'm a doctor, a wizard. No wizard has ever been king, it's unthinkable. For that to happen, a king would have to have a son born with the talent, and send him away to learn the craft under some master, and no king would ever do that. No wizard born outside the royal family could ever usurp the throne, because all his fellow-wizards would band together to stop him, and then there'd be a spirit war which would stamp the land flat. All the cattle would die, all the children would be still-born, there would be so much lightning and no rain— So that's that. The People of Heaven wouldn't stand for it, either. If I was to be king, they'd tear me in pieces, or die in their thousands trying.

So; right back to where we started.

\* \* \*

"You did say," I told him. "Any time, day or night."

He grunted like a pig. "Did I?"

"Yes."

He sighed. It was the middle of the night. He'd been with his youngest wife, not sleeping. "I must have meant it, then. So, you found him."

I tried not to look at the faces crowding round us, but it was hard. I recognised some of them, but most were unfamiliar, though the family resemblance was quite strong in some of them. The huge, grim-faced man with the wild eyes could only have been the Black One himself, the Lion, He-Stamp-Them-Flat, the founder of the kingdom; is there anyone living who wouldn't give his right arm for a chance to see Him, find out what He really looked like? But I didn't dare, I could only peek at him on the very edge of my vision. My ancestors, I realised; what an extraordinary thought. The Black One was my great-great-great-great grandfather.

"Are you sure we're alone?" I said.

He laughed out loud. "Oh, quite sure," he said. "I don't want to share this with anybody."

Me included. I wasn't at all sure I knew what to do about that. Still, I'd run out of options, so what could I do? Think of something, and quickly. "No rats in the thatch, even?"

He looked at me for a moment; then, with a degree of speed and power remarkable in someone so fat, he stood up and drove the little red-handled spear he always carried into the thatch above his head, right up to the socket. He pulled it

out, drove it in again about a foot to the left, and so on about a dozen times. Then he sat down again. “No rats,” he said. “Go on.”

The show of violence had unnerved me, and I had to pull myself together before I could speak. One thrust of that little toy spear, so very quick, not upwards this time, was all it would take, and all my troubles would be over. I’m not afraid of death, remember. Even so.

“Very well,” I said, and I told him a name. It was a lie. It was the name of the son of a very big important man, commander of five regiments, loved by all the people for his fairness, his generosity, his wisdom, his courage. Either of them, father or son, would have made a good king. A stable kingdom with a not-quite-so-good king and a standing army can do without men like that.

I felt the snake swell her coils in rage, because I’d just told a lie. The pain was unbearable. I didn’t dare breathe, for fear of crying out. The pressure kept on building, and I felt my eyeballs bulge.

“Are you sure?” he said.

I couldn’t speak, so I nodded.

He looked at me. “Are you feeling all right?” he said. “You look awful.”

“I’m fine,” I croaked. “Thank you.”

(As I said, I quite like him. Just occasionally, there are these flashes of humanity through the clouds of Heaven. Just occasionally. If he hadn't had to be a king, he'd have been all right. He didn't have the choice, of course. Not like some—)

"You're sure," he repeated. I nodded again. My head was about to crack open, like an egg hatching. "It seems so unlikely," he went on. "Of all the people, why him? In the war against my brother, he was on my side. Really on my side, I was sure of it. I can't believe he'd have taken in my brother's son. It makes no sense."

"Rich men like to collect weapons," I said. Luckily I'd learned the speech by heart beforehand. "They don't necessarily plan on using them, but they like to own them—you know; fine spears, ironwood kerries, axes with rhinoceros-horn handles. And maybe a man might get to thinking, if ever I had to defend myself against the king, I'd need a pretty special weapon, something practically unique. And maybe a clever tactician, an experienced soldier or someone like that, might feel the need to start defending himself before the attack comes."

He thought about that for a long time, and I could see him slowly getting angry—not the sort of anger he does for show, because it's expected of him, with shouting and arm-waving, but the quiet, tight-lipped kind that comes from being hurt and

frightened and betrayed. Meanwhile, the pain in my head wasn't getting better, but it had stopped getting worse.

"Are you sure?" he said.

I nodded, and this time I couldn't stop myself, because the snake swelled alarmingly and I had to cry out. He looked at me. "What's the matter?" he said.

I managed to grind out the words. "My head hurts, Lord."

"You chose a strange time to have a headache." He frowned, then looked past me towards the doorway. "Apart from me and you," he said.

"Nobody, Lord."

He rubbed his lower lip with his thumb. I don't know anybody else who does that. "There's an argument for saying that letting you live would be weakness."

I was distressed to see a couple of my ancestors nodding their heads behind him. "No, Lord," I said, "with respect. Letting the boy live would be weakness. Letting me live would be enlightened self-interest. Killing me would be a waste. If your father was here now, he'd agree with me," I added, untruthfully.

"You're bleeding," he said. "There's blood coming out of your ear."

I gave him a weak grin. "It does that sometimes," I said.

He frowned and peered at the side of my head. I could feel the blood trickling down my neck, like a snake crawling. At last he said, “There’s no point killing you. You’ll be dead anyway inside a week. You’ve been bewitched. There’s maggots in your brain or something.”

I really wanted to laugh. I managed not to. “That would explain it,” I said.

\* \* \*

Even now I’m not sure why the snake didn’t kill me for telling lies. She wanted to, I know. She said so. Her story is that she tried to do it, but my skull was too thick to pop. She always tells the truth. I don’t believe her.

It was touch and go, though, for a day or two. I got out of there and back to the guest hut, where I fainted half in and half out of the doorway, on my knees, with my ass in the air. When I came round, I couldn’t move my left arm, and the left side of my face was frozen. It makes talking difficult, as you’ve probably gathered. I sound like I’m drunk, which is so unfair.

For weeks, apparently, I talked nothing but drivel. I find that odd, because I can remember having a lot of long, intelligent conversations during that time; with many of the great names in my profession, with interesting spirits I’d never come across before, with people I used to know, with my relations. I even got to talk to the Black One himself.

He came and sat beside me, or rather he squatted on his heels, perfectly balanced. He was much younger than I'd expected. He was frowning. I didn't dare speak. He scratched his ear, then looked at his fingertip. My mouth was as dry as shield-leather.

"Hello," he said suddenly, and his voice was much higher than I'd thought it would be. "You don't know me. I'm your great-great-great-grandfather." He grinned awkwardly. "Silly, really. I don't feel old enough to be anybody's grandfather, or anything like that. But I died young, you see."

He sounded almost apologetic, as though he'd been inconsiderate. "Lord," I mumbled. "Great one, Eater-Up-Of-Elephants."

He gave me a look. "Yes, all right," he said. "I don't actually like that stuff. I used to," he added with a little grin, "and look where it got me. My brothers killed me, you know."

"Yes, Lord."

"So." He put the tips of his fingers together, aligning each one precisely. He had long, slim hands, like a girl. Everything about him was precise, delicate, elegant, even though he was so big and broad. He hadn't lived long enough to run to fat, of course. "You're the last of the family, then."

"Am I, Lord?"

He nodded. “My children and my children’s children have seen to that,” he said sadly, “slaughtering each other till there’s nobody left. I don’t know why they had to do that, it’s stupid. You’d have thought, the first duty of a king is to make sure he’s got a son to take his place. Not our lot, apparently. Too scared of being murdered by their own kids. I ask you, what kind of way is that to live? No,” he went on, “you’re the last of us, and you won’t have any children, being a wizard and all.”

I’d been figuring it out in my head. When he died, he’d been just six years older than I was at that moment. He’d started young, of course. Won his first major battle when he was fifteen years old. “I wish I’d been a wizard,” he said.

“Lord?”

“Never had the talent, of course,” he said. “I’ve always felt bad about that. A wizard’s got it all, hasn’t he? Power, cattle, everybody’s scared stiff of him, even kings; you can make people do what you want and they’d never dare try anything with you. Wizards are so much better than kings.”

“Lord.”

“Well, it’s true,” he said. “I mean, look at our family. You know how many of us lived to be thirty? Four, out of fourteen. You know how many of us died natural deaths? None, that’s how many. Not one.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Is that true, Lord?”

“Are you calling me a liar?” For a moment, I thought lightning was going to strike me and burn me up. Then he grinned sheepishly. “Sorry,” he said, “force of habit. I always made a point of taking offence at pretty much everything. It made people scared of me, you see. Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

He shrugged, then went on; “Wizards, now, they all live to be old men, respected, looked up to, and the older they get, the more people respect them. Opposite of what happens with everyone else, when you get old, nobody bothers with you, you’re just a nuisance. Even kings. Your sons sit there watching you, waiting for you to die, and it’s them people talk to and listen to, because you won’t be around much longer and they want to be in with whoever’s going to take your place. No, wizards are much better than kings. Well, you know that. You had that idiot eating out of your hand.”

“It didn’t feel like it, Lord.”

He frowned. “Really? I thought you handled him really well. Smooth as butter, I thought.”

“I was frightened, Lord. I was very frightened.”

That made him laugh. “Well, of course you were,” he said. “That’s natural. I mean, look at me. I was scared stiff most of the time. Absolutely petrified.”

“Lord?”

“Oh yes.” He nodded seriously. “Oh, I yelled and roared and carried on like I was wrong in the head; people respect that, they don’t dare answer you back, even if you’re doing something bloody stupid. And I went on about how being brave is so wonderful, and if anybody did anything that even looked like cowardice I was down on them like a leopard, no second chances, nothing. You do that, people think ‘he must be really brave.’ But I wasn’t. The number of times I pissed myself down the leg just before we started fighting. But nobody saw, I don’t think, so that was all right.” He shook his head. “Wizards are better. You don’t get to marry and have kids, but that’s probably one of the good things about being a wizard, I don’t know. Really, you’ve got everything. You people aren’t even afraid of death, isn’t that right? That must be wonderful. Like being, I don’t know, free.”

I stared at him. “But Lord,” I said, “you were the greatest king of all time. You conquered the world, you stamped out the tribes like the embers of a fire—” I stopped. He was giving me a sad look and shaking his head slowly. “Lord?”

“You’re smart,” he said, “you should know better. I wasn’t smart, like you are.” Suddenly he laughed. “Believe me,” he said, “I wouldn’t lie to you. Heaven-Thunders-The-Truth, remember?”

“Heaven thunders the truth,” I said. But it didn’t mean anything any more.

\* \* \*

Five years later, when the king was dying, he sent for me. I replied that I was too busy, which was true. He commanded me to attend on him. I didn’t bother to reply.

A lot had changed in that time. The People of Heaven had fought a bitter war against an alliance of their most powerful neighbours and had lost badly; we’d managed to patch up a sort of a peace, but it wouldn’t be long before they’d be back to finish us off. The king’s army was mostly dead; of the survivors, five regiments had crossed the northern border and kept going, until nobody knew where they were, and the king was only still alive because his three senior generals were still trying to decide which of them was going to kill him and take his place. There weren’t enough soldiers left for a civil war, so they were having to talk it through instead.

Meanwhile, the king’s illness, which he’d suffered from on and off for the last five years, had finally broken his will to resist, and he was about to save his loyal people the job. I, on the other hand, had prospered. I’d cured a plague. More to the point, I’d accurately predicted each crippling defeat, with enough circumstantial detail to convince even the most sceptical observer. I was turning away any job that didn’t

interest me, and asking for (and getting) ridiculous fees for the few I condescended to take on. I think it's fair to say I was the only doctor in the country who hadn't messed up at some point in the war. I was universally respected, and if I'd wanted to, I could've chosen who was going to be the next king, and everybody would've accepted my decision. But I chose not to. I was, I gave them to understand, above things like that, who cared only for wisdom. And truth. Heaven no longer thundered it. I did.

So he came to see me instead; unannounced, uninvited. But he still had a bodyguard of two hundred picked veterans; I had about seventy men minding my cattle and doing odd jobs for me, but even if I'd had notice and mustered them to fight, they wouldn't have lasted very long against the guards. So, when two guard captains burst into my cave late one night and said the king was paying me a visit, I just yawned and said yes, I'd been expecting him.

He'd changed. It was a particularly unkind sort of illness. He'd swollen up like a body that's been in the water. His arms and legs were like tree-trunks, and his body was grotesque; his head, though, was more or less the same size, which made him look ridiculous. He couldn't stand or sit, so he had to be carried on a stretcher, with trestles to rest it on. They brought him in, and I didn't look up. "Go away," I said. A moment or so later, I

heard them filing out of the cave. Only then did I lift my head and look at him.

“Hello, uncle,” I said.

His puffed-up cheeks had almost closed his eyes; they were narrow almonds of white, glaring balefully at me. “It’s true, then,” he said.

“Oh yes. How did you find out, by the way? Oh,” I added, because my father was standing over him, He was grinning.

“Is he still there?” asked the king.

“Yes.”

He sighed. “I can’t see him all the time, but I know he’s there, I can feel him.”

My father shrugged and pulled a face. He’s a jolly man, with a good sense of humour. I like him. I wish I’d known him.

“The illness,” I said, “is incurable. You have about five days to live. Then the weight will get too much for your heart and you’ll die. I’m sorry,” I added.

“Was it you?”

Inside my head the snake shifted ominously. All right, I told her, settle down. “Yes,” I said. “I put a spell on you, the night I lied to you. I had to, I’m afraid. It was the only way the snake would forgive me. I’m sorry, you can’t possibly understand that. The point is, I didn’t want to. But there was no other way.”

He nodded as much as he was able to, an inch or so. “The war?” he said. “Did you do that?”

I wanted to look away, but I reckoned I owed him eye-contact. “Yes,” I said. “I bewitched you into arrogance and stupidity. You were half-way there, but the other half was all me. I’m sorry for that, too.”

“You’ve destroyed the country.”

“I know,” I said. “We’re this close to being stamped flat. But it had to happen. The kingdom began with our family, and it’ll end with it. And frankly, no great loss. What did we ever do, apart from kill people?”

He closed his eyes. “If I tell my guards to cut your throat, I wonder if they’ll obey me.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know,” I said. “Would you like to try yourself? You can if you like, though the effort will probably kill you. I’m not bothered, one way or another.”

He was exhausted. Just talking, moving his head a few times, had drained all his strength. “What’s the point?” he said. “It’s all over now.”

“It will be,” I told him, “soon. Was there anything in particular, or did you just want to hear what you know already?”

His breathing was slow and shallow. Maybe I should've said, five days if you don't exert yourself. "Do one thing for me."

"It depends what it is."

"Make him go away," he replied, very softly. "Please. It's only for a short while, and then he'll have me forever. Can you do that?"

I looked at my father, who shook his head. "I'm sorry," I said. "He wants to stay till the end."

"Then give me some poison," the king murmured. "I can't stand him any more."

"You should have thought of that before you killed him." But I was already mixing two powders together in a little gourd of water. He couldn't see that, of course. Neither of them could. "Drink this," I told him, and he managed to get his lips apart a tiny crack. "It'll make you feel better."

\* \* \*

I lied, of course. The war was nothing to do with me. My snake let me tell the lie because it counted as part of the king's punishment. In fact, it was her idea. But I do think the war has been a good thing, broadly speaking. It's put an end to the line of kings that began with the Black One, and I don't think the People of Heaven will have kings after that, just some sort of governor answerable to whoever conquers us. Whoever that

turns out to be, they can't possibly be worse for the people than my family. Can they?

You have to ask yourself the question; does the snake choose you because you've got the talent, or do you have the talent because the snake chooses you? Everybody's always told me it's the first one—wizards, spirits, the snake, everybody who ought to know.

But take me as a case in point. Before she found me, I was stupid. I can just barely remember what it was like. You know when you're sitting inside, and outside there's two people talking, you can hear the voices but you can't make out the words. After the snake found me, I could hear all the words. I think that if ever the snake left me, which she can't do, she'd die; me too probably—but if that were to happen, I'd go back to being stupid again. Does that sound like the talent to you? I think the talent is the snake, and the other way about. I think that's why the snake chose me; because my father was the prince, and someone somewhere decided that making the last lost surviving son of the royal house into a wizard would have interesting results, which would facilitate some larger strategy. Otherwise, the whole thing's just one damn coincidence after another, and I don't believe it. The snake says otherwise, of course, and she's incapable of falsehood.

But I lied, yes. That makes it twice now that Heaven, as embodied in me, hasn't exactly thundered the truth. I don't care, and I don't suppose anyone else does either. Not even the snake.

After all, why not? Heaven should tell lies from time to time. Everybody else does.

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*K.J. Parker is the author of the best-selling 'Engineer' trilogy (Devices and Desires, Evil for Evil, The Escapement) as well as the previous 'Fencer' (The Colours in the Steel, The Belly of the Bow, The Proof House) and 'Scavenger' (Shadow, Pattern, Memory) trilogies, and has twice won the World Fantasy Award for Best Novella.*

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## THE MOON OVER RED TREES

by Alette de Bodard

Night over The Red Trees. Clarisse rises from the bed, casting a glance at the moonlight that slowly seeps into the room. Raoul, asleep in his bed with his arms outstretched towards her, groans and shifts, looking for her, but he does not wake up. He used to, when she first came here months ago; but he soon got used to her wandering through the house every night—and tonight of all nights, he knows she won't be able to sleep.

Within her, the magic pulses—a steady beat like the waves of the sea, like the call of a drum—but she's been listening to it for months, and she knows that this night is its last night. After all, nothing lasts forever, not even the spirits' gifts.

Tonight is a time for endings.

In her cotton gown, she pads down the stairs—the tiles under her feet are still warm from the sweltering sun, and the air itself has that heavy, dense quality of CochinChina before the monsoon. Everything is silent; the servants have been given their leave already, and the bookcases stand tall and dark, waiting for the movers to begin their work on the morrow. In

the living room, the Louis XV chairs exude a faint odour of rot—the humidity of the region has not been kind to them—and the ropes of the huge model ship creak on the table, as if yearning for a fair wind.

The secretary desk is at the far end, behind one of the potted plants Raoul takes such pride in exhibiting to his guests—talking about the wonderful way things bloom and grow here; about the wonderful new life one can make here, away from the Métropole—about how the indigenous population only needs firm guidance to exhibit its typical traits of courage and adaptability, how quickly they have soaked in French history and culture, how they can speak the language almost as well as native Frenchmen....

At that point he'd look at her, beaming with that dimple in his cheek and his whole heart in his eyes—and her own treacherous heart would give a stutter and stop in her chest, as if an icy hand had squeezed it. The magic would swirl and stutter, too, as if there was something she ought to remember, something that would make her angry if she paused for long enough—but the feeling would go away, leaving only that pleasant numbness of being with Raoul.

Tonight... tonight, however, she's not numb, or frozen. The tatters of the magic are pulsing through her, but they're no longer enough to hold back everything—there's an urgency in

her she can't fully understand, a sense of purpose that feels alien to her.

The top part of the mahogany secretary is a glass-front case, in which Raoul keeps the curios that he has gathered from his years in Tonkin and Cochinchina: yellowed ivory statues of the Daoist Immortals from Chinese temples, porcelain dishes said to be exact replicas of the ones used at the Imperial Court in Hue, and a white statue of the bodhisattva Quan Am—and it's an odd thing, because she's seen that statue for months and never even thought of it, but tonight she finds herself mouthing a prayer in a language she's almost forgotten, a simple sentence asking Quan Am to relieve the suffering of mortals, and she doesn't quite know which way the words come bubbling out of—a feeling of standing on the edge of a dark abyss that frightens her. What else has she forgotten, when she was here with Raoul?

There is a sword in one of the middle shelves—a curved, single-edged weapon that looks... brand new, almost gaudy, with a simple straight hilt, and a grey blade—except that the blade is covered with intricate etchings, patterns that swirl and dance even as she watches—coalescing into the hints of familiar shapes, then breaking apart again as soon as her eye focuses on them. It... it ought to remind her of something, but the

memories elude her—there's anger and a crushing emptiness, and she can't hold on to the feelings for long.

The magic pulses again—draws her gaze to the bottom shelf of the case, the one nearest the desk. Behind the jade ornaments and the alignment of ornate hairpins are two scroll-sheaths, ornate copper cylinders with sculpted dragons, their snouts meeting lightly, as if for a kiss; their eyes tiny beads of black stone, their moustaches flowing twisting twigs of metal.

It's not the sheaths that matter, she knows—with that same absolute certainty that put the words of the prayer to Quan Am in her mouth.

She reaches out. The case opens with a creak that must have been heard all the way to Ha Noi—for a moment, she stands still, her heart hammering against her ribs. If Raoul should discover she's stealing from him, that she's no better than the workers he derides for their dishonesty— that she's linked to the sword, though that last thought surfaces for only a moment before it disappears back into the morass of magic within her—

But nothing happens; there is only the merciless light of the room; and her hand slips between the wooden shelves, with a grace and fluidity that seems to come from a faraway place.

She puts her hand into the pockets of her gown and pulls out rice papers covered with ornate, flowing calligraphy—

though she knows they're not the work of a master but merely the handwriting of... of someone else, who was kind to her once, someone whose name and face elude her no matter how hard she tries to remember.

To Raoul, one set of papers will look much like another. Working quickly, almost without thought, she trades the papers; slips the ones she just took into her pockets, wrapping them in enough cloth to protect them—just as the door to the study opens.

“Clarisse?”

Slowly, carefully—*breathe breathe do not panic*—Clarisse closes the case, and turns around, to face Raoul.

Like her, he wears a gown—a silk one with five-clawed dragons crawling along its length, the latest fad in Indochinese design. His skin, the colour of washed-out red peony blooms, shines in the moonlight. His eyes shift to the open case, and then back to her—and narrow, in the beginnings of suspicion. “An odd time to look at my curios,” he says.

The magic churns within Clarisse—whispering words from the French classics, from poets and novelists and politicians, the words she used to catch Raoul's attention in the beginning—all equally useless. It's not common ground that she needs, but a way to charm herself out of a situation that has no good way out.

She settles for the closest thing to the truth she can think of. “I’ve always wondered what the jade bracelets would look like on me.”

Her voice breaks, a little, thinking of Mother’s litany of loss—of all the precious things they were forced to sell because of the declining family fortunes—the loss of scholar influence in the wake of the arrival of the French; the desperate, doomed attempts to trade against state monopolies; the death of her father, an embittered man old before his time. Normally the magic should be there to blunt it, to give credence to her tale of growing up steeped in the worship of French culture; but it’s fraying, its potency almost gone. “We never had anything so fine when I was growing up.”

The suspicion does not leave Raoul’s face, but it abates a fraction. “You could have asked.”

“You only open that cabinet for important guests.” No need to act to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Raoul walks closer to her, wraps his hands around her shoulders. He’s looking at the contents of the case, his eyes softer than they were a moment ago—infinately distant, as if he were already looking at the shores of the Métropole.

“You could come with me,” he says, at last.

“Back to Brest?” Clarisse crushes the flutters of her treacherous heart. “You’ve never asked before.”

“No,” Raoul says. “I wasn’t sure.” His hand reaches into the cabinet—settles on one of the bracelets, a beautiful snow-on-moss, flecked with dabs of pale green, like a watercolour from a master.

“You have a wife.”

Raoul’s smile is bitter, as he turns the bracelet in his hands. “At home? She died three months ago, Clarisse. I learnt yesterday.” He smiles again—an expression that doesn’t reach his pale eyes. “I don’t have much to go home to, it seems.”

*Stay here*, she wants to say. Stay here and be with me, and have everything as it always was—let us be happy together—but the magic is within her, shrivelling the words before they can bloom on her lips; and her love for Raoul feels... old, papered over, like the golden-tinted memories of a childhood that she can’t reach anymore.

She remembers the time when they rode side by side in the red dust of the jungle; when he pointed at pepper vines and their grapes of green fruit with the simple delight of a child; their long conversations about families and the constraints of their expectations for their members—remembers the warm, happy feeling of being with him, but it’s as if it all belonged to a stranger.

Raoul slips the bracelet over her wrist—she feels its icy cold on her skin; the gradual warming as it adjusts to the

temperature of her body. His agents—the ones that scour the countryside, spending the money he earns here as a planter—have been more skilled than usual; it's jade fit for the daughter of an official of the first rank, perhaps even for the wife of an Emperor.

“Come with me,” Raoul whispers, his hands on her shoulders, on her breasts, on her hips—and again there is that same flutter within her, that vision of a future where she goes to France, lifts herself above the genteel poverty she's always known; where she might well always be the jumped-up little Annamite to other Frenchmen—but what does it matter, if she has Raoul's love, and lives in the luxury he brings back home?

Her eyes, inexorably, are drawn to the sword in the case, rest on the swirling patterns; and, with a sinking feeling she knows it to be a gift of the spirits, the same as her foggy memories, as her uncanny mastery of French and the French classics, all the things she never studied as a young girl. “I've never noticed that sword,” she says, because it's the only thing she can think of.

Raoul's hands pause. “That sword?” His tone says this is not the moment; but nevertheless he humours her. “That's hardly something you'd enjoy handling. It came from a criminal. They imprisoned her for—” he pauses then, searches

his memory for something that never seems to come— “for some theft or another.”

Not a theft, she thinks, but she wouldn't be able to say why. The magic surges again, and everything feels... numb, pleasant again.

One last time. Surely one last time cannot hurt?

“Come with me,” Raoul says; and she turns and kisses him, and leads him back to the bedroom, to make love with the fury of the desperate and the lost.

\* \* \*

Later, she rises—the light of the moon, cold and merciless, falls on Raoul, who sleeps content, with a smile on his face, smug with the assurance of his happiness. In the pale light, he suddenly seems alien to her, with skin that is too white, too reddened by the sun; with his hair the colour of maple leaves in autumn. And there is another face in her mind, dark and quick to smile; and a name in the language of her ancestors.

Vinh, who is lost to her, who will never see the wedding candles burn bright; who will never again celebrate New Year's Eve with her kin; who will never have descendants to honour her name on the ancestral altar.

She has to work quickly.

In the secretary desk of the living room is paper, and a fountain nib and ink. She gets all three out, and stares at the

blank surface, fighting the beginnings of panic. The magic within her is fraying; it's not the French that is going—that was part of the bargain she made with the spirits, part of the price—but it's her memories, her real ones, that are returning; and even as they return, her anger unwraps itself from layers of cotton wool, devouring any kind words she might have had for Raoul.

Vinh, who is gone—who might as well be dead, sent to wither away in the tiger cages of Poulo Condor. Vinh, who was her elder sister, and who had sworn to retrieve the scrolls from Raoul's house; whom the magistrate imprisoned on a technicality, because no native Annamite—and especially not a woman—should be allowed to wear a weapon this fine, this beautiful.

The nib scratches against the paper. She aligns the words one after the other, groping for something that she can write to him—should it be words of comfort, or of anger? *I am sorry, but we cannot be together. You live in one world and I another. My people have a saying about a red thread wrapped around the limbs of lovers. Ours stretches from one country to another—from a vast sea to a vast desert—too spread out and too long to be ever wound tight. It's none of your fault.*

But it is; it is his fault; it is his men who visited the family estate, who bullied Mother into parting with everything that interested them for a handful of piastres—from vases to hairpins to sculptures.

Most of what they took—of what they stole—can be replaced; just as most losses can be endured. But the scrolls are Great-grandmother’s calligraphy; the flowing, effortless handwriting of a scholar’s daughter in the days the Nguyen dynasty was still strong, treasured for generations on the ancestral altar—to think of it in a glass case, subjected to the scrutiny of Frenchmen with no regard for its true value....

*I wish you happiness in the Métropole. I will miss you more than you can possibly know, but we weren’t meant to be.*

She would add something about rebirth; about how they might be closer in other lives, unbound by the threads of mingled love and hatred; but Raoul is Catholic, and would only dismiss that as indigenous nonsense. So instead she simply signs the letter “Clarisse”—which she now remembers isn’t the name her grandparents gave her, but it’s the only one Raoul knows her by.

On top of it, she lays the snow-on-moss jade bracelet; because she’s not a thief; she was never a thief, and neither was Vinh. She gazes at the sword for a moment, wondering if that

should be taken away as well; but it's the gift of the spirits to her dead sister, and it is not her place to retrieve it. Let the spirits weave as they will, and take back what is theirs, if such is their desire.

She leaves the Red Trees much as she came to them; empty-handed, nothing on her back but the traditional garment of a noblewoman—and the scrolls she came for, tucked in the folds of her blouse.

As she walks, the magic slowly ebbs—frays off like the tatters of fog at sunrise. The last of her disguise falls away—no longer the pale-skinned, sharp-featured beauty that Raoul fell in love with; the one who effortlessly flirted with him in French, smiling and simpering like the beauties of Paris and Marseille.

He will look for her, of course, but he won't find her. Everything she told him about her family was a lie, and he won't recognise her if he sees her now: smaller and darker-skinned, wide lips and large teeth, indistinguishable from the squat women he derided as throwbacks to primitive times—and she's not sure anymore how she should deal with that thought; if it should make her feel justified, or sad and drained.

Ahead, dawn is breaking, the pink sunlight slowly washing away the shape of the moon; she wonders if the myth is true, if Cui is still up there in his banyan tree, waiting for a chance to

get back to Earth, still gazing longingly at everything he has lost.

Everything seems to blur away from her, even the veil over her memory; and abruptly she remembers standing on the shores of a lake at dawn, shivering—waiting for her prayer to be acknowledged. She remembers the waters heaving, and the tortoise, a darker, sleeker shape beneath the waves—remembers the tortoise's voice, booming like the thunder of the storm, asking her what she desired.

Vinh had asked for a weapon to get back what was theirs—had asked for the sword, which had doomed her in the end.

Clarisse, too, had asked for a weapon, but for a different kind—for French words and French poets; and the ability to smile and lie and seduce, and everything that Vinh, with her unbending sense of honour, would never have thought of.

Will you pay the price, the spirit had asked; and she'd said yes, because what else could she answer?

She'll walk back to her family's decrepit house, where her brothers and sisters are taking care of Mother; she'll put the scrolls back on the ancestral altar, ignoring the gazes they'll throw her, the mingled pity and contempt; for surely they know, they must know what she had to do to get them back. She has what she bargained for; she has regained the family's treasures, and that is all that matters.

But she'll still remember the French and the French verses, and the words of love—and Raoul's touch on her shoulders and her hips, and the way her heart missed a beat whenever he smiled at her. It was the magic, of course; it was as false as her appearance, as her identity; but she can't erase the memories; the sweet rush of them, the happiness from other simpler times, a feeling she cannot afford anymore. Her future in Cochinchina will be made of whispers and frowns and speculations, and of a hasty marriage to a man who will prize an alliance with her family above the rumours about her virginity.

*Will you pay the price?* the spirit had asked, and she'd said yes, because she hadn't known, because she hadn't realised.

*I will miss you more than you can possibly know,* she wrote Raoul; and now—too late, much too late—she realises how biting a truth she wrote him; how she'll always be tainted by the memory of their love—and walk haunted by bittersweet, alien memories and impossible dreams, all the way to her grave.

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## BUTTERFLY HOUSE

by Gwendolyn Clare

The Scarlet Longwing will always be Yinghua's favorite. This was the one that selected her from among the many hopeful children to be the old keeper's apprentice. It alighted on her shoulder, fanning her cheek with velvety red wings, and the other candidates were ushered away. The Scarlet Longwing wrote for her a destiny within the steamy glass-walled gardens of Empress Jiaxen's butterfly house, and to this day she can hardly step inside without a Longwing or two claiming a perch upon her shoulders, her hair, the backs of her raised hands.

\* \* \*

The imperial corpsetakers arrived at the edge of the battlefield with less pomp and ceremony than Yinghua had expected. They made camp a fair distance away, leaving their horses and oxen where the smell of blood could not spook them, and they tossed the tools of their trade over their shoulders and went forth on foot. They were a sight to see, all clad in flowing black cloth with lanterns fastened to long poles, and thick black gloves, and shovels. They stayed quiet, though Yinghua—who had spent days traversing the mountain pass in

their company—knew they were simply the taciturn sort, and not silent out of respect.

She'd expected offerings and prayers, sandalwood incense perhaps, not this grim procession of only the most practical tools. Would-be corpsetakers underwent rigorous training at the shrine of the Shadow Goddess, nothing like her own serene apprenticeship among the butterflies. Should they not at least carry prayer scrolls tucked under their arms, or wear some symbol of their hard-won status? But, she supposed, the digging of mass graves was not glamorous work.

Tall yellowed savanna grass swished against her shins as she followed in their wake. The reek of the battlefield reached her nose long before she could see the source—cleaved viscera, blood baking in the sun, rot already setting in despite the dry heat. The corpsetakers met the smell stoically, but Yinghua's stomach roiled, and she bent over and emptied it into the grass. She must do as she was ordered, no matter how unpleasant, lest she bring shame upon her master and the butterfly house.

She would return with Corpsewing butterflies, or not at all.

One of the corpsetakers, by the name of Gangbo, paused at the top of a ridge to wait for her. "Will the enemy's dead be enough for you? We should begin our work immediately if we can, but our orders are to give you precedence."

Yinghua crested the ridge to stand beside him. A sea of bodies stretched away to the next hilltop and, she guessed, beyond. Blood stained the trampled earth, and the dark silhouettes of a hundred vultures spun lazy circles against a lapis-blue sky. She wanted to shrink away from the vastness of the carnage. How could he look upon this and wonder if the quantity of death was insufficient?

Unbidden came the thought, *I should not do this*. She was an artisan, living creatures her clay, not a purveyor of destruction. And yet, what choice was there except to steel her resolve and proceed?

“Yinghua?” Gangbo pressed, when she did not give him an answer.

“Yes, it should be enough,” she said, “if you leave the enemy’s dead to me.”

\* \* \*

The Indigo Swallowtail is the oldest species in the royal collection, brought across the sea from the Pengkar homeland in the early days of the empire. When they hatch, they crawl eagerly toward the warmth of Yinghua’s palm and cling to her fingers with their tiny barbed feet, pins and needles walking up her skin. She blows gently across their damp rumpled wings, coaxing life into the delicate veins. Each one must be handled just so—skin warmth and breath wind—or it withers and dies.

In a secret, blasphemous corner of her heart, Yinghua believes it must be a kind of magic to hold such a fragile life in one's hands. To her, each Swallowtail's quiet metamorphosis seems as powerful as a midnight prayer.

\* \* \*

Yinghua picked her way cautiously among the dead. Pengkar warriors, with their long black plaits and bright-painted armor. Badlander warriors with their dreadlocks and narrow angular faces. There were women among the Badlanders, weapons still clutched in their death-stiff hands—Yinghua had heard the stories of fierce female warriors, but she had not believed them until now.

The vultures, brazen in their ownership of the dead, stood their ground when she approached. If one felt threatened, it would splay its wings and hiss at her, but more often they simply gave her a wary stare and went back to their feasting. Now and again, a shovel would flash in the bright sunlight, catching Yinghua's eye from afar as a corpsetaker took a swing at a particularly stubborn vulture atop some fallen Pengkar comrade.

The first dozen or so corpses Yinghua paused to examine yielded nothing. By then her nostrils were so full of the death-stench that proximity to any particular corpse hardly mattered, and her nausea began to settle, as if her body were reluctantly

coming to terms with the situation. She tried not to look at the faces of the corpses, not to think of them as once-people. She saw the carnage in the abstract—this was not a severed limb or a split skull before her, it was simply part of the structure of a butterfly habitat.

Yinghua would do her duty and bring honor to the butterfly house. Nothing else mattered, she told herself. If her master were here he would tell her, *Breathe in, breath out, calm as a butterfly*, and so she schooled herself to embody tranquility.

She had wandered quite a distance south and west, deeper into the battlefield and away from the corpsetakers' work site, before movement tugged at her from the corner of her eye. Not the sweeping gestures of a man or a vulture but the subtle, crawling-insect movement she had grown so attuned to over the years of her apprenticeship.

Yinghua approached the corpse. It was a Badlander man, hardly out of boyhood, with a lanky frame that had not yet filled out—and now never would. The fatal blow had been a stomach wound, slashed so wide and deep that spilt viscera trailed in the dirt where he had fallen. The exposed intestines writhed with pale-pink caterpillars, Corpsewing larvae, a sight Yinghua found at once repulsive and fascinating.

Corpsewings were the only species of butterfly known to feed on flesh. Yinghua froze where she stood, struck by the dissonance of seeing the harmless creatures she loved so well swarming through gore.

After a moment, she managed to crouch for a closer examination. Yinghua had never seen this species before, but the reports claimed they would be broad of wing with thick sturdy bodies, and these caterpillars were still small. Not yet close to metamorphosis, then. Standing, she looked around for something she could use to mark the spot, in case the Corpsewings proved rare. She retrieved a fallen spear and jammed it point-down in the hard-packed earth beside the body before moving on.

As the afternoon progressed, she found more nests of caterpillars, on Badlander and Pengkar alike, but none approaching maturity. Not rare, then, but she would have to wait for them to finish their gruesome feasting.

When the sun dropped low in the west, painting the sparse wisps of cloud peach-pink, Yinghua headed back toward the camp. Gangbo, being as he was the most talkative among the corpsetakers, chose to accompany her. The jackals would be out soon, he explained, and they should build a fire to keep them away from the horses. The rest of the corpsetakers would light their lanterns and keep digging through the night.

\* \* \*

Over the campfire that evening, Gangbo relayed to her the Badlanders' tale of the origin of the Corpsewings. This is the story he told:

Tapua the Two-faced God was in the mood to make trouble, so under the cover of night, he snuck across the lands of the goddess Zhoache and crept into her oldest temple. From there he stole the gold-handled knife that her high priest used to make sacrifices of goat kids and jackrabbits, and he left behind three pearlescent green scales from a dragon-god's hide as a false clue.

But Zhoache had the eyes of a savanna cat, so the darkness did not cloak Tapua from her sight. She saw him sneak away from her temple, and when she found the knife gone and the green scales scattered across the floor, she was not deceived. She knew Tapua would want to brag to the other gods of his trickery, so she snuck into his lands while he was away. From his oldest temple, she stole the brass style and face-plate of his favorite sundial, and she left behind a sheath shed from a savanna cat's claw, so he would know this was her retaliation.

Now Tapua was as furious as Zhoache, and neither would return what they had taken. So Tapua told his people, *Go forth to battle and reclaim that which Zhoache*

*the Nefarious has stolen from me. And Zhoache told her people, Tapua the Intemperate has stolen my knife and our pride—go forth to battle and do not return without it.*

The clan of Tapua was reluctant to make war with their neighbors, but they knew well the inconstant moods of their patron god, and so they sharpened their blades. The clan of Zhoache was, too, reluctant to make war, but they had felt the rage of their patron goddess, and so they prepared their mounts to ride east. When the two clans clashed, both sides witnessed the insensible deaths of their clansmen, and both began to thirst for bloody-red vengeance.

The clans kept fighting until each had ruined the other and there were no warriors left to hold the weapons. Tapua and Zhoache looked upon the carnage with dismay. It was the duty of a patron god to collect the souls of their clan's dead and carry them off to Sky-Without-Stars, the spirit world from which they could be reincarnated into the body of a newborn clansman. But there were so many dead on the battlefield, one clan all mingled together with the other, that Tapua and Zhoache did not know how to sort their souls.

Tapua sat in the mud and wept, for without those souls there would be no one left to worship him. But

Zhoache was determined to set this right, so she did not let him wallow for long.

Together they went to Sister New Moon, who was known by the name Filperegh, and pleaded for her help. But Filperegh shook her head and said, *You reap only what you have sown through your own foolishness.* She had observed their conflict from her lofty vantage and found no sympathy in her heart for those who did not consider the outcome of their actions.

Despairing, they went next to Sister Full Moon, who was known by the name Siregh, and pleaded their case once more. Siregh, soft-hearted, took pity on Tapua and Zhoache and on the lost souls of the dead mortals. She had not seen their conflict, but she imagined how any war might leave souls lost in the mortal realm, and this thought troubled her.

She said, *I will make a creature to sort the souls of dead warriors and carry them up to Sky-Without-Stars.* And so she created the Corpsewings, and whispered to them their mission, and sent them down to the Badlands in search of souls.

\* \* \*

Gangbo was up before dawn, coaxing the coals back to life and preparing a large pot of rice porridge. His movements

roused Yinghua from her bedroll, so she joined him at the fire and made herself useful grating fresh ginger.

The eastern sky was paling from indigo to lotus-blue when the corpsetakers came trudging back to camp for the meal. Yinghua thought they might have come for sleep, too, but they rested only long enough to finish their food. One by one they stood and began to trudge back to the battlefield, neither reluctant nor harried but grimly resolute.

Yinghua decided she, too, had better return to work now that day was breaking. The skin across her cheeks still felt warm from the glare of yesterday's sun, so today she would be sensible and carry her rice-paper parasol. What a sight she would make, moving daintily among the corpses as if she were a lady out for a stroll along the beach—of course there would be no one to see but the corpsetakers, and she doubted they would find humor in it.

She spent the morning walking the battlefield, with Gangbo's story from the night before lingering in her mind. Yinghua realized she didn't know enough about the Badlanders to tell which clan this was that had come to their deaths to slow the westward progression of the Pengkar Empire. Tapua's or Zhoache's, or some other god's people? How strange to walk among their dead and not know such a fundamental thing.

She wandered far, watching for Corpsewing caterpillars and checking their size, before she circled back around to the corpsetakers' work site. Everywhere she looked, the caterpillars were too young, and Yinghua had to face that the whole life cycle of the Corpsewing could not fit within the count of days since the battle. While she was not usually given to impatience, neither did she relish the thought of lingering here. But as the master keeper was fond of saying, one cannot rush a butterfly. She would have to accept the wait.

There was a short scraggly tree with a swollen trunk standing alone near the work site, and Yinghua made a seat for herself between its buttressed roots. The corpsetakers had finished their enormous excavation and were now heaving Pengkar bodies, one atop the others, into the hole. It was not the dignified burial the warriors deserved, but it was better than leaving them out for the vultures and the jackals, and there were so very many dead to bury. If the bodies were not consigned to the dark beneath the earth, the souls might wander lost, never finding their way home to the bosom of the Shadow Goddess.

Watching the corpsetakers work, Yinghua idly wondered if they would have buried the Badlander corpses, too, had the battle been a smaller one. Were they in the business of stealing enemy souls? Perhaps the Shadow Goddess was fighting a

different kind of war from the one Yinghua could see before her eyes.

The idea bothered her. The Empress had a war to run and more important concerns than the collection of new specimens for the palace glasshouses. In Yinghua's memory, the Empress had never before deigned to issue a direct command to the butterfly keepers. So why now? And why had the Empress assigned priority to Yinghua's mission, when the corpsetakers' work was so essential to the war effort?

Yinghua tried to push the thought aside. It was her place to fulfill the Empress's wishes, not to wonder at their hidden motivations.

She hunched lower against the rough bole of the tree, disquieted.

\* \* \*

The Speckled Fritillary gives her trouble every time—the only temperamental butterfly. Yinghua often wonders if they enjoy acting contrary simply for the sake of spiting her. The older caterpillars always, unfailingly, seek out the least convenient spot to hang their chrysalises. On a branch that needs to be pruned, or a cage lid that must be opened. One particularly clever Fritillary caterpillar has snuck out of the gardens and anchored its chrysalis from the peg where Yinghua is supposed to hang her coat. Once formed, a chrysalis cannot

be detached without risking damage to the pupa, so Yinghua grits her teeth and carefully works around the Fritillaries.

Maybe they believe her daily annoyance is better than no attention at all. Maybe they are jealous that she loves the Scarlet Longwings so well, and that everyone else comes second in her heart. In truth their antics amuse her and she would never wish them to change, but Yinghua is careful never to let them see her smile.

\* \* \*

By the time the corpsetakers had commenced digging their fourth mass grave, the caterpillars were looking fat and slow, lethargic from their constant gorging and ready for metamorphosis. Yinghua recommenced her long walks among the corpses, searching every day for a cohort of caterpillars ready to shed their skin and pupate. She carried a tight-woven collection basket propped against one hip and her parasol in her opposite hand.

She could think of no finer relief than to accomplish her mission and leave behind the stench of death, and the sound of shovels scraping against dry dirt, and all her unaskable questions.

The next morning, she came across the corpse of a Badlander woman who had bled from an assortment of lesser wounds before the fatal blow—Yinghua could not tell which it

had been that had felled her. But what truly caught Yinghua's eye was the almost metallic shine of newly formed chrysalises, dangling from every edge of blood-stiff fabric. A few were attached to the bared teeth of the corpse's open jaw and the hollowed sockets where the eyes used to reside. One hand was picked clean of flesh, the fingerbones forming an ideal scaffold where perhaps two dozen chrysalises hung—they reminded Yinghua of the strings of paper lanterns that lit the plaza near the butterfly house at festival time.

If this were any other species, she would not hesitate to clip the branch and lift all those perfect chrysalises into her collection basket. She would not find a better cohort than this—the perfect age for transport, and clustered so densely together. But the chrysalises could not be detached from the hand without risking damage to the pupae inside. This left her only one option.

Yinghua took a deep breath to steel her nerves and set aside her parasol. Then she took her small, practical knife from her belt and, carefully, began to saw at the cartilage between the tiny bones of the wrist.

It was tougher than she'd thought it would be, but soon she had the skeleton hand severed from the corpse, and she gently lowered her precious cargo into the bottom of the

collection basket. She fastened the lid and turned back toward camp.

Gangbo must have spotted her because he followed from the work site. “You can’t ride alone,” he said. “There could be bandits.”

Yinghua’s first, and unbidden, thought was that the Badlander woman whose skeleton hand was in her basket would not have needed an escort through the mountains. She shook her head to clear it. “For the best chance of success, I must leave immediately.”

The corpsetakers’ work was a sacred duty, but Yinghua’s errand had been ordered by the Empress herself. And so it was decided that Gangbo would accompany her back to the Pengkar Empire. They packed their possessions quickly and unhobbled a pair of horses.

The mountain pass was a journey of several hard days on horseback, passable only by virtue of the season, and Yinghua was unaccustomed to such travel. She wanted to get the chrysalises back to the butterfly house before they hatched, so each day she pushed harder than she would have otherwise. Gangbo let her set the pace, except for reminding her when they needed to stop to water the horses. Mostly he kept quiet and watched for bandits, though they met no one on the road.

They were nearly through the pass and into the foothills by the time Gangbo finally decided to voice his thoughts. It was after sunset, their camp already made for the night, when he said, “I don’t know if this is wise.”

Yinghua looked up from her supper. The campfire lit his pensive frown with its shifting, mottled orange glow. “If what is wise?”

“Collecting the Corpsewings,” he said. “How will you breed them, when their young must dine on dead human flesh?”

Yinghua looked away. She could not deny that this question had been troubling her. What manner of horrific accommodations was the Empress prepared to make to keep Corpsewings in her butterfly house? Worse, what if these chrysalises were not meant for the butterfly house at all, and the Empress wanted them for a more nefarious purpose?

Yinghua simply said, “The Empress has given her command.”

\* \* \*

That night Yinghua dreamed the chrysalises were hatching.

In her dream, a full moon hung at the zenith of a clear night sky, and the chrysalises twitched and swung from the fingerbones on their silk attachments. The butterflies within began to hum to each other, slipping in and out of minor

harmonies—a slow, lilting tune that seemed somehow familiar yet just beyond the grasp of her memory. The song rose to a crescendo, then faded to silence, and all the chrysalises split open at once. (This was not how butterflies hatched, Yinghua thought.)

They emerged together, crinkled wings damp and glistening in the moonlight. Each one clung, shivering with the thrill of rebirth, to the translucent husk of its chrysalis. Unfolded, their wide wings were a pale yellow-green, the color of lemongrass stalks; their bodies were the velvety black of night. They began to let off a soft glow, as if Sister Full Moon had shared a tuft of her luminescence with her creations.

Yinghua realized the lid of the collection basket was in her hands. She should not let the butterflies escape. She moved the lid over the open basket, intent on trapping them.

*We must go free*, they said, their silvery-soft voices all blending together.

“I cannot let you go,” said Yinghua. “It would anger the Empress.”

They fanned their lambent wings, implacable. *We carry the soul of the great warrior Tharoshe. We must lift her up to Sky-Without-Stars, so she may watch over her two young sons.*

“I’m sorry,” said Yinghua. “I must do my duty, for the honor of my master and the butterfly house.” She tried again to close the lid, but her arms felt suddenly too tired to hold themselves up.

A single Corpsewing fluttered out of the basket, swaying on its new wings, and landed on the tip of Yinghua’s nose. *Is it not enough that her life was taken? Will you take her soul, too?*

Yinghua woke up.

\* \* \*

She did not dare let herself return to sleep, so she sat by the cooling coals of the fire and watched the pale light of dawn creep over the jagged terrain. She felt an itching need to check on the chrysalises, but after that too-vivid dream she also wanted some distance from them. She feared she would find them hatched and gone, as if the dream could somehow have summoned the butterflies from the basket as easily as it had summoned her from sleep.

Finally, her desperate urge to know won out over her reluctance, and Yinghua crouched beside the collection basket. Her hands felt unsteady as she fumbled open the lid, but she muttered a prayer to the goddess of gardens and flowers and regained her calm.

The butterflies were all present, and still nestled safely inside their chrysalises. She tried to ignore the tiny grain of disappointment inside her that not a single one had hatched. What if they truly did carry a warrior's soul? No, she had come this far and could not allow her resolve to slip now.

She closed the basket and stood, deciding she should wake Gangbo. The sooner they returned to the empire, the better.

\* \* \*

That night the dream came again.

This time the butterflies used her as a perch, bathing her bare arms with their soft light. Their pinprick feet wandered in slow patterns across her skin, almost painful, but Yinghua held herself still.

*You must release us*, they said, their gentle voices chiming like a dancer's bells.

Yinghua wanted to promise them their freedom, but she did not. "If I disobey her command, the Empress could execute me for treason."

*If you follow her command, you may claim ignorance but not innocence.* (Ignorance of what? Did the butterflies know what the Empress truly wanted: not the Corpsewings themselves, but the soul they carried?)

"I have no choice," she pleaded.

*There is always a choice.*

The butterflies took flight and spiraled up through the night sky. Their radiant wings shone brighter and brighter with distance, and the separate points of light melded together into a sphere and became the moon.

\* \* \*

She slept fitfully the rest of the night. In the morning, the sun seemed to take a very long time to crest the easternmost ridge of the mountains, and when it did it pained her eyes as it burned away the last shreds of dawn mist. Once again, Yinghua longed to check on the chrysalises but also dreaded the thought. Breakfast was prepared and eaten and their saddlebags packed before she finally gave in to the desire.

Yinghua cast a glance over her shoulder before kneeling beside the collection basket. Gangbo was occupied with his stubborn mare, who did not fancy taking a bit today, and he did not notice her. Why she felt this required stealth, she didn't know—she was, after all, an imperial butterfly keeper, and it was her duty to care for them. Still, her fingers shook as she fumbled with the lid fastenings, guilty as a thief.

She felt a strange comingling of panic and relief when she saw a single hatched butterfly inside. The wings were a too-familiar lemongrass green, though they did not seem luminous under the light of the sun. The rest of the chrysalises were starting to hatch, too—emerging one or two at a time,

haphazardly as butterflies should, not all at once. She held one hand out over the top of the basket, fingers splayed, to keep the Corpsewings from escaping. Silently, the first butterfly fanned its wings to dry them. Yinghua half-expected it to sing to her, but that had been only a dream, hadn't it?

This was a war fought with bodies and blood, a war fought over the lands of the mortal realm. Even if the Shadow Goddess had tasked the Empress to steal souls from the Badlanders' old gods, such a thing wasn't possible. Was it? Yinghua stared down at the fine, silk-soft scales of the butterfly wings. Was her mission truly about expanding the butterfly house's collection, or had she been sent to test a different theory altogether—a theory of souls? Her thoughts raced, the dreams blending with the present until she doubted her own sense of the truth. Perhaps her fears were the foolish concoctions of an impressionable mind, but perhaps the fulfillment of her mission came with a hidden, irreparable cost.

The Corpsewings could escape. There could be a problem with the lid, or the fastener, and when her attention was elsewhere they could find their way out. She could still be faulted for carelessness, of course, and would return to the butterfly house in shame, but better that than to openly thwart the Empress's wish and return a traitor.

Her hand still hovered uncertainly over the basket, blocking their passage. If they were only insects, mindless and beautiful, at least some would remain within. But if they carried the souls of a fallen warrior, they would yearn for freedom and seek the narrow crack that led to the wide blue sky.

This much she could do. *Breathe in, breath out, calm as a butterfly*, as the master keeper would say.

Yinghua replaced the lid, not quite properly closed, and turned away, blinking against the harsh eastern sun. She combed her fingers through her gelding's chestnut mane, working out the tangles while humming the butterflies' hatching song.

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*Gwendolyn Clare resides in North Carolina, where she tends a vegetable garden and a flock of backyard ducks and wonders why she ever lived in the frozen northlands. She has a PhD in mycology, which is useful for identifying wild mushrooms but not for much else. Her short fiction has*

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## COVER ART

“Golden Age,” by Juan Carlos Barquet



Juan Carlos Barquet is an artist from Mexico City. He has done illustrations for books, album covers and tabletop games for clients such as Fantasy Flight Games; concept art and matte paintings for short films supervised by DreamWorks Animation and ILM, and exhibitions at Art Takes Times Square (New York, 2013), Parallax Art Fair (London, 2012), Euskal Exhibition Center (Bilbao, 2012) and more. View more of his work at [jcbarquet.com](http://jcbarquet.com).

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