

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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THE ORANGERY

by Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam

Guardian

I'd held my position as guardian of the Orangery for twenty years when our first intruder broke his way in through the stone wall.

I walked among the Orangery, watching for roots reaching up from the soil like begging hands. These trees I'd oblige with stream water poured from a basin of pure gold. Then I walked the path with my great pair of shears. From the words of my ancestors, I knew to hold the shears poised at my own heart as I went, so as not to frighten the trees and set them about producing their poison. If a tree wished to be trimmed, she would rattle her branches. I trimmed until she stopped her shaking.

After my rounds I paced the grounds thrice before retiring to my cottage beside the greenhouse to read stories I knew by heart. Little room in the Orangery meant the guardian's library was limited. The books on my shelves I had chosen as a young woman: stories of adventure and romance, stories that left me with a pitted longing. They weren't the books I would have

chosen in my middle age. Still, I not only read them but ran my hands along their covers, rooting my fingers in their engraved spines and decorated binding. They'd been bound with the skin of beautiful people, the only skin I'd ever touched. Their pages were formed of delicate reed paper. I was lying back in my reading chair with one hand across the book spread against my chest and the other between my legs when I heard the trees' startled shrieking.

I jumped to my feet and grabbed my spear from the mantle and ran from the cottage through the woods and along the wall until I found the place the intruder had entered: a large swath of stone wall, toppled since I'd last checked it. The wall had never before failed. I made note of the number of strides it had taken for me to reach it and then darted off through the woods, searching for the intruder.

I didn't find him that night, though I searched until my legs throbbed and my eyes ached from squinting in the dark, for though the seasons didn't touch the Orangery, night and day still folded the woods in their embrace. When my legs refused to carry me any longer, I rested against the wall, guarding the break from which I thought any intruder might, having realized the lack of treasures inside the Orangery, escape.

* * *

Guide

From here you see perhaps only a forest. But come, let's step along the path through the woods, and I'll show you. Do you see? Their shapes, the curve of their trunks? Some were of a flowering age when they changed. These show their differences more keenly: three knots, one for the breasts, two for the hips. No, no, there are no nipples. Trees reproduce by dropping seed.

This one is called Lotis. See there the bronze plaque half-buried in her trunk. She's one of our oldest. Over the years she has swallowed her name, as though she wishes to forget that she ever held a form of skin-and-bone, of blood. Our books tell us that she enjoyed the drink, the drug, the dance. Our books tell us that she loved no man twice.

If you read your guidebooks, you'll find a story of her transformation. You'll find a warning: don't eat of her flowers. The story is a lie. The warning, though, is true. She's here surrounded by those who didn't follow it. See their shapes, too: women, men, and children. They may look the same as our dear Lotis, but they do not flower. If you look closely, you'll see that they are hollow. These are not trees but shells. Besides, the Lotis's blooms are said to taste of your mother's perfume, bitter to the tongue.

I'll give you the real story, if you're ready to hear it. If you prefer to follow your guidebooks, please move up along the trail. You'll find plaques beneath, or inside, each of our Main Attractions. Those who wish to know the world for what it is, please leave your books in this basket here. Listen, then, to the story of Lotis, and follow me and truth along the path.

Rowdy girls are always the first to go. Some men think they can tame them. Lotis's men thought this. She had them once and let them go, no matter how they begged her to marry them beneath the lotus tree in the center of town.

The farm boy was no different. He bred his father's sheep, milked his father's cows, and slaughtered his father's pigs. He tended his mother's apple orchard and harvested her vegetable garden. Lotis found his quaintness endearing when he asked her, with a dip from his waist, to dance. He wasn't terrible to lay, but a rowdy girl only settles when she's good and ready, and Lotis was not, no matter how sorely satisfied she was after their lengthy encounter.

She expected to see him again at the festivals. After all, his farmer father sold his pigs and wool there. Sometimes she bought a leg of tender lamb from his mother to line her empty stomach before coating her throat with wine. She didn't expect to see him standing over her in the grass where she slept one morning after an uneventful evening of lackluster socials. She

had gone to the field to take in the shock of sunrise, alone. He straddled her waist, stinking of pig shit. In the distance a donkey brayed five minutes too late.

She wrapped her hand around his ankle and dug her nails into the flesh until it bled. When he jerked his leg away, she struggled to her feet and ran across the grass, down the hill, to the center of town where Apollo played his music and mixed his potions.

“Give me a weapon,” she cried. “Priapus has tried to take me.”

Apollo looked up from the crafting of his new lyre and sneered. Everyone knew his story: a god on vacation in the world. An immortal who had fallen for the mundanities of mortals. Everyone knew, too, his magic. “I’ve seen you with Priapus,” he said.

“Please. He could be coming this way.”

“He’s told us all of his intention to marry you. Beneath the lotus tree.”

“I don’t want to marry him.”

“Why not? He’s good to his family. He’s handsome and healthy. He’s said to be good with his spear.” Apollo winked. “You’re running out of time.”

Lotis grabbed his wrist with both her hands and twisted the skin in opposite directions.

“Stop, that hurts,” said Apollo, too calmly.

“I won’t stop unless you help me.”

“Yes, fine.” Lotis let go. Apollo’s wrists bore the imprint of Lotis’s fingers. He uncorked three bottles and poured the contents into a golden bowl. “Drink this.”

She gulped the syrup down like wine. Her legs fused into a trunk. Her fingers split and split and split until they were fans of green leaves. Her eyes popped out of her tree-skull and bloomed into the beautiful white flowers of the lotus.

The townspeople were overjoyed at the appearance of another lotus under which to marry. They erected a statue of Priapus beside the tree.

* * *

Guardian

I knew him first from his music, the haunting voice that came to me through the air. I followed it until I saw him leaning against one of the trees as though he hadn’t given chase all night and still possessed all the energy of a well-rested child. His fingers trespassed in a blur across the strings of his lyre. He’d draped his blue button-down over one shoulder, but his chest was bare. I approached, spear at the ready though I didn’t want to pierce him, for doing so would stop his singing, or at least change it irretrievably into a ghastly moan of death.

“Oh, guardian, guardian, where has she gone?” he sang. “I’ve journeyed long but my girl won’t come out to accept her song.”

“Who have you come for?” I said, pushing the spear’s point into his navel. He didn’t have to tell me his name; one of the books I’d brought with me to the Orangery told the tales of old gods and men and names I’d seen etched in our plaques at the bases of our named trees.

“You know who I’m here for.”

“I do not. As I understand it, you’ve had your fill of many women, perhaps half of our named. How am I supposed to tell from the stories which maiden you *really* had your heart set on?” I pushed until a drop of red blood dripped from the button hole; it traveled down the shaved trail and disappeared beneath the waist of his overalls. “Tell me her name and I’ll show you her resting place.”

“Daphne,” he whispered, boring his eyes into mine. He let the lyre fall to the ground. He grasped the point of the spear with both hands and pulled it further into his belly. “I’ll die before I leave without her.”

I’d dreamt of him as I had dreamt of all men who graced the reed pages in my books, deprived of the company of men for the whole of a life and feverous with curiosity. If only the spear were my hands digging into his flesh, I would pull his

stomach out and make of his body a new book. Instead I pulled back my weapon.

“I’ll take you to her in the morning,” I said. “Until then you’ll go to my cabin and wait for me while I mend the mess you made in my wall.”

“I don’t want to be alone. I’ll go with you.”

“You’ll do no such thing. I know where your Daphne sleeps. Either you go to my cabin and wait until I come back for you, or you taste the point of my spear.”

“I don’t know the way,” he said, but already he bent to gather his lyre into his arms.

“Follow the path,” I said.

He hesitated then nodded and turned to follow the path. I watched him walk until I could no longer see him.

“Daphne,” I whispered. “Show me where you’re hidden.”

In the distance I heard her rustling. I walked the path until I came to a grove of stumps with a single laurel queening over the dead. Unlike Lotis, Daphne did not tempt with poison blossoms, but still those trees that dared to drink from her soil perished before her terrible beauty; her virgin innocence sucked too much sustenance. I touched my palm against the rough of her bark.

“It’s not a sin not to want the way other women want,” I said. Across my chest I could still feel the weight of a book

against my skin. I thought of how she'd rejected the man whose skin surely felt as good, or better, than those long-dead books' skins. "It's okay to want, too."

I removed the plaque submerged at her roots, prying it from the place where she had begun to wrap her wood around it. I traveled deeper into the trees until I found one of the nameless, a dwarf of a laurel. I placed the new plaque at her feet, kicking dirt over the name so that Apollo might think it had been there long before he had burst through my wall. I buried her original plaque ten strides from her base. I patched the wall as best I could with spit and stone and dirt until the evening returned and I could no longer see the hole for the darkness behind it. Then I followed the shelter path and found, in my bed, a naked man with both hands drawn beneath his head.

* * *

Guide

This space here, see, this empty hole where once roots reached deep into the soil, once held a tree with the wounds of a mother upon her bark: a scar near her roots where she tore between the legs. Dryope wasn't like the first we saw. She loved only two men. The first, her husband, had already fathered her child when she stumbled upon Apollo with his lyre. Her husband was good to her; he cooked the meat he hunted, fed

the child so that Dryope might claim a moment to sleep or weave or lay with Apollo in their secret glade.

An artist, Apollo had little to offer Dryope when his clothes cloaked his body, but when he removed them he offered her what she could not weave: a pair of eyes that didn't know her in her worst moments. Astride him she was invincible and untouchable, though she did allow him to run his hands across the stretch marks that streaked her hips like constellations. Her husband named the marks; Apollo didn't notice them. When he asked her to leave her husband, she refused.

"What good will that do me?" she said, gathering her clothes. It was time for her to return to her family in the hut they'd built upon land that was once the center of a bustling town, empty now of all but a lotus tree and a crumbling statue of a man with a cock that cast a shadow larger than the statue's height. She and her husband mocked the statue when they were light with drink.

Each time she left Apollo, she told herself it was the last. Then his song called her across the river, and her husband would know the wild look in her eye. He would take the child from her breast and tell her, go, go. Disappear. We'll be here when you return.

The night of her transformation she asked Apollo for a dance. He obliged. He wore the leather she'd brought for him,

made by her mother. He allowed her to tie his hands with reeds. When the drizzle had ended, leaving only dew across the grass, she stood to leave but was pulled back into the dirt by an insistent hand.

“You’ll stay with me,” Apollo said, digging his nails into her wrist.

She wrenched her wrist away. Apollo grabbed her hands. She tried to leave, to roll away, to run, but he wrapped a reed around her wrist, around her feet.

“I’ll make you stay.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for her life to end, for the devastation of losing control of her body, but she heard only the sound of feet sloshing through mud then nothing. When she opened her eyes, Apollo was gone.

When finally she broke the reeds and ran back to her family, she found her husband’s bags gathered, the baby strapped to his chest.

“You should have told me it was him,” he said. “I only ever wanted you to be happy.”

“I don’t want him,” she said. “He doesn’t know my constellations.”

But her husband no longer trusted the words from her mouth, too tainted were they with the spit of a god-man.

Dryope wove until her fingers bled. She sunk her fingers into the place her daughter had first glimpsed the world until she slept. She dreamt until Apollo came for her.

“I don’t want you here,” she said.

“I don’t want to be here. I brought you a gift.”

“What is it?”

“To ease your pain.”

“I don’t want anything you have to give.” She pulled a blade from her bedside table. “Leave.”

When he went, he left the vial beside the place from which she had pulled the blade.

Hours passed. Days drifted like wayward clouds. One month without her family made of her a waif without the will to hunt on her own. She had asked the gods for freedom and had been granted an excess. She had asked to be looked at and now faced the sorry stone gaze of each villager she passed any time she left her hut. No one helped her. No one spoke her name when she was there.

She drank the syrup. Her branches broke through the thatched roof of her hut. Her roots broke through the stone of the floor, sending cracks like lines drawn to indicate the dreamy shapes of constellations. For years no trees grew around her, until her name had been forgotten and her legend erased. We uncovered it, of course. We uncover all such

legends and bring them here to the Orangery where they might live again.

And what of the roots, the empty hole? She did not die in her tree-form. No, she was cured. Yes, there is a cure, or was. There is one man who knew it. One man who brought it here, who thought to use it to fuel his own long-lost desire. But should we name it cure or curse? Who's to say that the trees don't prefer being trees, that the burden of womanhood is too much for some to bear?

You understand. I see the way you touch these trees. There is no coming back from it. There is no escape that erases all the memory from your bones, even when you no longer have bones, even when you no longer have memory. There and back again. I still feel his hands, burned like imprints in my skin.

* * *

Guardian

To say I didn't long for him would be a lie, for I ached deep in my belly to feel the prick of that spear. But it could have been any man, any skin so much like the skin of my books but warmer and softer to the touch.

"Come here." Apollo beckoned with one long finger.

I stood beneath the cabin ceiling so low it brushed the top of my head. Cracks in the wall zigzagged like lightning bolts. The trees held this place together while tearing it apart.

Through those cracks I glimpsed the limbs of trees poking through, more insistent than a single man's finger.

"I will not," I said, crossing my arms to cover my chest.

"Why not?" Apollo propped himself up on one bent arm. "The looks you've been giving me."

I looked from crack to crack, tree to tree. "Aren't you here for someone in particular?"

He raised a single eyebrow, a pirate villain, a lothario, a lion in man's clothing. The books, at least, had prepared me for men like him, if my lack of contact with them hadn't.

"You'll take me to her? Even without my offering?"

"What else can I do? You've come all this way."

He stood from the bed and slipped on his blue shirt, pulled on his overalls. Through his belt loop he wore a tiny ax. How had I failed to see it before?

"I didn't come a long way," he said. "Don't think I've been missing her my whole life or anything. Had a job near here is all. Thought it'd be silly not to look her up, see how she's been."

"I think you'll find her less than communicative about her life since you." I gathered my shawl to cover as much of my body as I could, to protect against both the cold and the man. "What's your work?" I held the door open for him to pass. He brushed against me as he exited the cabin.

“Lumberjack,” he said. “Well, I operate the lumber company.”

I stopped and gripped harder the knife at my hilt.

As he turned to me, the shadows fled from his face. “That’s not what I’m here for. It’s just another strange job for a strange life. To stay in the mortal world, one must play the mortal game.”

I loosened the grip but didn’t let go. “If you try to hurt her, I’m obligated to slice your throat open.”

The man smirked. “Specificity may be your strongest suit. I’ll keep your threat in mind.” He gestured at the long, dark path before us. “I don’t know the way.”

“Of course.” I stepped before him. I led us past the grove of Dante’s suicide trees, men who’d died for love or shame or the numb that gripped so many by the throat. This, too, I knew from books: men were also delicate, some with skin so thin you could tear it if you bit too hard. I longed to tell him of the treasured trees, to point to and tell her story so that she might be known again by someone more than me. It had been years since the Orangery had seen a tourist.

“There are so many,” he said as we passed a grove thick as the porridge congealed on my stove. “Why do you women fear men so much that you would rather be tree than give a kiss?”

“I am not a tree,” I said. The shadows reached across our path. I waited for it to recede before passing. “And I do not fear you.”

“Well, these women feared us. You can’t tell me they didn’t.”

“These are not all the changed women of the world. All forests are filled with them. You think of that next time you steady your ax. The women here are the lucky ones. The poorer women, women of lesser fame, aren’t so lucky.”

“We use saws now,” he said.

I eyed the ax.

“Just for show.” He ran his finger along the blade. “See? It’s dull.”

When we came to the grove where I had christened the new Daphne earlier that evening, I slowed. Would he sense the true Daphne out there, farther along the trail?

“Why have we stopped?” He squared his arms on his hips and glanced about us. “Is it safe to stop here?”

The trees mumbled. I worried that they might release their potent poison and kill us both, but these trees were older, less apt to react to human presence. Besides, the trees of the Orangery had grown fond of me, and I of them. My stomach turned at the thought of my betrayal: to lead such a dangerous creature into their midst. But he couldn’t harm them with me

there, my hand against the hilt of my blade. My presence was the reason no rabbits bounded along the paths, no insects dared to feast upon the trees' succulent leaves.

"Do you not sense her here?" I said. "We're in her presence as we speak."

Apollo the lumberjack looked madly about, as though his franticness might call her forward from the darkness rather than send her slithering back into it as frightened trees may do.

"No, no," he said. "Which is she? It's been so long."

"Over there." I pointed to the tree with Daphne's plate at her roots.

"How little she has changed." He wrapped his arms around the mislabeled tree, rubbed his cheek upon her, and caressed a low-hanging leaf. "She's better than I remember her."

"Yes, she has flourished here."

"I never intended to take her," he said. "But I wonder if she might be allowed to come if persuaded?"

"You may try, but you will fail."

"Would you like to come with me?" he asked the tree. She didn't speak in return. Likely the warmth of such a stranger did nothing to impress or provoke her. I wanted to laugh with the other trees whose branches began to rustle.

"They speak," he said. "But she doesn't."

"She doesn't."

“What do they say?”

“We don’t love our strangers here,” I lied. “They ask when you will leave.”

“Daphne?” said Apollo. “Perhaps if I sing?” He sang three lines of an ancient song. The trees’ branches rustled faster, stronger.

“We best go now,” I said. “She’s given her answer.”

“She has said nothing!”

“Then you must accept that she’s forgotten you.”

“I won’t,” he said. He reached into his pocket and pulled from it a vial. I drew my blade and moved forward. But he had turned the vial upside down, the clear liquid already soaked into the dirt at her roots. I couldn’t kill him until I knew the consequence of his actions, and any possible remedy.

“What was that?” I asked, for it looked like the very syrup we kept locked away at the Orangery: the changing syrup.

“You know what it was,” he said, dropping the glass. “I thought perhaps a second dose would reverse it.”

“You know that’s not how it works.” I dropped my blade but pulled a rope from my deep pocket, the same rope I used sometimes to train the trees’ limbs, when they asked to be trained. “Your hands.” He obliged me this, allowed me to tie his hands behind his back.

“Worth a shot,” he said, his voice shaking. “I can’t go on living without her. I’ve spent all my life looking for her. You must understand what it is to have loved and to have such love taken from you.”

“Guardians of the Orangery do not love.” I picked up the blade, pressed it again into his flesh. “Walk.” I pushed him until he did so, led him back along the trail the way we had come. I didn’t expel him from the Orangery in case his syrup wasn’t as he had described it. In the morning I would lead him from the Orangery so he would never again find his way back.

I didn’t have that chance, for when I returned in the morning to the tree I found there a woman, naked and shivering in the dirt, her eyes still sealed with sleep. I didn’t know her by name, and I knew that upon awakening she wouldn’t be able to tell me. The women of the trees forgot their names when the bark encased them. Few ever remembered. I bent and brushed the long brown hair from her face. Her blue lips tremored.

“Are you alive?” I asked. She didn’t stir until I pressed my fingers to the pulse point at her neck, where a faint beating could be heard beneath the skin. “Apollo, what did you do?”

I carried her limp body in my arms back to the cabin. I fixed a bed of leaves and grass on the floor of the greenhouse and placed her upon it. I went inside my hut to Apollo, who

slept on the hard dirt floor where I'd left him after checking his pockets for more of his poison. They were empty.

"What did you find out there?" he said, sitting up to face me. I'd left his hands tied behind his back.

"You know what I found," I said. "Change her back."

"I want to see her."

I knew he would and wanted him to. Would he finally recognize that she was not the woman for whom he had come? I led him to the greenhouse and watched as his lips contorted with understanding.

"This is your doing, then," he said.

"Change her back."

He shrugged his broad shoulders. Though I had imagined the pressure of his lyre, the handle of his ax, looking upon him as he looked lustful upon even this stranger woman, I had nothing but contempt for him. To want a man was not to love him. To want a man was not to give in to him, either.

"I'm bored of you," I said. "Change her back now or I'll gut you."

"You won't," he said. "Because then you won't know where I came upon the syrup, or how to reverse it. Which I will tell you, of course, but I want to see her, the real Daphne. I want to kiss her goodbye."

I shoved him back into my hut and locked the door so that he could not escape. I went into the greenhouse and looked upon the woman, barely breathing in the dirt. She, a woman of the woods, might know better than a Guardian what needed to be done. I breathed breath into her mouth, careful not to place my hands upon her skin. She fluttered to life, gasping and clawing at herself. Her breathing sounded like the rustling of leaves.

“What have you done to me?” She scurried into a corner behind a pot filled with herb seeds. “Take it off.” She scratched first at her cheeks then down her torso, her legs, until quick as the swing of an ax lines of blood trailed a map of fear down her body.

“Stop, stop.” I rushed to her, pried her hands from herself. There was no escaping skin, except by way of bark. But even then it was still trapped beneath, never gone, as easily accessed as by a syrup poured on the roots. No matter how deep they ran, they could be fooled in an instant. I held her hands too hard, fearful of cracking the fragile bones but more fearful that she might unravel herself on my watch, before I had a chance to know her, the only one of my watch that had ever changed back. For that, and even though it wasn't her choice, I knew her to be strong. One can learn from strong women. “If you kill

yourself, we won't have a chance to speak. And I want to speak with you. I will help you, but please don't leave me yet."

She calmed, or at least her body stopped its thrashing, though now it leaked sap from its eyes, and I saw that the blood down her legs was not blood but a red thick as sap.

"What am I?" she said. "What have you made me?"

"I did nothing to you." I let go her hands, which fell to her sides in the dirt. I tore strips from the frost covers that lay along the greenhouse shelves and went about wrapping her from her ankles up her legs. "There. You'll bleed less. You won't scratch beneath them, will you?"

"If not you, then how did I get like this?"

"You were like this once." I squeezed her hand. It was limp in mine. "Do you remember?"

She shook her head, slow at first then more rapidly, until her hair swayed about her shoulders.

"Change me back." She gripped my arm with all her returned strength. "I don't want this."

I fixed her a bed in the dirt and locked her within the greenhouse. "Block this door," I told her. "And let no one but me through."

I walked along the dirt paths until I came upon the true Daphne. I knelt at her roots. There were many reasons I was hesitant to allow the changed Dryope to use the last remaining

syrup we had locked away: I didn't want to use our only syrup, the only remnant of a time when women could change should they need to. I didn't want to reach a time when I needed the syrup but couldn't use it. I'd always imagined myself joining the Orangery in the end of my days, when another Guardian came to take over my post. And then, buried, another reason: a fascination I had with her, a loneliness I longed to discard, a desire to know the life of these women from the inside out.

Even for all that, I didn't want, either, to bring the man to his victim, to allow him that which he desired. I'd give up the syrup, that much I knew. I would change her back because it was the right thing to do. That was what she desired, and to give in to the women of the woods was my one and only lot in life.

I laid my palm upon the ridges of her roots.

"You are safe," I said. "I won't bring him here."

* * *

Guide

And here, my friends, we have our belle of the woods. Please remain calm. Don't touch her, no. Don't speak too loudly. Don't speak her name. She'll go if startled, though it will take you a moment to realize. You'll look where there was tree and see only shadow. That's the way of a virgin. Don't hold

hands in her presence. The chaste don't approve of skin on skin.

She, friends, is called Daphne. No longer does she bear her plaque. We only know her by the scar, here, in her breast, where Apollo found her once again and, in his rage, tried to cut her down. The very same man, yes, from the stories. The very same man who burst in through these walls uninvited. I have told you what we do to uninvited guests. We did that to him. So do not touch.

Daphne hated Apollo straightaway upon meeting him, and who could blame her? Daphne the water girl had gone into the woods to fetch a jug for the young sporting kids in town, as was her daily task. She watched the children because she didn't long for her own, because she was impartial enough to their begging mouths not to give in to every whim. She was walking along the path to the winding river that cut through her father's vast swath of land when she came upon Apollo entwined with a woman upon the roots of my own tree. She saw them but passed without comment, for sex didn't bother her but also didn't interest her in any of its forms. She didn't, like her mother, tend a garden. She didn't, like her sister, lie with fools when she ran out of songs to sing.

On her way back up the trail, she found Apollo waiting for her, sprawled nude across the dirt like an egotist. The nameless naked woman was nowhere to be found.

“Beautiful girl,” said Apollo. “But so stern. What do you have to be upset about, stern girl? You know they say laughter is the best medicine. You’ll find me a funny, funny man.”

“Where’s that woman who was wrapped around you a moment ago?” Daphne searched the shadows, for she had heard of lover pairs tricking strangers into the woods. “I don’t have any money if that’s what you’re after.”

“Don’t you worry about her. She had elsewhere to be.” He rose and offered her an acorn in his palm. “I don’t want to take from you. I want to give.”

“I’m in need of nothing.” She shifted her water jug from one hip to the other. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

She hadn’t been taught to be a rude girl, but she needed a man’s excusing like she needed a knife in her eye, so she went on past him without awaiting his reply. He gave none, nor did he shout across the woods to her as she walked away.

Instead, the next day when she woke, she found he had penetrated the only weakness in her walls; her father at their breakfast table sat with the man, sharing the seeds of a pomegranate. Daphne’s typically still heart hammered with fear.

“What is he doing here?” she said, gathering her robe around herself. Never before had she felt the need to cover herself in her own kitchen. Never before had she felt the need to run and never look back. She stayed where she stood, however, and her father patted the seat beside him.

“This, Daphne, is the mighty Apollo.” He looked to the man. “Forgive her behavior the other evening. She is uninterested in the goings-on of our city and doesn’t know the faces of our heroes. That’s one of the reasons I love her so. She is her own world.”

“I don’t know the name Apollo.” Unwilling to be inconvenienced, she grabbed a handful of seeds from her father’s bowl and shoved them in her mouth. They stained her hands. She wiped the red down the front of her robe.

“Her own little world,” her father said again.

Apollo leered at the red where she’d left it. “Yes, I see that. I would still like to offer my hand.”

Daphne knew these words; she had known their time might come, though always she had hoped that her father would not ask this of her. She shook her head and backed into the hall.

“You haven’t, father,” she said.

Her father beamed. “Daphne, dear, aren’t you thrilled? The day all girls dream of.”

But he knew, didn't he, that she was not most girls, that she hadn't dreamt of it. She had thought she made it clear when, at night, she followed him outside to name the constellations instead of staying in with her mother and sister content to laugh over their baking and coo over the neighborhood children. She had thought it was clear when she didn't attend the dances with her sisters but stayed home to help her father chop wood for their fire, when she asked him to teach her how to make a home all on one's own. Never before had he mentioned a husband. Never before had he mentioned that she would one day have one.

She ran back to her room and escaped through her window. Her robe blew out behind her as she ran. She didn't get far before they found her.

She was married in a private ceremony in their kitchen, where Apollo slipped a ring of wood around her finger. It left splinters in her skin when she tried to remove it. They didn't sleep in the same bed, a courtesy Apollo said he would grant her for their first year of marriage.

"You will love me," he said. "I'm sure of it."

Each night he played one of his famous tunes on his lyre. Each night he replaced the names of other women with hers and sang of her beauty, and when that didn't work he sang of

her intelligence, then her kindness. But she was cold toward him.

The men in the local tavern laughed when she entered with Apollo, hand-in-hand, for he asked her each day if she would grant him the pleasure of her flesh, but her fingers laced in his were all she gave. The men at the bar elbowed Apollo for stories of the ice queen's body. "Is her hair down there frosted?" they asked. "Does she make your cock cold?"

"We haven't made love," he told them, proud of this, his latest wickedness. "I haven't touched a woman since we married."

"What point is there to that, then?" said the men. "Ay, well, perhaps she needs another man to warm her up."

Apollo fought the men and won his brawl. He was a brute, after all, even if he didn't look it. They didn't go back to the tavern. At home he grew impatient; he demanded that she bring him things to fill the void the lack of her body left: food, blankets, drink. Sometimes she did. Sometimes she didn't. That she could still say no left her with the last vestige of hope she had in her gut. At night she repeated the word: no, no, no. In the morning she practiced saying it, to everyone, until eventually she no longer visited any family at all.

Like all women in her town, Daphne carried a particular syrup close to her breast. Like all women of her time and place,

she had been given this concoction upon her thirteenth birthday. There are some fates, her mother said, better than growing up.

One year of marriage brought Daphne no more fondness for her husband. She felt no despair for her lack of love. Love was a frivolous thing, fine for others but wholly uninteresting to her. Sometimes, in her bed at night, as naïve as we all once were, she considered that her marriage to Apollo might not be the worst fate life could have given her. Other men might have demanded her care instead of her cooking. Other men might have bruised her bodily. Other men might have disallowed her the small pleasures of morning walks, evening sweets, the secret space of her own bedroom.

But he had promised her a year and only a year, and no matter how sweet his treacly song, he was a man of his word.

He came into her room without requesting permission. Daphne sat carving notches into the wood of the desk where she did her sketching; she drew the woods where once she had fetched water, to which she would no longer return for their bad luck. After all, it had been those woods that had brought her Apollo. He touched her face without asking, drawing one long nail along her chin. The point left a red almost-scratch behind. She wished it were a cut deep as death, for then she

could hate him. The syrup itched her skin where it lay against it. He kissed her rigid mouth.

When his hands undid the first of her buttons, only then did she stand and go, running through the door of her once-secret-space of a bedroom and then through the front door of a house she hadn't called home no matter how her husband insisted. Along the path she ran until she came to the woods' threshold. As she went, she shed her clothes. A woman of the woods needed no clothes.

At the river she stopped. She closed her fist and pounded the tree where first she had seen Apollo and his lover entwined. Her knuckles bled when she pulled them away. She cradled the vial of syrup in her palm, the way we all did, the way you hold both a blessing and a curse.

"Go ahead and do it," Apollo said, advancing toward her. His voice cracked under the strain of its want. "You all do it. Be like the rest of them. Leave me alone."

Daphne knew that other women might comfort him. Other women might pull him close and pretend to love him to stop the flow of tears from his eyes. But men needed to cry the same as women. She wouldn't comfort him like I tried to comfort him, those days we spent in the woods. She swallowed the syrup in one deep gulp.

* * *

Guardian

Though I promised not to bring Apollo back to Daphne, I couldn't control his desire to see her again. I turned and found him standing before me. In his arms Dryope the girl struggled to escape. He held the blade of his lumberjack's ax to her throat. In her hands she held a vial of changing syrup, the very one I kept locked in the curio.

"If you let me take Daphne, I'll let the girl go."

"But your vial is empty." I raised my hands in the air, conceded to victimhood in the name of saving a girl's life. "You have more?"

"I'll take her wood," he said.

"But she'll die. She can't change back if she's dead."

"She'll be better that way. She'll be mine that way."

"And what do you intend to do with this other vial? The one you stole from me?"

"I'll return it." He grinned. "I brought that one for you. I know how failure makes a woman desperate."

I tensed not from anger but from guilt. I didn't want to give Apollo what he wanted, but it seemed I had little choice; Daphne couldn't speak, couldn't beg me to save her. Plus, if I let him go with what he wanted, I had a better chance of coming out alive. If I didn't barter, if I gave nothing, he might kill the girl, kill me, kill Daphne: all of us. I was of a logical

mind. Logic told me to take as few chances as possible. With the syrup, I could give the girl back the body she had chosen for herself, all those years ago. Without it, without the woman, we might all be no more than fodder for the swollen earth.

“You may have Daphne,” I said. “You have word of a Guardian of the Orangery.”

Apollo let the woman loose. She ran to me, and I pried the syrup from her hands. Better to wait until Apollo had finished his deed. Better to wait until the monsters had gone before I let myself be alone once more.

He didn't speak to Daphne but wrapped both hands tight around the handle of his ax the moment he was near enough. The woman beside me tensed and looked away. I didn't look elsewhere. It was my burden to watch what I wouldn't didn't stop. In so many years, had the world not changed?

Apollo had claimed himself a lumberjack; what I knew of him, then, was that he, and others like him, had made a profession of hunting wood. And to what end? My hut was strong and warm and contained no wood of which to speak. Though the Orangery had not changed, the world had surely grown around it, Apollo evidence enough of that.

Apollo struck. I uncorked the syrup and advanced upon him. He struggled to yank the dulled ax from wood grown thick with time, one hand pushing against the bark while the other

worked at freeing the ax. With my knife, I pinned his hand to the bark. I pulled his head back with his hair and poured the syrup down his throat. He didn't struggle, shocked, I think, to taste a liquid so rancid on the tongue, the bitterest medicine there ever was.

He stumbled from Daphne, roots forming their armor around his feet then up his legs, encasing his cock, his torso, the arm that still held tight to its ax, his face, its mouth hanging wide as though to wish liquid out. His tree was no more gnarled, no less beautiful, than any others in the Orangery.

I left him unmarked.

Without the syrup, I could not help the girl pursue her highest of desires—to change back—but I taught her to read, to write, to care for the trees. The wind outside the Orangery whispered through the cracks in the hurried patching I'd completed for the wall. I'd looked too long at Apollo's naked body. I knew enough to understand that it wasn't the thrill of a monster that so intrigued me but the thrill plain and simple, and if within the Orangery's walls the tides could turn, why could a Guardian not leave her post to pursue a life of which she'd only read?

I went to find a man worthy of my skin, to sate the curiosity of my body. I went to experience stories with a different ending than the trees'. Perhaps, I thought, the women

of the wood would like to hear them. Perhaps it would call them forth once more.

* * *

Guide

And this one, you ask? He was no one: an admirer of Daphne. We don't even celebrate his name.

* * *

Guardian

I watched the guide return to the cabin that once was mine, so many years ago. The roof was gone, given way to the sky.

“What happens when it rains?” I asked, stepping out from the shadows.

At first, Dryope did not recognize me. I'd changed, that much was certain. I'd hated and loved. Outside these walls, there was so much love to go with the hate. After a breath, Dryope smiled. “You,” she said. She stepped into the light so that I saw her face weathered only slightly by age. “Were you here the whole time?”

“No, no, I heard your tour. I hid behind a woman and her daughter. I've gotten good at blending in.” I stood so that I, too, caught the light. Time had not been as kind to me, for I'd lived the kind of life some would be ashamed of. I'd known a hundred men, women too. I'd embraced Dionysus and

explored other states of reality. I'd exhausted many of the world's possibilities. I wasn't ashamed. "I'm impressed with the amount of people on your tour. We never had so many. I did tell people about this place, in the hopes that you wouldn't stay too lonely, but I suspect it's your lively storytelling that's drawing them in."

"Thank you," Dryope said.

I motioned up. "You didn't answer my question, about the rain."

"I like the rain," she said.

"Ah." I remembered, then, that before she became human again she had not lived under a roof for over a thousand years. It is strange the things you forget for an instant, as though you could make the world disappear by forgetting it. I smiled to myself; one of my lovers and I used to play that game, forgetting pieces of the world, seeing if we could make them stay gone. We never could. I tried to forget the horrible things that happened to Dryope. But how can you forget things you never knew? "So there has been no relief for you?" I meant the memory of bark, the memory of hands of which she spoke. "I thought you said you didn't remember the skin. But in your tour—"

"I remember." She pursed her lips, a human habit she must have picked up from those who visited the Orangery.

“Sometimes I don’t know if they’re memories I’ve embellished, or if they’re true. But they feel true, when they come at me in nightmares. I never used to have nightmares, before...”

“I’m sorry.” I stepped forward. “May I?” I held out my palm. She nodded. I grasped her hand. “I’ve brought you something. I searched for them everywhere. I destroyed them all, except this one.” I slipped the vial into her palm. “For you, I thought an exception should be made. After all, I’ve learned that it is more painful to lose something than to never have known it at all. And I am responsible, after all. I never should have led him to you, never should have offered you in Daphne’s place.”

She looked down at the vial. Then in one fluid motion she tossed it into the fire at room’s center. The liquid poured into ash.

“Are you back for good?” she said. “Are you here to replace me?” She pursed her lips again. “I don’t want to go.”

I had intended, yes, to take back my old post. To free Dryope. After all, the Orangery needed someone, for once, who knew the world in all its shades of grey. Too long had the guides told terrible stories and known only the world’s terrible truths. Too long had we subjected the trees to their grief retold and nothing more. I had brought with me stories of light to soothe the dark.

But she had thrown the vial into the fire. It had been her choice to stay in her skin, and now it was her choice to remain in the Orangery. Why shouldn't she? I could build a bed of leaves for myself, could even make a new cabin if she did not wish to share. As I had learned outside the Orangery walls, light came in many shapes, including the shape of a companion, a friend to hold your hand and quell your nightmare shaking. I would do this for her, if she wanted me to.

“No,” I said. “I’m here to join. Should you wish it.”

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Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam's fiction and poetry has appeared in over fifty magazines and anthologies both literary and speculative including Clarkesworld, The Toast, Lightspeed, and previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies. She recently released an audio fiction-jazz collaborative album, Strange Monsters, with her partner Peter Brewer, centered around the theme of women's voices. She's been reprinted in French and Polish, for numerous podcasts, and on iO9. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from University of Southern Maine's

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THE JWELED NAWAB JUNGLE RETREAT

by Priya Sridhar

I'm the only person honest enough to chronicle what happened to Madam Coates. The hotel concierge, a bald and ever-sweating British man, gathered us staff in the Jewelled Nawab Jungle Retreat and swore us to secrecy about the rules that she had ignored. If we so much as breathed a word to a private detective or a pale-faced guest with glasses that turned out to be a journalist, we would be kicked out on the street with only the clothes on our back.

The white Europeans started building the Retreat on the jungle's edge, hoping to lure in more elegant tourists with the promise of large, elusive game. They believed that if they had conquered Asian kings, then surely they could conquer the violent Scarlet Viceroy whose wings were larger than the bed sheets we would hang out to dry, the Garuda Eagles whose talons could carry off an elephant, and Mahesh the Sand Raksha, whose roar could make the ground shake.

I write this because although Madam threatened my livelihood, she deserves one truthful account. Someone needs to remember the power of the jungle, and of the great beasts

that lurk within the retreat. I still Mahesh's roars at night, echoing against my darkest dreams.

* * *

I am the oldest sister of three girls and one little boy; my little brother studies in the local school. Amma realized we needed an extra pair of work hands, cut my hair short, and dressed me in a boy's dhoti, white pants with a tail in the middle. She started to call me "Ram" instead of "Rani," and sent me to work in the fields. My small hands became callused and blistered, and my skin became as dark as tealeaves left to dry in the sun.

I began to pilfer books when I picked up my younger sisters from school, and I read their assignments. Numbers made me relax at night, as did the thought that our universe was bigger than the tiny village where cows and goats ate up all the garbage and left enough dung cakes for weekly firewood. One time I wanted to become a doctor and cure the aches of my grandmother, who lost ten children before having my Amma; when I betrayed this ambition to my sister's schoolmaster, she taught me how much work and money one needed to learn how to cure a grandmother's aches.

When I hit my teens, and discovered that my breasts remained small, I realized that I could keep earning money for the family, so that my brother Kartika would never have to

leave school. Amma didn't know that I had taught myself the Western words, so that I could read the papers and write for advertisements. The Jeweled Nawab Jungle Retreat was new then, and they wanted people to sweep the floors and gather luggage. They paid more than the farmers offered during the harvesting season did.

I left home that night, only taking enough of my farm's wages to pay for the fare to the Jeweled Nawab Jungle Retreat; I would walk home if I had to. The rest would pay for the family's food for the next week. If I failed, the farmer would hire another boy for harvesting.

Around dawn, I approached the Jeweled Nawab Jungle Retreat. It was new then, with the painted walls a pristine blood red, shaded by thick leaves. Strange winds came from the nearby trees, however, and once or twice the ground shook beneath my feet. I struggled to stay upright and walk with dignity.

The hotel concierge was a light-skinned Indian man with a trimmed mustache; he took one look at my clothes, caked in dust from the road, and started talking to me. He was sitting on the veranda like a king waiting for honored foreign guests, a cup of coffee in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

"So you wish to work for us?" he asked, in a voice with the sharp, guttural European accent, talking slowly in Tamil.

“Yes, sir,” I responded. The dust had caked on my head, and could have passed for expensive sandalwood paste.

“What is your name, boy?”

“Ram, sir.”

“Where do you come from?”

“From Sri Mamba, sir.” This was a lie; I came from a small village.

“Heh!” he snorted. “From the city, eh? I don’t just accept anyone. Can you speak English?”

“I can understand it, sir,” I responded. “I have read the letters, but at times I do not know how to pronounce them.” Then I repeated the phrase in English, to the best of my ability.

He snorted again. Then, inspiration striking him, he reached for the newspaper and spread it in front of me.

“Read this, boy, and perhaps I will hire you.”

I blinked and stared at the letters. Printed words marveled me, as they always did in the village.

“Bomb explodes in Oxford shire, killing twenty. On Monday, Oh-Gust Twenty-Four, a bomb exploded in the center of Oxford. The ah-sail-lant was a young man, in his late twenties, a student in the chemical sciences.”

The Concierge’s eyes widened. He pointed to another article on the paper.

“Read this.”

This was on the House of Parliament's policy on economics. This was easier, since it featured more numbers. Again I read it aloud, mispronouncing some of the words.

"Hmm." The concierge said. "Hmm. And I suppose you can read Greek as well."

"I could learn it fast," I offered. "I like to read."

"Arrogance!" He patted my head, as if I were a performing monkey. "Maybe you will be an amusement for the guests. Can you sweep? And clean? And carry heavy items?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, trying not to get irked. "I will do anything you ask me to, as long as I get paid."

"Hmm!" He considered this. "I can pay fifty rupees a week, as well as meals."

"Also, am I allowed to read the books in the library? When I am not working, of course."

The wicked glee returned to his eyes again. Perhaps there was jealousy there, or the traces of smugness.

"Boy, you will be working so hard that you won't have time to read. But let me tell you this: if you can entertain the guests with your fancy words, then you can earn tips. If you can master Greek in a month, then you can read all the books you like in the library."

I did not like the concierge's mocking tone, or the way that he studied my rough hands and my soft voice. But because of

what he promised, I agreed, and I changed into my work clothes that day. The guests arrived in the evening, and I was instructed to read the newspaper for them. At the time I didn't understand, but I later heard them calling me a "dancing bear." I didn't like the sound of that phrase.

The concierge gave me the smallest servant's quarters; it had probably once been a broom closet. When I lay down to sleep, eyes aching from so many letters, I swore that I heard a distant roar and that my thin sheets shook.

It took me two months to teach myself Greek, reading in the late hours of the night, and another month to work up the courage to demonstrate my ability to the concierge. He laughed when I told him, his booming laugh echoed around the room, like the sound of a library door slamming shut.

"You honestly thought that I meant that? I was joking."

Rebellious, I opened a book of Ovid's poetry which I had brought with me and read it aloud, slowly and carefully.

He chewed on his lips, and told me I could read one book a night, and I had to record which book it was. I decided to shut up, continue working hard, and send Amma the extra money. She was able to buy proper clothes for my sisters, and to save for their dowries.

"But what about you, Ram?" She would write. "How long are you going to keep this up?"

I never responded to that question. Instead, I sent most of my wages to her and prayed that my breasts would stay small. Eventually Roger Smyth, the sweating white-skinned man, replaced the concierge who hired me, and he never challenged me to learn Latin or practice Greek. He also allowed me to buy ear plugs so I wouldn't hear the distant roars.

* * *

Second, Madam Coates. She was a thin British woman with yellow cheeks that had flares of red, and she wore elaborate hoop skirts in bright colors, as if she wished to change into a fat green parrot. Her eyes would flit from person to person, perhaps in hopes that she would find an interesting subject.

Mister Coates, in contrast, was large and rectangular. He reminded me of a brick stove, because his face would often turn red from frustration. His hair was white, and he often snuffled. He often talked about game, and he was fascinated by the game that Papillon's Jungle offered.

"A knack it is, to catch a Viceroy," he would repeat. "You want to keep the wings intact, but these large specimens will smother you to death if they get half the chance. They have no patience for silly little nets and chloroform. You have to use a large honey lure, ideally a pit of sticky substance, and wait for

them to be trapped. Like seeing buffalos getting trapped in golden tar...”

I was sweeping the dining room that evening, combing the corners with a short brush. My outfit was brown and orange, so that it didn't appear dirty. Madam Coates followed me with her eyes.

“Oh come now, dear,” she said. “It's not that much of a knack with the new guns and all. It's just “bang-bang” these days and the wings can easily be restored.”

I made a strong effort to not shake my head. To go after a large butterfly fresh in its prime was suicide; every local knew that, especially with the legends of extraordinary hunting failures. Their wings were strong, up until they started to lay eggs on large tree leaves and life started to depart the great colorful bodies. Often we would find the dead butterflies at the bottoms of deep gorges, often in piles.

The hotel concierge found it in his best interests to give the guests a sporting chance, and lead them to the butterflies that had just laid eggs and were nearing the end of their lives, without telling the guests that they were hunting corpses.

“I look forward to trying out my new rifle on one of the Viceroy,” Mister Coates went on, as if he had not heard his wife. “The Black Viceroy beauties are said to be elusive, for they

blend into the darkest night and are said to blot out the moon when they fly together.”

Madam pouted, and she sipped her coffee. Mister and Madam Greatfall were also dining that evening in the main room; they had visited before.

“I want to see the Sand Raksha,” she said, in a loud voice. “I want to see that large caterpillar that never grew wings.”

“Why, dear?” Mister Greatfall prodded. “Most of the time you only see sand anyway in that dry old hole of his.”

“Imagine how it would look on the trophy wall,” Madam Coates gushed to her husband. “A large beast with a Papillon’s mane and jaws.”

Pure discipline kept me from dropping my broom, since I had heard these words dozens of times; the hotel concierges expressly forbade shooting Mahesh the Sand Raksha; he was a legend, an untouchable beast. We told the guests that Mahesh was a giant worm, with no limbs apart from his giant pincers, but he was vengeful, clever and ruthless. That did not stop them from discussing the matter, or attempting to bribe us to start a hunting expedition.

Madam Coates caught my startled gaze and raised her voice. A smile appeared on her face.

“We would have to take the head, of course, and have it packed specially for delivery home. I imagine the taxidermist would have a field day with him-”

I closed my eyes to not think of taxidermists in the elusive west, breathed in the smell of sweat, spices and stale tea, and continued sweeping. Back and forth, thick hairs gathered dead leaves and stray grains of salt in a pile.

Another sound, clicking. I looked up. Madam Coates had dropped her shawl. Given the way she clicked her fingers, she wanted me to pick it up. I placed the broom against the wall, wiped my fingers on a cleaning rag, and returned the colorful red cloth to her. It was fringed with gold thread and had black flecks.

“We could do with coffee later in my room,” she suggested, wrapping the shawl around her neck, and gesturing to me. “Ronnie old boy, would you like to bring it?”

I had enough experience to not correct her about my name, but to merely nod and continue sweeping.

“Come now, dear,” Mister Coates said. “We tip this boy enough for his recitals of *Romeo and Juliet*. Why don’t you give us that instead, Ronnie boy?”

Again my old name. I hadn’t heard it in ages. Madam Coates saw the surprise, and she kept smiling.

“How about some *Hamlet* instead, Ronnie?” she asked. “I could do with some tragedy.”

Hands shaking, I fetched the book from its place beside the wax fruit bowl. As I did so, I heard her order, whispered to me.

“Coffee, Ronnie. In the late afternoon tomorrow.”

I read out the Yorick monologue perfectly, without a trace of a Tamil accent. The four Europeans stared at me, as if the dancing bear had suddenly learned a delicate waltz. Then I stumbled on Ophelia’s funeral, on Gertrude wanting Ophelia as a daughter-in-law, and all was well. They laughed, and I collected rupee coins.

* * *

I knocked on Madam Coates’s door. My other hand balanced a tray of two coffees, foaming in silver cups, as well as cream and a sugar bowl. I had changed into the red servant’s tunic and white dhoti, meant to be kept clean.

The door opened. I entered, placing the tray on a nearby table. The lights were dim, and incense burned. Store-bought cinnamon entwined with vanilla.

“Ronnie.” Madam Coates sat on her lounge in her white dressing gown and a pair of blue, silken pajama pants with a lace pattern. “It is good to see you, boy. How do you take coffee?”

“Where is Mister Coates?”

“Talking to the jungle guide, to arrange to hunt for the Sand Raksha for me.” She stood up, her tone becoming sarcastic. “Such a sweet man. He gives me everything I want. He won’t be back for a few hours.”

I felt very much like the girl with the red cape, encountering the wolf dressed in a grandmother’s clothes. My mouth went dry, and I hurried to mix the cream and milk in Madam Coates’s coffee.

“Why do you turn so red, Ronnie?” Madam Coates came over, and ran a hand over my arm, plucking at stray hairs. “Surely you have many admirers?”

I muttered a refusal in Tamil and tried to brush her hand away. She instead clamped on my arm, so that I could not move from the coffee table.

“Is it that I’m not attractive?”

“Oh no, Madam!” The words burst from my mouth. “It is... I’m not...”

If my life were a traditional novel, Mister Coates would walk in, release a bellow that would echo into the distant mountains, and shoot me three times through the heart. Worse, he could rip the decorative bayonet off the wall and stab me, denying me the merciful release of a musket. If I lived,

Madam Coates would accuse me of seducing her, and I would lose my job that helped send my brother to school.

Trapped in the worries of my mind, I froze, and Madam Coates explored my torso with her hands. I tried to keep her away from my shirt, but she pinned me against the table. The coffee cups rattled, and brown liquid splattered.

“Hold still,” she whispered, “or I will scream.”

Her fingers dug under my shirt, and untucked it from my dhoti. They felt warm and creased, and my heart threatened to stop beating when they came to my breasts.

“Please,” I mouthed.

She didn't realize, not at first. My breasts still hadn't grown. Perhaps it is something that women realize first, that men and women's chests feel differently. Her hands then went to my groin and cupped something. I gasped and tried to fend her off, but she wouldn't let go.

“Madam Coates! Please,” I repeated, becoming hot all over with embarrassment.

It took her a few minutes, with my prying her fingers off and backing away. She stared at me with confusion, disappointment and frustration. Then she shoved me towards the door, leaving me to refasten my dhoti and shirt.

I kept to the hotel's more remote buildings that day, hiding and sweeping with fear. What would happen if she told the

hotel concierge? Or if she told her husband? Would I lose my job? Would I be able to pay for my family? By the time Neelanth found me, as I was going over the same corner with a broom, I was on edge.

“Mister Coates has arranged for a hunting expedition,” he barked at me. Then he noticed that I was shaking. “What happened, Ram?”

I shook my head, continuing to sweep. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny flask, as well as a tiny metal cup. Then he offered it to me. I downed it in one gulp and coughed.

“Mister Coates is an idiot for wanting to hunt the Sand Raksha,” he said, “but if he insists, he may as well see for himself that Mahesh is not a hunting trophy. Oh, and Madam Coates wants you along as well, perhaps as entertainment.”

It was a good thing I was still coughing, or I would have squeaked something out. Still, the stricken expression on my face must have told him something.

“Did she do something to you? You look like a cobra spooked you.”

I couldn't respond. The drink, bittersweet and sharp, lay on my tongue.

“Take care, Ram. They are hunters, both of them. She tried to take a pass at me,”

“She did?” I was surprised. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Women are a mystery. Did she do the same to you?”

I started at the metal cup. He nodded, and poured another shot.

“During the expedition, sit with me in the back. I’ll stay between you in case she tries again. Such immorality!”

“Thank you,” I said. The second shot went down more easily.

* * *

The hotel concierge gave me the day off for the jungle safari; Madam Coates had packed a tome of a Shakespeare play I hadn’t known, *Henry IV*. My stumbling over the words as we waited for the horse-drawn carriage to be prepared led to more amusement from the others.

We had no mosquito nets on the carriage, and the brown-haired horses did not like the rough paths. They nickered and keened as we drove closer towards Mahesh’s sandy lair, past the cluster of large trees that already contained bulging butterfly eggs.

I sat in the back while Bhadri, the carriage driver, carried on forward; Mister and Madam Coates sat in the middle. Mister Coates had taken care to not load his musket, but he cleaned every part. Madam Coates leaned against him, giving

the illusion of devotion. She kept stealing glances at me, sometimes coy, sometimes curious.

The grass became sandy, and the trees, thick, massive trunks with huge leaves, vanished one by one. Patches of dirt appeared, and the clouds began to open up to a pale blue sky. Bhadri had to steer the nervous horses and keep them from bolting. A herd of goats scurried past, loping with nervous glee.

We started to enter the land where few wild cattle and goats roamed, unless drought forced them to the sparse green patches. I could never figure out how Mahesh got enough to eat before the hotel started to offer him chickens. Neelanth had once guessed that Mahesh offered a croon, as the Greek sirens did, to lure the fattest cattle to his large sand pit.

At last, we approached the pit. Only a few patches of grass surrounded it, and the sandy soil crumbled beneath our feet. We heard no birdsong, or goats bleating in the distance.

Bhadri stopped the carriage sixty feet away from the edge, at a safe distance. We dismounted, and he placated the horses with large sugar cubes. They shied away from the sand. I helped Bhadri calm them. Madam Coates's eyes followed me as my hands shook.

“So,” Mister Coates said. “So. This is the beast's lair, out in the open.”

“As I have said before, I advise you to abandon this hunt, sir, and merely observe Mahesh,” Neelanth said. “If you get hurt, the hotel is not responsible for your actions. Mahesh is not like the butterflies. He is wily, and hungry.”

“All the better to hunt him.” Mister Coates started to load his musket. “Most likely the vibrations will drive him deeper into the pit, so he must be lured out.”

The pit was as large and deep as a lake, and yet it was not a steep drop. There were holes and crevices within the pit. The very bottom, however, appeared flat. Sand glistened like diamonds there, along with various bones, feathers, and animal hides.

“We need bait, if you insist,” Neelanth said. “Do you have the lure?”

Mister Coates produced the large hook, one that the hotel had bought to install the piano in the lobby. It had been soaked in chicken grease, and dangled on a thick string. We prepared to suspend it over the edge.

I lowered the lure with care. Neelanth and I had to swing the large hook, while Mister Coates got into position with his musket.

Minutes passed. The sun rose towards midday. The sand at the bottom of the pit did not move.

“The smell isn’t attracting it,” Madam Coates said. “Maybe it’s not in the hole.”

“Nonsense,” Neelanth said. “There are no birds around here, or goats grazing. If Mahesh had moved, the animals would have come back.”

“We would have to get closer then. Or we need a better lure.”

Neelanth’s mouth was set into a line. “That would be suicide. It would be best to leave things as they are, and not risk your lives.”

Mister Coates considered this. He eyed Neelanth, and then Bhadri and me. “Ronnie, old boy, why don’t you go in the pit?”

“Don’t be foolish,” Neelanth told him. “No one survives if they go into the pit.”

“Well, it’s not like Ronnie is so useful to the hotel,” Mister Coates said.

Everyone stared at me. Madam Coates stopped smiling. I wasn’t surprised, however.

“You are needed to manage the horses, and you have to guide them back,” I told Bhadri and Neelanth. “I’m only a servant boy. I can handle this.”

“I must protest-” Madam Coates started, but her husband interrupted.

“Excellent!” he said. “Get that rope around your waist, Ronnie, the one we used for the hook, and we’ll lure the beast out.”

Neelanth untied the rope, but he refused to tie it around my waist. “You’re going to get killed, Ram,” he whispered. “It’s not worth it.”

“I’m not going to anger Mahesh,” I said. “I’m just going to let them see him and get scared off.”

“Mister Coates doesn’t scare easily.”

“Mahesh doesn’t either.”

“Then we may as well do this right,” he said with irritation. “You idiot boy. The nearest tree will have to do; let’s wrap the rope around it so we can belay it slowly.”

He and Bhadri walked to the thickest tree in the distance and looped the rope around its middle to steadily slide around it. After tying the other end around my waist, I stood on the edge, facing backwards as I started to lower myself down into the pit, abseiling down; Neelanth held onto the other end, letting it slide around the small of his back, to give more rope for my descent. Bhadri and Neelanth looked concerned as I lowered below their line of sight. The rope was light and felt like it would fray.

Forgive me Mahesh, I whispered to him, as I went lower.
Forgive me.

My foot dislodged a stray rock, and it traveled to the bottom of the pit. I watched the rock skitter slowly, making my heart rattle. Dread filled me. When it landed, the sand began to shudder. The ground rumbled.

Above, I didn't see Neelanth or Bhadri; they must have retreated. Madam and Mister Coates leaned over the edge, watching with eager anticipation.

"Get back! Don't be stupid!" I tried to shout to them, but the words came out low and raspy. They didn't seem to hear.

A blast of sand shot from the bottom. I shied away into the nearest crevice, shielding my face. The pit's edge crumbled like flour; someone screamed. Dust coated my hands, and I choked. When I caught my breath and lifted my head, I saw two bodies falling...

"Ronnie!" Madam Coates shrieked. "Help me!"

She had wedged her sun parasol into the remains of the pit edge, about ten feet above me, and had tried to pull herself up with the rope that tethered me to the distant tree. Her arms were too small, however, and I could see the edge slowly crumbling. Her feet scurried and dangled in the air. Mister Coates groaned from another crevice below, where he had landed on his leg. The leg stood out at an odd angle.

Perhaps I could have estimated the distance between her and me so as to make the climb and boost her to safety, to

where Bhadri and Neelanth waited. I even prepared to do so as the rope around my waist went tight. But something older than my thirst for knowledge emerged, a sense that this was not my fight, and it hadn't been my fight ever since Mister Coates had insisted on hunting Mahesh and Madam Coates had put her hands under my shirt.

“Ronnie! Please!”

My hand reached upward, and my foot dug into the dirt wall so as to climb, but I knew it would do nothing. Neelanth had warned them.

Another coat of dust followed, pricking my eyes and making them water. The screams stretched over the dusty air. Mister Coates, groaning and yelping as he tried to move his leg, started to yell as something large skittered upwards. Wiping my eyes and coughing, I heard the nasty sound of bones crunching.

In time, the screams stopped. The dust settled. I coughed, and peered out the crevice.

Madam and Mister Coates were gone; the sun parasol jutted out of the cliff, caked in dirt.

There was a swooping sound, and a black shape rose. The shape swirled and dropped several objects on the ground; from a distance they looked like bones. Then I stared into Mahesh's face as he leveled his gaze at me.

His eyes were as large as the twin suns. His pincers were coated with blood and hair, and I swore that I saw pieces of fingernail as well. I cowered as a booming voice echoed in my head

WHAT A SACRIFICE! WHAT OFFERINGS!

I recoiled. More sand collapsed above me, crumbling into my hair. The air was silent except for the sand, as well as Neelanth and Bhadri calling, but the voice rang through my ears. It was the sound of thunder hitting a mountain, of a thousand rocks shattering to dirt, the roar of a triumphant lion standing over his kill. My head threatened to shatter as well, but I clamped my hands to my ears and steadied myself.

I AM SATISFIED. I HAVE NEVER TASTED SO RICH A MEAT.

“It was an accident,” I said weakly.

YET YOU SEEM AT PEACE.

I didn't respond. Seeing the face of the great beast, who enjoyed human flesh, was not so peaceful.

I WILL GRANT YOU A BOON, OF YOUR HEART'S DEAREST DESIRE, FOR BRINGING SUCH GREAT OFFERINGS.

I didn't know my heart's desire while facing a large creature that represented the old world. All I wanted was for Mahesh to not eat me for disturbing him. So I said nothing in

the face of the choking sand and those large, glistening black eyes. The eyes blinked at me, understanding some truth I couldn't voice or express.

IT IS DONE. YOU SHALL HAVE WHAT YOU DESIRE. NO ONE WILL KNOW WHAT YOU ARE, NO MATTER HOW HARD HE OR SHE LOOKS, AND EVERY GRAIN OF KNOWLEDGE WILL BE YOURS.

I felt the sand ripple. When it settled, the great beast was gone. A new pile of sand occupied the bottom of the pit, as did a scattering of bones and frayed cloth.

The rope around my waist tugged. I moved to climb up, staggering over the edge. Neelanth's hand came into view, and I took it. He pulled me to solid ground, and clapped me on the shoulder.

"They're dead," I said. "They... Mahesh..."

"At least *you're* alive, Ram," Neelanth said with relief and admiration. "You saw the face of Mahesh and survived."

"I was lucky," I responded. "And stupid, like you said."

"No, you were clever. You stayed out of his way," Neelanth replied.

We stared at the pit, which had gotten larger with the sand crumbling. The horses shuddered with fear despite Bhadri's coaxing.

Bhadri calmed them, and we drove home in silence. Birds started to chirp again. I fiddled with the Shakespeare book.

When we got to the hotel, Neelanth drew me a bucket of water and told me to change into clean clothes; I closed the door to my small quarters and washed the sand off my face and out of my hair. I changed quickly into the new shirt and dhoti. They were too large for me.

There was a new book on my chair, one that I hadn't read before. I opened it, and felt sparks run through my fingertips. It was a treatise on mathematics, on algebra and calculus.

Grains of knowledge...

* * *

So. That is what really happened to Madam Coates. The hotel concierge made the three of us swear that it was a dust storm, and that the couple happened to ride out on a freak day. He commented without emotion on what a magnificent and extremely terrible tragedy it was, that he would have to notify upper management. New rules would have to be made, new releases for the lawyers in London to draft. But we had to keep mum.

The three of us agreed, myself shaking with horror and relief.

These days I recite Shakespeare with exact precision, while still receiving tips, and have started to decipher the ancient

Sanskrit texts. The books in the hotel library keep changing. They sometimes become ancient tomes, or sometimes dialogues on Isaac Newton's theory of physics. I have been teaching myself new languages, studying Latin characters and Chinese brushwork. My memory is like a net, capturing and holding all these works. I do not know how long it will last, but I am savoring every new fact.

Neelanth has made it a point to keep me away from the women in the hotel. We don't talk, but sometimes I read out his favorite poetry over a bottle of spirits. Whiskey goes well with dark verses.

There are new tourists that want to see Mahesh, and one hunter expresses desire in mounting the worm on his wall. He thinks the taxidermist will have a "field day" with him, despite what the concierge says.

Mahesh's roars enter my ears every night now, demanding more flesh. I toss and turn, as the hunter demands to go on a fateful safari.

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Priya Sridhar, a 2016 MBA graduate and published author, has been writing fantasy and science fiction for fifteen years, and counting, as well as drawing a webcomic for five years. She believes that every story is a journey, and that a good tale allows the reader to escape to a new world. She also enjoys reading, biking, movie-watching, and classical music. One of Priya's stories made the Top Ten Amazon Kindle Download list, and Alban Lake published her novella [Carousel](#). Priya lives in Miami, Florida with her family and posts monthly at her blog [A Faceless Author](#).

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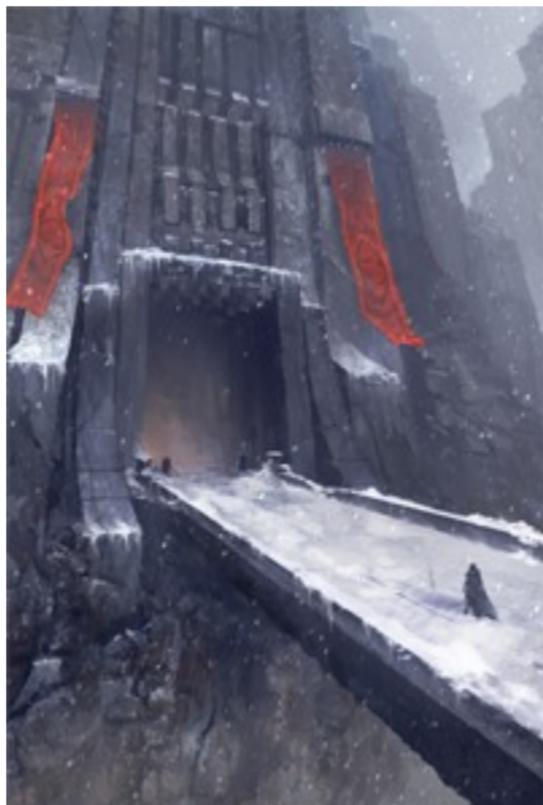
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COVER ART

“The Sacred Flames,” by Jinxu Du



Jinxu Du is a primarily self taught artist, now enrolled in school to pursue a career in concept art and design for entertainment media. See more work online at ishutani.deviantart.com.

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