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[“The Girl with Golden Hair,” by Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam](#)

[“Court Bindings,” by Karalynn Lee](#)

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THE GIRL WITH GOLDEN HAIR

by Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam

Once, in the city called Mu, lived a girl with hair of real gold. When she was born, the city's people came to meet her, crowding into the bloodstone hut near the city's largest grove where her parents lived and farmed and fished in the river. They formed a line to touch the slick of her hair.

"She will do a great thing," her mother said. "A girl with golden hair must do a great thing."

The Queen Loreen sent a servant to see the girl they would name Oovis. When the servant returned to the palace, the Queen asked if the girl's hair was truly golden.

"Golden as the sun," the servant replied.

The Queen sent the servant to the land in the mountains to fetch there a root that guaranteed immortality—a task from which none of her servants had ever returned. Then the Queen went herself to see the girl with golden hair.

The girl's hair had come with her from the womb. It was shoulder-length and hard and heavy. The girl could not move her head under its weight. The Queen saw this and laughed.

“You will be a pointless girl,” she said to the baby. “And your hair will not be so extraordinary. I will see to that.” The Queen turned to the girl’s parents. “I will be checking the tax records, to make sure you are paying daily for that bloodstone with which you built this hut.”

“We pay,” the father said. “We’ve always paid.”

“We’ll see,” said the Queen. When she returned to the palace, she searched the records but found no mistakes. She walked through her courtyard and stared down into her mirror pond; her own hair was brown as tree bark, brown as mud. She issued a decree: there would be no more trees with brown bark, no more dirt. If the Queen spotted the color brown, she would send the offenders downriver, where the fish people lived, so that the fish people could eat their heads. This, she told her congregation, would improve relations with the fish people.

Oovis’ parents, who survived on the food from their garden and the fruits from their fruit trees, chopped down the trees and covered the dirt with white leaf mulch from the banyo trees in the grove. They planted more banyo trees, even though these would grow unbearable in the late season, when the trees shed their leaves and chattered like nervous maidens in the cool evening air. They advised their daughter, who grew to be plain in her adolescence despite her golden hair, to stay out of

trouble. They forbade her from attending the palace protests with her peers.

“But I’m supposed to do a great thing!” Oovis would yell. “How can I do it if you keep me from standing up for what I believe in?”

Her parents knew better. They too had believed in things. Then they grew to know the city in which they lived.

“When you’re of age,” they said, “you can do whatever you want.”

But Oovis was a girl with golden hair, and she fit the city better than the Queen, whose brown hair shone like murky lake water in the sun. She watched her parents prick their fingers each morning and drip their blood into a bowl and place it outside their door for their tax. A daily offering that was collected by the Queen’s servants. Oovis hated that her parents suffered, that their fingers never healed. Oovis wouldn’t give the tax herself—she was frightened of blood—but she snuck out her bedroom window the night of the protest with a pocketful of stones to throw at the palace windows. The banyo trees, in their naked season, whispered as Oovis climbed the wooden fence into the empty lot across the way.

“Where are you going, golden girl?” one asked.

“She’s not allowed to go to the palace,” another said.

“Are you going to the palace?”

“I wish I could see the palace.”

“Shush,” said Oovis. “You’ll wake my parents. You’re right. I’m not supposed to go. Now will you please leave me alone?”

“Golden girl wants us to leave her alone,” said a banyo. Their red trunks in the darkness frightened Oovis, their mouths gaping black holes. Oovis walked the long way around their grove. She ran through the field of centaurs—since the year of curses, we centaurs had been silent—and across another fence and into the main square of the city and down to the palace courtyard where a boy waited for her.

“Where are the others?” she asked.

“What others?” he said, sitting on the Queen’s bench. “It’s just us.”

It felt wrong to be there alone with a boy she hardly knew, though he had been the one who had invited her. She laughed when his hand reached for her hand, when his fingers curled around her own. When he aimed his lips at her lips, however, she stood and stomped her feet.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I’m meant for a greater thing than you.”

She crawled back in her bedroom window. Her father heard her and knew that she had shut trouble out and was thankful. She would indeed do a great thing, he repeated to himself until he fell into a sleep deep enough to die.

* * *

The girl's father did not die, though he sometimes wished that death might take him young. He too wanted to be remembered, and being a man of little talent, his best bet was to be remembered for dying young. But his body kept on, his wife's too, and the girl with golden hair began to suspect that the thing she would do might not be so great. After all, all the doers of great things had lost their parents young. She was no longer young.

Like the Queen, who had been orphaned at the age of nine already promised to the Prince of Mu. The Queen had dreamed of a palace and servants and a city to rule. When they were married at thirteen, the King loved the Queen so much that every night he kissed her, her picture, and her marriage ring: a declaration in three parts. The Queen had never loved anyone. The King's love churned her stomach. He was always, always in her way.

That she poisoned him was not hearsay but a source of pride for the Queen. "Go search for the root of life," she would tell her servants. "Or I will poison you like I did my husband." When speaking to her congregation, she often reminisced on the day: "I am almost as happy today, on this great anniversary of my Queenhood, as I was the day I poisoned the King."

The girl with golden hair hated the story of the King and the poison. If anyone ever loved her, she thought, she would be kind to them. She would love them back.

But she didn't. Many boys fell for her, not for her personality and not for the great deed she had accomplished, for she had accomplished nothing of the sort, but for her hair alone. Oovis denied them. She told herself that it was not real love, not the kind of love a King bestowed upon a Queen.

Instead of boys, Oovis spent her time with the centaurs in the fields across from her hut. She spoke to them as though they understood her. They did not understand her: none of them except for me. It was I to whom she told this tale, the tale of her life, a memoir for an ordinary girl in an ordinary city. I could not speak then, but I understood her. I too had been born with hair the color of wheat. I too had amounted to nothing. Together, I knew, this girl and I could turn our fates around.

The centaurs were bright once, I wanted to say as she fed me oats from the palm of her pretty hand. Look at us now. But then I did look at her, and I realized that she was as poorly off as us. Too young to do any good and too old to use her tears to make things happen for her. I saw her life stretched out before her; the past that she had spilled to me in crisp detail. She would amount to nothing. A girl with golden hair can never live

up to expectation. And a human with a horse body can never be more than a beast.

It was then that I decided I would help her, in any way I could.

* * *

Of course the only way I could think of to help her, then, was to listen. I listened while she told me stories of her inability to connect with the other girls of her age, who dreamt of kissing and marriage. Oovis wanted none of it. She did not like boys, and she did not like girls, and the thought of spending a lifetime next to someone made her uneasy.

“I’ll spend forever with the centaurs and the banyo trees and my mom and dad.”

But the banyo trees gossiped about her when the sun was down and she was not around to hear.

“She cries at night,” one said to another. “The banyo by her window says he hears it.”

“She hasn’t done anything to be worthy of her hair,” said the other tree. “We should cut it from her head with our limbs.”

Stop that, I wanted to say. *Don’t talk about the girl that way. You haven’t given her a chance to prove herself.* I neighed instead, stomped my front teeth, growled at the dirt.

“Centaur likes the girl,” said the banyo. “Poor little centaur. What kind of world is it when the trees may talk but the centaurs can’t? This city will ruin.”

“The girl,” said the first banyo. “She’ll ruin with it.”

* * *

Some say the banyos predict the future. I’ve never believed it, and neither did the girl with golden hair. As she grew older, she believed less and less in things she could not see. She no longer thought she had a destiny to fulfill; no longer believed that the centaurs once spoke, that the Queen’s servants who went for her to the mountains found the root but were taken by the lull of immortality. She no longer believed in the fish people; to prove it she tossed her trash into the river. She spit into her parents’ blood bowl to spite the Queen who had spread such lies about life and the city and the trees whose whispers, she was sure, were just wind through their branches.

Then the guards came to her door and pulled her away to the palace and thrust her before the Queen. The Queen was aging, not as old as Oovis’ parents but not as young as her peers, and her brown hair was long and silky and beautiful in the glow of the two suns’ light through the windows.

“You’ve been spitting in your parents’ blood tax bowl,” the Queen said. “Also, tossing your trash into the river. This first offense is a violation of the first rule. This second offense is a

violation of the fifth. That makes two out of ten you cannot seem to follow. I wonder if the city needs a girl who cannot follow twenty percent of its laws.”

“You’re a liar,” said the girl with golden hair. “You lie to keep us in check. You lie about the fish people to keep us here, so we won’t try to escape down the river. And you lie about the mountains, so we won’t go there, either. You lie about the blood tax being integral to the wealth of the city. What could you possibly use the blood for? You have no use for it.”

“No use?” said the Queen, tapping her ragged nails on the golden throne. “Bring me her blood.”

The female guard held Oovis down while the male cut her finger and dripped three drops of blood into a banyo bowl. The bowl smelled like a rotting body, but the Queen tipped it to her mouth and drank it down. When the bowl was empty, she placed it on the floor at her feet and smacked her lips.

“There are so few pleasures in a city such as Mu. The blood is like wine to me. A happy Queen makes a happy city.” She stared into the shadows in the corner of the room. “As for the fish people, they are real. They are unhappy.”

From the darkness, two creatures stepped into the light. They had the heads of fish and the bodies of humans.

“They like your golden hair,” the Queen said. “They have demanded it as their price for the pollution of their waters.”

The appearance of fish people unsettled Oovis, not because they were frightening—they looked less frightening than the banyo trees' smiles in the dark—but because they meant that the Queen had not been lying, about anything. Great evils lurked in their world.

“Don't worry, golden girl. I have appeased their thirst for shiny objects.” The Queen stood from her throne and beckoned to her guards. They inserted levers beneath the throne. “These men will carry my throne to the fish people's land. The throne will make up for your mistakes. You, in return, will do me a favor.” She smiled. “You will find me that root in the land of the mountains. You will bring it back to me. You will not be sucked into the loll, because your parents' freedoms depend on this. I will release them from their blood tax, from any and all taxes, if you come back to me. If you bring me what I want.”

The Queen moved down the room to Oovis. She touched her hair.

“It's always surprising how hard your hair is,” she said. “It really is like gold. Not a soft strand at all. Doesn't your neck hurt, holding all that weight up?”

“It does hurt,” said the girl with golden hair.

The Queen laughed. “You're too serious. No need to worry. If you don't return, your parents will be safe, serving in my

palace. They will help build the huts. Back-breaking work, but someone's got to do it."

"I'll return," said Oovis. "You don't need to worry."

"I'm not worried. I have a city to myself. I'll go down in history. Where will you go down?"

"I'll find my way," Oovis said.

* * *

When she told me where she was going, I knew I had to go with her. She kissed her parents goodbye and thrust her bag over her shoulder. I nudged her with my head, pushing her down into the leaf-lined dirt. I knelt so that she might climb onto my back.

"You want to go?" she asked. "Whatever for?"

I nudged her again. When she stood, leaves stuck to her hair, to her clothes. A small patch of dirt showed on the ground. She kicked leaves over it, then stopped and uncovered a bigger spot of dirt.

When she climbed upon my back, her weight was a relief. The pressure of contact was a craving I hadn't realized I missed.

We rode through the city, not bothering to say goodbye to the remainder of its wonders.

* * *

The roads that led to the mountain were bloodbrick red until the forest, when the path became dirt which weaved through the thick layer of banyos. Further into the forest, the trees were more varied, less affected by the Queen's decrees. Brown-barked and green-leafed, simple and beautiful. They had no faces. The banyos were scattered, and once night fell we heard their whispers. These had the accents of the mountain people, thick and garbled, and it was difficult to discern what they said. I could tell the girl was frightened, but we rode on.

We wondered when we would encounter the thing that had kept the others back, those servants who had disappeared. But as the mountains came into view, we still had encountered nothing more frightening than a wild dog who had followed us for a spell, nipping at my heels. The mountains came ever closer. "It can't be this easy," Oovis said.

But it was, so easy we forgot our reason for going.

The mountain town's gates were open. We rode right in. There were no huts, just caves carved into the mountain rock. We saw no one in the streets, but shadows danced in the light of the caves. They did not look menacing. Still we did not dare approach. We looked about for a shop, an inn of some sort, somewhere we could sleep out of the elements. Or somewhere she could sleep. I did not mind the wind and rain. The chill mountain air ran through my fur. My ears popped. Each word

Oovis spoke sounded as if she spoke into a tunnel with me at the other end. There were no inns, only temples that rose like flowers from the ground, silk tents attached to the towers where black fires blazed.

We entered a tent. The fire was not warm but wet; it filled the tent with the sensation of water. We felt as though we were walking across the bottom of a lake. In the temple, a bigger fire blazed. Coins littered the floor. Gold and copper. Oovis bent to the copper, which long ago had been banned from the city of Mu. She folded her fist around the coin, then let it drop.

“Where are all the people?” she asked. I neighed, unsure. Why would they hide in their caves when two strangers appeared? Were they not frightened that we would take what was theirs?

We slept in the temple atop a bed of copper. In the morning a sweat had formed over our skin. Oovis’ hair shone duller in the temple light. She looked, almost, like her mother. When we moved into the light, she was herself again. Destiny-heavy. Determined, but tired of the words she had heard all her life.

We found the roots in a garden; they looked like beets, a food common to Mu. Our eternal falls and springs meant that there was not much that would grow to fruition in our dirt. Too little of the suns’ light came down. This root looked no different

than most. We cooked it over the wet black fire, and Oovis bit into the black flesh.

“Just a taste,” she said. “To make sure it’s the real thing before we return.”

She smiled, teeth black. Her pupils swallowed the color in her eyes. She lay back onto the ground. The rest of the root in her hand glistened in the firelight. I took it from her and swallowed, leaves and all.

* * *

In the of the mountains, always the ground was wet with drizzle. My body throbbed, new skin replacing the old. Oovis lay in the grass at the base of the mountains. She lay in the sand of the temple. We walked at snail’s pace up the mountains and peered into caves. People crouched against walls, gazing up into the cave’s roof.

There was no shortage of time, so we did not introduce ourselves but only watched before moving on to the next and the next. In one we saw one of the Queen’s servants, ten years younger than he had been when he left.

We studied the sky; it was hazy with golden light, the two suns specks of yellow like egg yolks. I studied Oovis’ hair, ran my cheek along the edges. We laughed laughs that took months to subside. Life was a lazy fascination and an unbearable boredom. We ate more of the root, a daily meal. Time meant

nothing, and I understood what others meant when they claimed that a life without mortality was not worth living. Oovis did not understand. She forgot the people who had loved her. She shushed me when I tried to talk her out of eating the root. I was a servant to the pressure; if she snacked, I too bit in. We were bad for each other, like fatal lovers who had never touched.

Then one day I found the servant we had first glimpsed in the streets, his breath now still as mountain air. When I touched his chest, I felt only a faint murmur of heartbeat, an unheard whisper. I backed away, unsure what had done this to him but also never more sure of anything in my life.

I drew Oovis a picture of her parents in the dirt so that she would see, would know my concern.

“My parents will live and they will die,” she said, letting her hand pass through the temple flame. It did not burn her. It burned no one who ate of the root. “This is the great thing I was meant for.”

I drew a cage around them.

“Nothing can free them,” she said.

I drew her, with X’s for eyes. I drew her hair. I drew unhappiness and failure.

“A failure?” She touched her hard hair. The haze lifted from her eyes. She had not eaten that day, and the elation only

lasted as long as the root coursed through the blood. “I can’t be a failure. It’s not what I’m meant to be.”

I nodded, gesturing to the road we must leave upon.

She shook her head. “I cannot walk,” she said. “I cannot walk away from this.”

I knelt at her feet, so that she would know that I intended to carry her. And carry her I did.

* * *

In a pack around my waist, I carried two roots, enough for the Queen and enough for Oovis once she had fulfilled her destiny and saved her parents from the fate she had made for them.

The road was a weak enemy, the banyo trees’ withered voices no longer frightening. They had aged. The forest had aged, grown taller in the time we’d been away. How long had it been? Longer than we knew.

At the edge of the forest, we saw Mu. What was left of it. Ruins of crumbled stone. The stench of buildings no longer occupied, dusty, full of must and mold. The roofs caved in. Cracks in the ground, the dirt showing. Banyos toppled, their bark ash grey with death. There were no centaurs in the fields, no children in the streets. At the palace, too, no guards stood outside the window.

“What’s happened?” Oovis said, dismounting.

“Earthquakes,” said a familiar voice. The Queen stepped from the front door of the palace. “At first they were infrequent. Once a year or so, you remember.”

Slight tremors in the ground. A crack or two. I remembered.

“Then they grew worse. The last two years, they’ve happened every week, at least. Everyone has gone. Said the city is unstable, that there are better places elsewhere. I could not stop them. They did not invite me. They made the decision to leave without me, and I knew that they did not need me. And they told me that if I came, they would rise against me, would kill me in my sleep. My own people. I could not leave my city anyway. It is mine. It has been mine, the only thing I can call mine, for most of my life.” The Queen fell on her knees. “Did you bring it?” she cried. “The city will be mine forever.”

The girl with golden hair reached her hand into the pack around my belly. I felt her grip hold of the root, but she did not pull it out.

“It’s gone,” she said. “The root must have fallen from the bag on our journey home.”

Ovis wants it for her own, I thought. Still, I did not tell the Queen that she was lying. I would give the girl with golden hair whatever she wanted. Or maybe, I told myself, I would toss the root into the river on the way to find the others.

The Queen wept. She fell to her knees and pounded on the dirt, a tantrum befitting only royalty. When she brought her fists up, they were covered in dirt the brown of her hair. She did not notice.

“Take what you will,” she said. “Steal what you must. I am done with. I will die alone.”

“You could come with us,” Oovis said. “You might not be a Queen, but you could be happy.”

The Queen shook her head. “It’s too late for me,” she said. “I’ve done things only a Queen can live with.”

Oovis knelt and wrapped her arms around the Queen. Together they shook.

I ventured into the palace of ruins. Holes in the ceiling had let rainwater leak through, creating little ponds on the stone floor. I stomped my hooves through them, letting the water splash onto my fur. It felt good to be clear of the root’s power. I searched through the palace rooms, vast empty halls. Bugs had eaten through the family portraits on the walls; they were grotesque as ghosts now, ugly things.

In one of these halls, I found my voice cowering in the corner of a room. I bent down and blew the dust from it and swallowed it whole, unsure if the other centaur voices, too, would return, or if the voice, trembling in a corner, was for me and me only.

I yelled into the room, a word indistinguishable from words. The sound echoed back, the greatest I had ever heard.

My great thing was done. One destiny fulfilled.

* * *

Outside the palace I kept quiet before the Queen, whom Oovis had soothed into a stupor. Oovis wished her goodbye and climbed atop my back.

“Take me to the river,” she said, “the one beside my hut.”

I led her to the river, awaiting the moment when I would reveal my newfound voice.

She climbed down and grabbed the roots from my bag. Stop, I started to say, but when I saw that she was tossing them into the river, I bit my tongue. We watched as they bobbed their way down, down, through the rocks and over the waterfall, where they would wash up on the fish people’s shore, if there still were fish people. If they still had a shore.

“That was a good thing you did,” I said.

Oovis jumped. “What did you say?”

“Throwing the roots in the river. Comforting the Queen.”

“Your voice!” she said. “You’ve found it!”

I told her of the corner and the dust.

“I am glad that you have your voice again,” she said. She once more crawled upon my back. “I am glad that, now, we are equals.”

“Do you want to look for your parents?” I asked.

“They are gone,” said Oovis. “I know better than to wish.”

“You did your great thing,” I said. “You deserve a wish.”

“The Queen and the roots?” she said. “That was not my great thing. My great thing will come.”

We rode, then, once more through the woods. We were going, we decided, to find our new home, where the girl with golden hair and her centaur friend would live and die in a city where stone came without the cost of blood, where people did not waste their lives on other people’s wishes, where a girl with golden hair could do many as many great things as she pleased.

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COURT BINDINGS

by Karalynn Lee

When I come across you, there are forsythia blossoms scattered unnoticed in your hair, as though the shrub leaning above you wooed you in such secret that you remained unaware. You're unmindful too of how a daughter of a bloodline such as yours shouldn't be lying on the dirt on your stomach, staring at a spiderweb. It's so unthinkable that it has taken me a full hour to discover where you are; enough time for shadows to shift direction, or an assassin's blade to find you. Besides that, it's still early spring, and it is chilly outside. I chide you for being so careless, and you say indignantly, "But I was careful! I even drew the strokes in order—" and you show me your name as you have recently learned to write it, the characters spelled out perfectly within strands of spider-silk. Trembling along the last line, still spinning thread, is a spider.

I have guarded you ever since your hundredth day, when you were dressed in colorful formal robes that you would never wear again because children grow so fast at that age. String and silver and calligraphy brush arranged before you, to see what sort of life might lie ahead: longevity or wealth or wisdom. No

one knows which you might have picked, for a messenger rushed into the room to tell your mother of her mother's death. Those were his last words; he slumped across the table with a knife in his back, and you reached out and touched your fingers to his life-blood. An ill omen, especially for a girl who had just become the heir to the kingdom.

Because I have guarded you since you were a hundred days old, the spiderweb doesn't surprise me. But it will not do to be so obvious with your gift. I coax you into releasing the spider. The great art of the court is subtlety, I tell you as I pick the flowers from your hair. Do nobles not hire assassins rather than killing each other themselves? Don't turn a creature so blatantly against its nature.

You look at me and ask, "But then how else will I know that it's doing what I bound it to do?"

They say even children can speak with wisdom. Instead of answering, I brush away the web and tell you not to do this where others can see.

When your mother scolds you over the dirt on your skirts and asks what you were doing, you say only that you like flowers. She reminds you that you are a royal princess, not a gardener, and forbids you to ever lose your guards again.

You don't listen, of course, although the next time I know where to find you. This time you bind a long-whiskered fish in

the garden pond. It has always evaded your clumsy splashes before, but after you tell it not to be afraid, it bides quietly under the touch of your fingers and eats the shred of persimmon in your palm.

When you finally release it, it swims to the bottom of the pool and hides among the rocks there.

Then there's the sparrow you set to chirping an alert whenever someone approaches your suite from the palace courtyard. After several days, it falls to the ground and is no doubt claimed by some hungry scavenger. It had too diminutive a mind to realize it could serve you longer by taking time to eat and sleep.

With each binding you discover your limits: you can only bind one creature at a time. You can only give it a single command. And that command will last, even should you forget, until you lift it or the creature dies. But if you lift it the creature will remember, and sometimes that effect is just as useful as the binding.

As you learn, so do I. You do not mean to be cruel to all the animals you practice upon, but you are.

* * *

There are a dozen clans who plot against your mother's rule. They think her power is waning. But the assassins they send against her are all caught and executed. They finally turn

their attention to you, and there are nights you wake to a stranger's scream then my quiet, "Go back to sleep, Your Royal Highness," as I drag out the body.

One of the assassins is in the service of none other than your aunt. She is older than your mother and should have taken rule, but while she was heir, she publicly declared herself willing to step aside. She lives away from the palace now, but has come to visit you in your suite, treating you as a royal in your own right and not just a child. You're excited. I'm wari-er, and I intercept the mug of exotic tea your aunt's maidservant prepares.

"Guardswoman," you hiss, humiliated.

I sip the tea and recognize the bitter aftertaste. I shake my head. "This is not appropriate for the royal princess's delicate tastes. We have pure mountain spring water to offer instead, gathered from the melted snows of Sorak Peak."

Your aunt's lips tighten only a little before she nods graciously.

I am sick later, but I have carefully built up my resistance to all manner of poisons, and this one will not kill me as it would have you. You watch me sweat and retch, and you understand.

* * *

When you next see your mother, you tell her, “My honored aunt tried to poison me.”

Your mother looks sharply at me, and I nod. She sighs. “Clumsy of her. My elder sister is a bitter woman who craves the throne.”

“But she gave way for you willingly,” you protest.

“She gave way because she knew I would be a stronger queen. She must not think the same of you.”

You flinch.

“You have time to learn, my daughter. As long as you trust your guard and don’t take foolish risks.”

Where I hear concern, you hear criticism. You have no siblings, and your mother is perhaps harder on you than she should be. In return you flout propriety at every opportunity, knowing how much it means to her. I spend as much time teaching you the traditional ways as I do guarding you.

To my surprise, sometimes you listen to me.

* * *

There is one time when you save me. I’m riding alongside your palanquin on the way to a local temple when my horse suddenly spooks. You slide aside the window to see what is happening, and I shout for you to stay inside as I fall to the ground.

“Be still,” you cry out, and when I disregard you to roll away from the lash of hooves, I find myself right in front of a snake, coiled to strike. I recognize the pattern of color along its scales. Its venom could be diluted and used to paralyze a dozen people, their breath frozen in their lungs.

It’s a vicious breed, but it doesn’t strike. Then I notice that the forked tongue is still extended in the air instead of flickering back into its mouth. You’ve bound it not to move.

I kill it quickly. The other guards never notice anything strange, as they’re distracted when you jump out of your palanquin and rush to me. “Are you hurt?” you ask.

I’m embarrassed by the fuss. “Please return to your palanquin, Your Royal Highness. I’m fine.” Because of you. I don’t know what to make of this reversal of our roles.

You’re still thinking about the incident that night. “I nearly bound your horse instead,” you fret. “I almost didn’t see the snake. But then I realized something must have startled the horse in the first place.”

“You did well,” I say.

Your eyes, brimming with tears, are bright in the moonlight that slants through the bamboo shades. “I could have lost you!”

I hesitate, then gather you into my arms and shush you. You cling to me as I whisper that I will always protect you.

* * *

By your sixteenth birthday you are old enough to marry the young man who was engaged to you at birth on the strength of his bloodlines and birth sign. You rail against your mother, but she sits stone-faced and tells you that this arrangement is what's best for you, your clan, the kingdom. You must bear a child, an heir. Her expression softens as she looks at you and says that some duties bear gifts, but you don't notice.

It's not the kingdom you're worried about. You ask me about the wedding night. What I tell you does not reassure you. You're pale against the resplendence of your robes, and I don't like the look of your new husband's face as he looks upon you at the joining ceremony.

I've never spent a night away from you since you were first given into my care, but this night I am sent away. Sleepless, I prowl the garden.

The next morning I'm standing in the courtyard outside your suite. When you slide open the door, you look tired but happy.

"Jinho-ya," I say, forgetting myself and using your name instead of your title.

You gesture for me to lean close. Into my ear you say, "It works on *men*."

I am too relieved for your sake to ask questions. Afterward, your husband always looks at you with trepidation, and you never do catch a child.

* * *

You attend when your mother holds court, and thus so do I. We're not allowed to speak, of course. Afterward, you talk to me about her decisions, struggling to understand the intricate dance of court politics, where no one says what they mean.

The clans are growing more restless. They send representatives to court, and your mother turns away their elegantly worded demands with even more elaborate refusals.

They heed her at first but soon grow bolder. There are more assassins than usual, but your mother only chooses the best guards. Soon it won't matter: open rebellion is only a matter of time.

"A civil war will destroy the kingdom," you say. "Why won't she negotiate?"

"A queen does not negotiate," I say. "She rules."

"I could make the clan leaders obey, you know that. If only I could talk to them..."

But you'll never get the chance. In court you wear plain white robes to symbolize your status as a non-participant in the proceedings.

You seek out your mother in private for the first time in a long while. You suggest that she send you as her representative to the clans, but she rejects the idea as too dangerous.

“I’ll take my guard. I’ll be safe.”

She sighs. “I don’t have time for this. My spies tell me that the clans are already mustering their armies.”

“You can’t let this go to war!”

Your mother asks, “Are you telling me what I can do?”

Even you recognize such perilous ground. You murmur a formal leave-taking.

When we return to your suite, you begin to pace restlessly and say, “I tried to bind my mother.”

I don’t know why this surprises me. You should have first tried long ago.

“As you saw, it didn’t work. She must have some sort of protection. She’s always so careful about protecting herself. But what of the kingdom? There’ll be only pieces left for me to inherit if she’s so set on this war.”

“It would be a difficult time for any queen,” I say.

“But not me. Not with my gift.”

“You’re not queen yet.”

“Then she must die,” you say.

My mouth goes dry. “You mustn’t kill her.”

You whirl on me. “You always cared more for what my mother wanted than what I did!”

My knees fold and I make obeisance before you, forehead pressed to the backs of my hands. “My foremost thought is your safety, Your Royal Highness.”

“I wasn’t going to kill her myself. I’d send an assassin, of course.”

“But you have none in your service.”

“I have silver.”

I breathe carefully, evenly. “An assassin’s loyalty must be cultivated like an orchid. Mere money will never assure you that you will not be betrayed.”

“A binding—”

“If you bind an assassin, you must hold them forever, or risk their turning upon you once you release them.”

You turn thoughtful. “You could kill her for me. She’d never suspect you, always so loyal.”

“No.”

Your head jerks at my flat tone, and our gazes lock.

“You must not kill your own mother,” I say, desperate.

You kneel across from me. “I know it’s horrible even to consider. But she never really cared for me. In my heart, you are my mother.”

I close my eyes. “She wants the best for you. I beg of you, do not send an assassin against her.”

You purse your lips but let it drop, or so I think.

* * *

You kill your mother yourself. Under different circumstances, I would be proud of how untroubled your expression is as you approach her, of the way you conceal the knife in your robes. A royal princess of the court bloodying her own hands is inconceivable, and her guards are unprepared. By the time they react, you have become queen. Your mother’s body slumps to the floor, her elaborate braids still perfect.

I react swiftly. “Your Royal Majesty,” I say clearly, making obeisance, and others in the court follow, once their shock begins to wear away.

You’re still trembling with the knife slack in your hands, crimson splatters ruining your silks.

“Here,” I say gently, and I take the knife away from you. “You must bathe and put on new robes. Royal ones.”

“Yes,” you murmur, and you let me guide you to the doors and help you slip on your shoes. We could go straight to your suite, but a path through the garden would be more peaceful, and you’re still so shaken. A brief respite is all I can give you, here among the secluded trees and flowers where once I worried that an assassin would find you.

* * *

Jinho-ya, do you know, do you know that your mother has only ever spoken to me once? I was the finest of assassins who, having breached one queen's defenses and almost another's, was marked for execution. My body was bloody and broken by the guards who captured me, but my mind, my spirit, were strong and unbowed. Until your mother put you in my arms and said, "Protect her."

She loved you above all things.

* * *

With your mother's death, her last and longest binding is broken.

I know the power you wield. It is the gift of your bloodline, and nothing that I would see live on in this world.

I have your knife. You never suspect me, always so loyal.

* * *

Spring is early this year. The forsythia shrubs are already rife with yellow blossoms. I leave your body underneath them, where the fallen flowers might blanket you and keep you from the chill. This time, I will not brush the flowers from your hair.

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Karalynn Lee grew up in Korea without being fluent in Korean. She now lives in Silicon Valley and has just a high enough geek knowledge score to pass as one in dim lighting and loud music. Her story [“Unsilenced”](#) appeared in [BCS #105](#), our Fourth Anniversary Double-Issue. She is fond of both poetry and terrible action movies.

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COVER ART

“Migration,” by Julie Dillon



Julie Dillon is a freelance science fiction and fantasy artist from Northern California. She received her BFA in Fine Arts from Sacramento State University in 2005, with continued education at the Academy of Arts University in San Francisco and Watts Atelier. Her clients include Simon & Schuster, Penguin Books, Wizards of the Coast, and Paizo Publishing. She won the 2014 Hugo Award for Best Professional Artist. View more of her work online at www.juliedillonart.com.

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