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[“In Memory of Jianhong, Snake-Devil,” by Richard Parks](#)

[“Whatever Knight Comes,” by Ryan Row](#)

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IN MEMORY OF JIANHONG, SNAKE-DEVIL

by Richard Parks

There was a trail to follow, if one could call a slight lessening of the undergrowth a trail.

“Honored Father Pan Bao,” I asked, “Please tell me again why we are on this freezing mountain? I haven’t seen the sun since we entered this forest.”

“Filial—Occasionally, When It Suits Her—Daughter Jing, as I did not tell you the first time, how by all the gods can I tell you again?”

I was perhaps too optimistic, but as my father was still feeling the effects of the previous evening’s carousing—mostly involving plum wine—I had hoped to catch him unaware. I should have known better. My father may have had a headache and a slight worsening of his normally dour disposition, but he had taken our client’s gold, and I knew from experience gold tended to focus his mind when little else save a new scroll on the *Tao* could.

“Then will you perhaps tell me for the first time?”

He seemed to consider, though he never broke stride. “Jing, as we are both likely to perish today, perhaps I should. We’re hunting a very powerful snake-devil.”

I sighed. “That is the sort of thing one should know beforehand. When were you going to tell me?”

He paused to scratch his beard. There was a hint of gray in it now, something I had barely noticed before. “In truth, I was debating whether I should tell you at all. At seventeen, you know little or nothing of the world. As your father, it is my duty to keep matters that way until the time you are married.”

Dying in ignorance is not a virtue, Honored Father. But then, marrying in ignorance probably wasn’t either.

I thought it, but I did not say it. There was no point. Father may have been a scholar of the Tao, but he was not above invoking the teachings of Kong Fuzi when it suited him, usually where I was concerned. It was my place to be the innocent, obedient daughter, except in our role of devil hunters when I had to use my martial training to kill something. I took a moment to loosen my *jian* in its scabbard across my back. This accomplished little except to make me feel a bit better. In addition to his wards and charms, Father had his own *jian*, except his was made of peachwood and was, in its way, far more powerful than my own sword of three-plate bronze. It depended on who—or more likely *what*—was to be killed.

As we ascended, the undergrowth thinned out until we emerged into a high meadow. The trail was still visible, if faint. The sun was visible again but weak and cold, and an icy wind struck us now without hindrance, making me wistful for the undergrowth. “Did you say ‘snake-devil,’ Honored Father?”

“I did.”

“A high mountain cave seems an odd abode for a snake-devil. Especially at this time of year.”

While winter was not yet fully upon us, here in the north of Qin late autumn was severe enough. I was dressed warmly, but even so I was chilled. I could only imagine it would be worse for the devil. If a snake-devil was not a true snake, it did share many of a snake’s characteristics, including an aversion to cold weather.

“While it is my obligation as a follower of the Tao to root out evil, the weather was, I admit, a consideration. I expect the creature to be somewhat sluggish now. We must use this to our advantage if we are to succeed.”

“You mean not die?”

My father sighed. “You’re starting to remind me of your blessed mother,” he said. “Please stop.”

I had barely known her before she died, but my mother’s face was burned into my memory. She was beautiful, as by my own reckoning I was not. The idea that I might still remind my

father of her in some regard I found very cheerful, even if that regard might be my annoying habit of seeing through his nonsense. I had no way of knowing personally, but Father had made it clear enough over the years this had been one of her less endearing traits.

The path grew steeper once we'd crossed the meadow, and we soon came across a high mountain stream. Father paused to consult a small scroll. "This is what we were looking for. We follow the stream and it will lead us to the monster's cave."

"I gather this creature is causing mischief, else why pay us to remove it? Who is our client?"

"The Provincial Governor, Sun Fu. Apparently the beast descends from the mountain whenever it gets hungry, and so far under his administration it has devoured three soldiers and seven goats. Most of Qin's fighting men are needed for the southern borders with Chu, Zhou, and Wei, and on the north side of this mountain are barbarians probing for weaknesses. He can't afford to lose any more soldiers. Or goats, for that matter."

I frowned. "Is Qin at war, Father?"

He paused a moment before answering. "Daughter, so far as I can tell *everyone* is at war now, or preparing for it. The political aspects of the situation do not concern you... or me,

come to that. We have a mission to complete. That is all that matters to us.”

We followed the stream into a small defile cutting deep into the side of the mountain. Evening was falling, and the sides of the crevice cut off some of the remaining light. Ahead we could see a shadow that marked the cave entrance, though the stream emerged from a smaller crevice to the side rather than directly from the cave. I drew my jian as we approached the opening. “We’ll likely need torches.”

“Wait until we’re inside and our eyes adjust to the darkness. No point in revealing ourselves sooner than we must.”

Which presumes the devil doesn’t know we’re coming.

We paused just inside the cave’s mouth. I wasn’t too worried, as the entrance was narrow enough that any attack would of necessity be from the front, and there was still enough light to see anything coming. In fact, there was more light than I expected as we moved farther in, so much so that I abandoned the idea of torches.

Father looked about. “Very curious,” he said.

“The fact that we can still see our hands before our faces, Honored Father?”

“That and it’s much too warm in here, or had you noticed?”

“Indeed.”

I was not especially fond of caves. They tended to be damp and cramped and chilly. Granted, in extreme winter weather they were much warmer than being outside, exposed to the elements. Yet this particular cave was even warmer than that. It was almost... pleasant.

“Wait a moment, Daughter.”

We paused then. In my estimation we were now about half a bowshot into the cave. It had not widened appreciably nor had the light dimmed, so I was still reasonably confident that we could not be taken by surprise, but that still left the mystery of the light and warmth. I could see a source for neither.

“This isn’t right,” he said.

“For a cave? No. For the abode of a snake-devil? Ideal,” I said.

Father grunted. “Exactly. This is spirit magic at work, which means this creature may be even more powerful than I suspected.”

“You flatter me, Sir.”

The icy wind we had walked through on our way to the cave settled into my stomach when I realized the voice had come from behind us. Father and I whirled about to find what appeared to be a finely dressed young woman only a few years older than myself, standing less than twenty paces away.

How?

I dismissed the thought. Its resolution was not nearly so pressing as surviving the next few moments. I held my blade straight toward the figure and adopted a defensive stance. Father fumbled for his peach sword, but all the while the woman merely looked at us. For a few moments we returned the favor.

“It’s an illusion,” Father said.

The woman frowned. “I assure you I am quite real.”

“I meant your appearance, devil. Reveal yourself!”

She smiled. “It’s more transformation than illusion. As for revealing myself, there is no need. You know what I am, nor am I trying to deceive you, but as of yet I am not certain what *you* are. This requires some thought, so pardon me.”

The image of the woman swirled as if it had turned to mist, and in an instant she was gone. Father and I stared at the empty space where she had been, then turned to each other at almost the same moment, but I asked the obvious question first.

“Father, why aren’t we dead?”

He scratched his beard with the tip of his wooden sword. “Curious.”

I frowned. “That’s all you have to say? We were caught unawares by what is clearly a very powerful devil who doubtless knows our intent, and all you can say is “Curious”?”

“But, Daughter Jing, isn’t it? Consider your own question: Why are we still alive? In the devil’s place I would have slain the both of us without a second thought, and so would you. Yet the creature seemed, well, curious about us. Why do you think that is?”

“It’s plain that it knows what a human is, as it assumes the form of one and has eaten more than a few. How are we special? I do not know.”

“Neither do I. Our mission—not to mention our lives—may depend on answering that question.”

I had another question of my own in mind. I took flint and striking stone and after a few moments managed to get a torch lit.

“Daughter, why are you doing that? We have more than enough light to see.”

“To see? Certainly. To examine? On that small issue I would disagree.”

I crept back to where the creature had made its appearance, first examining the ground, then raising the torch to get a closer look at the wall and ceiling.

“There it is,” I said.

Father joined me there and looked up where I pointed. “Ah. Very clever, Daughter.”

There was a circular tunnel connecting to the main tunnel, at about the height of a tall man and about as wide, leading away into the darkness. It had blended into the shadows of the rock in that dim light so well that neither of us had spotted it.

“It stood to reason that, as the devil is a physical creature, it hadn’t simply manifested behind us. I’ll wager there are more of these,” I said.

“Well done... and another reason to be vigilant.”

Neither of us spoke of simply turning back, though I must admit the thought did occur to me. My father had been a devil hunter before I was born, and as he had no son, he had trained me to follow his example until the day, as he sometimes threatened, to marry me off to the first brute foolish enough to meet his conditions. Said conditions always seemed to change from one day to the next, or at any time when my frustration with his drinking and carousing goaded me into asking about them.

I knew the thought was pointless—we knew nothing else, we had taken the provincial governor’s gold, and so we had no choice but to either fulfill our mission or die in the attempt, though now dying seemed likely. Honor was at stake, certainly,

but if word spread that we had failed to deliver, our livelihood was also ruined, and Father's vices were expensive.

It occurred to me, considering those vices, that we were in more difficulty than whatever the devil had planned for us. On that matter, Father seemed to be mulling the possibilities.

"We are not dead. Therefore, it seems likely that the devil wants something from us first."

"You mean such as taking pleasure in tormenting us before our inevitable destruction?"

He smiled. "You're thinking of a cat-devil. That is not the habit of snakes."

"What, then?"

"I have no idea. I admit I am curious to find out."

We pushed on, though more slowly, and now I kept the torch lit, examining every inch of the cave wall as we proceeded, but we traveled at least a hundred paces further without finding any more side tunnels. Then the woman appeared again, this time in front of us, no more than fifteen paces away. The mist swirled once more and there she was.

"I understand how you might consider your business here pressing," she said, "but I wonder if I might have a moment of your time."

Father held his peachwood sword in front of him but had not begun any of the incantations appropriate for a

confrontation with a snake-devil or any other kind. “While it seems foolish to me, in a sense we owe our lives to your forbearance, so it would be ungrateful to refuse you. However, I must warn you that any trickery will be met forcefully.”

She bowed slightly. “That is fair, as you have no reason to trust me. Yet I will further state that I know your intentions toward me just as you know my true nature. As I hinted before, this form I wear is for your convenience, not as a deception. If we must be in opposition, at least in these regards we can both be in accord.”

“Freely conceded,” my father said. “Other than our deaths, what do you wish of us?”

“Information. Or a possibility. I admit I am not yet sure which.”

Either the devil was sincere in her confusion or she was an even better deceiver than I expected. Considering my father’s proclivities, it should also have been easy enough for the creature to assume a form even more enticing—and distracting—to his lecherous eye. The creature’s appearance, while that of a winsome young woman, was not obviously designed for that purpose, aside from the fact that we all knew it was not her true form.

“We’re listening,” Father said.

“I have worn this form before,” she said, “while I... well, I’m sure you’ve heard of my transgressions, or you would not be here. I will not bother to defend them, other than to say I was hungry. But at one of those times I moved among the villagers as one of them, I heard an interesting story about a snake-devil long, long ago who lived as a human woman and eventually became one. I’m wondering if it is true.”

I frowned. “Are you referring to the legend of Madame White Snake?”

She brightened. “Yes! That’s it exactly. Is it true?”

“I used the word ‘legend’ deliberately,” I said. “It’s an old tale and as such has many versions. They cannot all be true.”

“Meaning it’s possible that one of them *is* true,” she said, and I had never seen a devil looking wistful. This one did.

“Most legends have at least a seed of truth,” Father said. “Why do you ask?”

“I’ll tell you, but first I need to think some more. Please excuse me.”

In an instant, she was gone—again—before we could even react.

“Father, do you have *any* idea whatsoever what that was about?”

He looked thoughtful. “Perhaps. The Three Jewels of the Way are Compassion, Moderation—what was that noise out of you, Daughter?”

“Forgive me, Father,” I managed to say. “I was just clearing my throat.” In reality I was trying my best not to burst into laughter, as that would have been most un-filial. After a pause and a glare, Father continued.

“As I was saying: Compassion, Moderation, and Humility. Of the Three Jewels, compassion is the first. It’s possible the creature is attempting to throw us off our guard by a false appeal to our empathy. Or....”

“Or?”

“She really does want to know the answer to her question. Frankly, I am undecided as to which is true.”

“Throwing us off guard seems rather pointless if she could have killed us already,” I pointed out.

Father didn’t even blink. “Devils are perverse creatures, and their motivations do not always make sense. Humans are the same. Never forget this, Daughter.”

I had no argument to make in that regard. “I think our next meeting will tell the tale, for good or ill. Shall we move on?”

Not that I was in a particular hurry to confront the creature. While my sword was imbued with as many devil-

quelling charms and wards as my Father was capable of creating, I was nowhere near certain this would be enough. The creature was both smart and fast, and had demonstrated both traits to my complete satisfaction. Whatever advantage we had hoped to achieve from the cold had long since evaporated in the warmth of the creature's cave. Plus, we would be fighting the devil in her lair. She knew its nooks and fissures as we did not. She had every advantage, and yet we still lived. More, we had not even been attacked.

Strange.

As if sensing my thought, Father said, "I do not claim to understand what the creature wants from us, but I don't think we should assume too much from the snake-devil's reasonable demeanor. We know what she is and what she has done. If she has not acted as we feel she should, that is our limited perception. She has her own reasons."

No doubt. I simply hoped that we might understand those reasons before she either killed us or we did the same to her, for I could not see any outcome to this matter save one or the other. I did not wish to either fail or succeed in ignorance.

My father frowned. "Jing, did you hear that?"

I did, just as he spoke. The faint notes of a flute coming from somewhere further up the tunnel. The sound became clearer the more we walked. "Is that a *bawu*?"

“I believe so,” he said.

There was no need to ask again, since by the time we had progressed a little farther I could even identify the song —“Spring Flowers on the Mountain.” I often played that one myself in whatever free time I had left after training, slaying devils, or looking after my father. I had my own *bawu* that I usually carried in a silk bag on my back along with my sword. I had to admit, however, that whoever was playing now put my poor skills to shame.

“Father, I see light ahead.”

While the tunnel we had been walking in for what seemed like hours carried its own dim illumination, what I saw now was much brighter, and the lovely soft notes from the flute sounded much clearer. I paused to extinguish the torch.

“She’s waiting for us, I think. Be on your guard, Daughter.”

“Always, Father.”

We emerged into a cavern, or rather what could more precisely be described as a lair, because it was unlike any natural cave I had ever known. It was at least two bowshots across in either direction, with mostly smooth walls and floor, save for a deep circular depression high on the far wall and what appeared to be an old stalagmite in the center of the floor, carefully carved and hollowed to accommodate a spring coming up from beneath it. The water gently poured over its sides and

down into a circular moat that fed into a stone trough carrying it away to a fissure on the right hand side of the chamber, likely the source of the mountain stream. At equal distances from the fountain but nearer to the walls there were six bronze braziers holding glowing embers, which together made the light we had seen and the warmth we felt. I still heard the flute, but there was no sign of the devil.

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Oh, here, I think,” Father said. “My peachwood sword will reveal her if she comes near, but at the moment she clearly chooses to be invisible.”

The echoes in the chamber made it difficult to determine her location from the direction of the sound. “I don’t like this.”

Father scratched his beard. “Neither do I. Yet this is the situation we are in. Even so....” He scratched his beard again. “I sense something.”

“The snake-devil?”

“No. Something older, fainter... something I can only describe as an echo of a shout, only the shout is long gone. Let’s have a look around.”

“Fine, but we stay together.”

We passed by the stalagmite fountain, and as it had been a long walk, I could not resist dipping a handful of water. I sniffed it carefully for any taint, found nothing, and drank it

down. It was of the purest, sweetest water I had ever tasted. I would have encouraged Father to try it, but he was already a few paces ahead, and I hurried to catch up.

“Daughter, look at this.”

Father stood by a low stone slab, perfectly square and at least twenty paces across. Taking up the entire slab was the skeleton of a gigantic serpent, perfectly coiled. As we looked at it, amazed, the song on the flute changed from “Spring Flowers on the Mountain” to “Snow Falls on the Heart,” a song of longing and loss.

She appeared then, standing in the round depression high on the wall, the *bawu* across her lips. I had thought the circle might be another of her access tunnels, but closer now I could clearly see the solid stone behind her. The last note hung for a moment in the air and she lowered the flute.

“Mistress Devil,” Father said very formally. “I think it is time we spoke with one another again. Or have we been chasing a ghost all this time?”

“Shall we test that supposition?” she asked.

In an instant the bamboo flute in her hand transformed into a sword, the six braziers’ embers flared into flames so bright I was nearly blinded. The devil descended from the circle like a hawk stooping on its prey. Father was mumbling a charm of some sort, but I was mostly concerned with blocking the

devil's sword, which I never seemed to touch yet still, time and again, somehow kept from touching me. A wind swirled around us, and the devil's long hair flew around her face like a nest of snakes. I saw a chance and lunged, but in that moment she simply was not there. Another moment and the fire from the braziers had died down and the snake-devil was again back high on the stone wall, flute in hand, as if nothing at all had happened.

I turned to my father. "An illusion?"

"Young Mistress, check your right sleeve," the devil said.

I did. There was a very clean cut a finger's length from the end that ran from the bottom of my sleeve until just below my arm. A little more and I might have lost the arm.

"I am no ghost," she said.

Father's only reaction to the cut on my sleeve was to nod and grunt. "I concede your reality and your skills, and admit it was wrong of me to goad you, as I knew a ghost was not possible. However, I would ask you to do us the courtesy of not underestimating us."

"I do. As for that one," she said, pointing her flute at the skeleton, "That was Jianhong. He was the original owner of this place. He was a very powerful snake-devil. As I was—relatively—young and foolish, I challenged him, as is our custom."

“Then you must be even stronger, as this was the result,” Father said, indicating the skeleton.

She smiled. “On the contrary—he could have swatted me like a fly, if he had so chosen. Yet he not only let me live, he allowed me to share his home. It took me some time to understand why.”

I scowled at my ruined sleeve. “You mean he was not overwhelmed by your charm?”

Her smile didn’t flicker. “Nothing of the sort. Powerful as he was, he was also very old, and he was dying.”

Father nodded. “Ah, I think I’m beginning to understand.”

I looked from one to the other. “I admit that I do *not* understand. What has this to do with our current situation?”

“Daughter, it is a devil’s greatest ambition to become immortal, and despite his presumed power, Jianhong had failed to achieve this. So when he died... well, that was the end of him.”

“He wanted to be remembered,” the snake-devil said. “This I promised to do and have done. It was not immortality, but it was something. I realize to ones such as yourselves it is a small thing, but if I am dead at the end of today’s... business, shall we say, you might do him the courtesy of remembering his name.”

Father, looking more solemn than was usually his wont, agreed. “Done. Yet that is not all, is it? And before we go any farther, I am Pan Bao and this is my somewhat-filial daughter, Jing. May we know your name?”

The snake-devil descended from her perch high on the cave wall, moving in a rather winding pattern like a snake swimming through water. I held my sword at the ready, but Father had not moved. He was clearly waiting for an answer.

“I am called Mei Li,” she said as she gracefully touched down, “and I have a proposal. You have seen a bit of my skill, and I have seen a bit of yours. Your own power, Sir, you kept in check as I believe you realized my intent. As for your esteemed daughter, she came very close to wounding me. Frankly, I am no more certain of the outcome of a true contest than you are.”

I had to interrupt. “Father, is what she said true?!”

“Not entirely, Jing. I did put up a barrier. It would have been difficult for her to seriously harm you. And yes, I could have mistaken her intent, but then I have lived as long as I have by being right more often than not. Now please pay attention—the adults are speaking.”

Please clarify what would strike you as serious, Father? A lost limb? An eye, perhaps?

I slipped into sullen silence as I waited for the urge to throttle him to pass, which it always did. Eventually. I did love

and respect my father, but I couldn't resist wishing that he did not make it so hard to remember this sometimes. If that was an un-filial thought, so be it.

My father spoke first. "What is your proposal, Mei Li?"

"I merely wish to ask a small favor of you. If you will agree to it, I will submit myself to your will. Slay me if you wish; I will not resist."

"And what is this favor?"

Mei Li looked uncomfortable. "That is the one part of my proposal that may cause some difficulty—until you agree, I cannot tell you."

That was the end of my silence. "You mean we must agree to your terms and not know what they are? That's absurd!"

"Not completely," Mei Li said, calm as a statue. "You know my terms. What you do not know is the condition. I can only tell you that what I mean to ask will not cause harm to you or any other person."

Father glared at me then replied to Mei Li. "Absurd or not, your proposal is interesting. Tell me—what if I agree to your terms but I am unable to fulfill them?"

"You are a scholar, Sir, I know this. As with any contract—it is simply an understanding between us, and I will agree to let it remain in force until the terms are fulfilled. But it is not any

legal interpretation I will rely upon—only your word that you will fulfill my request if and when it is in your power.”

“And the alternative?”

Mei Li looked solemn. “Then I’m afraid we must fight to the death here and now,” she said. “I await your answer.”

Father was silent for several moments, and when he spoke again I could not believe what I was hearing. “I agree to your terms, Mei Li, provided you are willing to swear by the Ten Kings of Hell to fulfill your end and that your request will not cause harm to ourselves or any other person. In essence I, too, am asking for your word.”

She didn’t even hesitate. “By the Ten Kings of Hell, I swear that all I have said is true.”

“Then I agree and swear by the Tao to honor our bargain. Is this sufficient?”

“It is,” Mei Li said.

“And this ‘favor’ you wish of us?”

“I want you to send me to Hell,” she said.

I took my sword. “Easily done—”

I had taken no more than a step when Father grabbed my wrist. “Stop, Jing, and put your sword away. It’s over.”

I pulled away. “Honored Father, what do you mean ‘over?’” I asked through gritted teeth. “She just said she wants to die!”

He sighed. “No, she said she wants us to send her to Hell. Well, we can’t, or weren’t you listening?”

“She also said that her request would not bring harm to any other person,” I pointed out.

“Nor does it,” Mei Ling said. “I am not a person. I am a snake-devil... which is rather the point.”

I stopped then but only to stare at the both of them. “Would either of you care to enlighten me?”

Mei Li frowned. “Is she always this angry?”

“Quite often. When her mother named her Jing—‘gentle’—she was perhaps being optimistic,” Father said. “Daughter, when a person dies—a human person—no matter their merit, they go first to Hell to atone for their life’s sins before being reincarnated, correct?”

“So I have been told.”

“It does not work that way for devils,” Mei Li said. “Either we achieve immortality and eventual deification, or we die and go to nothing. A person goes to Hell and then on to a new life. A devil does not.”

“But... Hell is full of devils!”

“The ones who live there or have duties under the command of one of the kings. Not one such as I. But then I heard the story of Madame White Snake, a snake-devil who lives as a human for many years until she becomes one.”

I shook my head. “Or dies or is sealed away for eternity or... well, there are many other versions. Besides, it’s just a story!”

Mei Li just looked at me. “Young Mistress, empires have risen and fallen on the backs of stories. Lives changed, ruined, exalted! The course of human *history* turns on the stories people tell themselves about what they are or want to be. If all this is true, why do you suppose that a story does not have the power to change what I am? When I saw Jianhong die and vanish from all that is, I saw my future! Then the two of you appeared and I thought, perhaps, there was an alternative.”

“Change is a basic tenet of the Way,” Father acknowledged. “But there is more to this—I did and do agree to your request, though I cannot as yet fulfill it. Even so, you must hold up your end of the bargain until I do.”

“True,” Mei Li said. “I am at your command.”

“First, a new diet—no people. You will eat what we eat. Second and most obvious, you will need to maintain the appearance of the human you wish to become and live as one while you travel with us—”

“She’s coming with us?” I asked.

“Can you think of another way to fulfill our bargain?” Father asked. “Honestly, Daughter, you are not stupid, though sometimes your anger makes you appear so. It is now our

responsibility to teach Mei Li how to be a human. No matter how long it takes.”

“Perhaps your Honored Father will grant you the privilege of killing me when the time comes,” Mei Li said. “Until then I will try not to be a burden.”

I sighed. “With all due respect, Honored Father, I think you’re forgetting something—we took the provincial governor’s gold on the promise that we would slay the snake-dev—I mean Mei Li.”

My father scratched his beard. “I will keep my agreement with the governor, eventually, though I do see your point. He will not take kindly to our returning without immediate proof.”

Mei Li smiled again. “Honored Sir and Young Mistress, if I may—I think I have an answer to our dilemma.”

* * *

In the end, Father took the skull of a snake-devil rather than an intact head to present to the provincial governor, explaining that he had stripped and bleached it so as to avoid offending the governor’s delicate sensibilities. He was even able to give the devil’s name. Later I was told that the skull was mounted as a trophy in the governor’s council chambers, identified with a plaque that read so:

“The Great Snake-Devil Jianhong, slain by order of Governor Sun Fu.”

That part was Mei Li's idea, as suggested to the governor by way of my father. When he left to carry the skull to the governor's mansion, he told Mei Li to "please instruct my sullen daughter on the proper way to play a *bawu*."

That part didn't sting quite as much as perhaps he intended. I had recognized Mei Li's superior skill with the instrument from the start and was quite willing to learn all she could teach me. When the lessons paused, she looked thoughtful.

"You do have a natural talent; the problem is mostly that you do not get enough practice. Alone in my lair, I had plenty of time. You have overcome much to become as good as you are."

"That is kind of you to say," I said, because it was.

Mei Li brightened. "Is it? Lovely. I was worried about kindness, as I'm not sure I understand the concept. Devils have little use for it."

I almost smiled then. "Nor do all humans. No matter. At some point this evening we will need to prepare for Father's return."

"Prepare? What do you mean? Forgive me, but there is much I do not yet understand."

I considered. "Well, first we'll need to heat some water for a bath so we can get him cleaned up and in bed. We'll also feed

him if he's able to eat, but at the very least we must make him drink some clear water or else he'll be worse in the morning."

She frowned. "Worse from what?"

"Plum wine and the effects of over-indulging. It will be late and he will be drunk when he returns, or I do not know my father."

"Humans are strange creatures," Mei Li said. "Such behavior cannot be good for him, plus what of our bargain if he kills himself this way before I learn to be human?"

"As his daughter it is my job... well, now *our* job, I suppose, to make sure that doesn't happen."

"I will gladly help, but if we are both subject to his will, how do we dissuade him?"

I smiled then, and for the first time in a while, I was not angry at all.

"Mei Li, I thank you for the lessons. Now, however, it is my turn, and I think there is yet a thing or two you can learn from me."

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WHATEVER KNIGHT COMES

by Ryan Row

Some summers, you like to watch the firefly comets through your huge window in the east tower. The scribbled yellow, blue, and red lights crisscross the sky in an obscure dance. A tangle of light and form that you sometimes find very alluring, and that sometimes reminds you of master swordplay. Wild strokes of light, turns and swirls and loops cutting right through the fabric of the hot summer stars. The night sky, it has always seemed to you, is a big fête. Sometimes, you can't stand to watch, and you push the heavy wardrobe with the broken mirror inside it in front of the window and leave it there for days, months, years.

Sometimes you have a maiden in the west tower. The maidens smell like good soil, like rose, like sunlight, like ice. They wear dresses of tissue paper, of spider's silk, of common wool or dirty cotton, of gray wolf skin. Sometimes they are naked and ashamed, and you throw your black cloak over their shoulders with a practiced flourish, and they mistake it for kindness instead of compulsion. Sometimes they are naked and don't care. You have seen white moonlight on every shade of

bare skin and it always looks, to you, like a much more gentle lover's touch. They stand before you as if daring you. Daring you to take off your armor, but your armor never comes off. To touch them, but you will never touch them. To love them. You will always love them. Every one of them, even though you also hate them. You throw your cloak over them anyway. It weighs at least thirty pounds, and this is as close as you can ever come to hurting them.

The knights come, and you fight them. Sometimes they have witches in tow who have blessed them with burning sage and owl blood. Sometimes pages who carry their swords. Sometimes whole armies come for you, and you enjoy this the most, because you can kill as many soldiers as you please, just not the knight. It always ends the same way. A knife through your neck. A pike through your chest. Your head on the ground beside you, dead eyes full of stars and blood. Once a boy killed you with a six-inch nail he'd pried out of a wall in his bedroom before running away from home to come and rescue a princess. You are a master swordsmen, and you know twelve of the thirteen ancient forms, Palm Grasping Moon, Ocean Turning Time, Dragon Eating Itself, and a boy killed you with a crooked nail.

The same humiliation over and over. Sometimes the knights are alone, and they have great swords, like your own,

and you duel atop the black stone bridge above two hundred empty feet and a silver loop of river that rings your castle like a wedding band. These are the moments you are closest to being yourself. Perry, repost. Perry, repost. The art of the sword. The complicated music of steel and iron. It can go for hours. Bursts of blue and red sparks off your swords like spells, like dreams of other places, other times. Eventually, the knights tire, begin to slow, and magically, the next form goes out of your head, the next step disappears under you. You trip over nothing. You slow down for no reason, and the knight lands a lucky blow and chops off your arm, and it goes flying through the air, sword and all, like a strange, dark bird.

You are not allowed to hurt the maidens. You give them food, but you do not force them to eat. You lock them in the west tower, and, even after all these years, you are still ashamed each time. Sometimes they pound on the door until their fists are bloody. Sometimes they are so silent you think they may have died, and it is a relief. Like a deep muscle pain, you love every one of them.

“Someday, you will learn to love me,” you say, you always say, just before you lock the door. It is your destiny to repeat these words over and over. You are used to something else controlling your body, at times, and at least, during those moments, you can pretend that you are not responsible.

* * *

The knights always kill you, and you always wake up the next morning. Always they break down the door to the west tower, following the singing, the crying, the screaming. Some have enough sense to take the heavy iron key off your body; others hack down the door with their swords, axes, maces. Sometimes they take the gold in the south tower. Sometimes not. The gold is also cursed and will turn to dust in three hundred days and reappear in your castle. You like it when they take the gold. You hope it will bring them great misfortune and unhappiness. You hope they use it to pay for their weddings.

Sometimes you wake up on the road where you died, arrows still sticking out of your back like new, throbbing hearts. Sometimes, if the knights have burned your body or thrown it into the silver river to dissolve, you wake back up in your lace iron coffin in the north tower. Sometimes you lie there for days before you have the mental strength to reach up and push the coffin open. It is cool in there, and so silent.

Time shudders around you. Years. Winters, summers. Seasons of firefly comets. Years as fleeting and meaningless as shooting stars.

* * *

Sometimes there are no maidens in your castle; sometimes two or three at a time. Sometimes you are compelled to ride a

skeletal wyvern, even less alive than you, that lives at the top of the north tower. Sometimes you wonder what sin this creature committed. It was here in this castle long before you came, and it will be here long after you are gone. You caress the white calcite scales and they click against your black armor. Under your palm, it feels like an incredibly fragile creature, hollow, and it sighs into your hand, leans into you. It has huge black eyes, like a dog's. Perhaps no sin at all. Sometimes, birth alone is a great enough sin to be punished for.

You ride the white wyvern for days, clinging to its neck like child riding a mare for the first time. You ride through storms that chill you all the way down your skeleton and burn it to frozen glass. Perhaps that is not your skeleton you are feeling, so brittle and cold. Perhaps that is your soul. The wyvern dodges cracks of lightning like cracks in the world while you pray and pray to any god who might still be alive.

I'm sorry, you pray. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

You always pray in the lightning storms, and you always feel foolish afterwards. You ride over the dark forests surrounding your castle. The forests are filled with bear and wolf and snake. You ride over the ivory deserts, the five-inch sea, over huge cities alive with alchemy and astronomy and the noble sciences, and you ride over miles and miles of gray ruins and rotting stone rising out of poison marshes like half buried

bodies. Sometimes you wonder if this ruin, a soft stone courtyard lined with tufts of white grass or a tiny village encased in clear ice, might once have been your home. Did you live here? Did your mother live there? Your daughter? Whomever you might have once had in your life, they are long gone now.

You take maidens from their beds. From the fields, grain, corn, oranges, silver apple, fat grapes. Sometimes they fight you. Shears and farming scythes and bits of broken glass or tiny mirrors, which, later, you must pick out of your eye with the slivers of iron you use as toothpicks. More than once, you have saved maidens from drowning, from rape. You caught one in mid-fall off a cliff, and still she did not love you. She was terrified of you. Your black armor like gargoyle skin. Like demon's skin. Once, you stopped one from killing her father in his sleep. You pried the knife from her hand, and let it fall to the soft wood floor, and for just the smallest moment, you felt like someone's hero.

“He deserved it,” she said. Her voice was even harder and more filled with hate than yours. Her eyes wild, and full of old pain. She smelled like dried flowers and pepper. “If any man deserved it, he deserved it. This was justice. Why did you stop me?”

“When it is time,” you said, in the voice that you hate, that constant wraith whisper, that dying breath voice. “Nothing can stop me. Certainly not justice.”

You have slain many fathers to kidnap maidens. You have slain dragons to kidnap maidens. You have slain trolls. Your sword is elder iron, that much you remember; it was your father’s sword, and it cuts through stone bodies like so much hot air. Through golden scales. Through the water mail of putrid merfolk, the ashy skin of lower demons, the heavy plate of other cursed knights. You still enjoy combat. The craft of swordplay was always the medium of your art. The perfect strike like the perfect wild beating of your heart. And who knows? Perhaps one of these curses, floating over these twisted bodies like great pendulum blades, will be greater than the one hanging over you. Perhaps, one day, you will meet with some curse that is greater than yours, and some demon will murder you.

This hope, like your sometimes belief in God, makes you feel so foolish. Like a child, all you have are your fantasies.

* * *

Often you read. The library is huge and takes up most of the south tower, and an inhuman peddler occasionally comes to the castle and trades you new books in exchange for allowing him to fill his vials in the silver river. You read, in a children’s

book, that when a curse is broken, a brand new firefly comet is born. You read in a much newer scientific tome from the university city of Zaren that the firefly comets are some type of invisible energy burning and becoming visible in the upper layer of the ether. Both explanations make you more than a little sad.

* * *

A new maiden today. You have ridden the wyvern for ten days over open sea as blue and cold as infinity. The stars are sometimes calm, and sometimes scatter as firefly comets swirling and chasing each other across the sky. Who is chasing whom? What will they do when they catch, or are caught? The air is cold and full of salt. You feel like you're rusting. You whisper to the wyvern. You tell it stories you have read. It is your only true companion. A crescent of islands across the ocean reveal themselves like a shattered moon. You can feel your curse pulling you toward one of the smallest islands at the outer tip of the formation.

The wingbeats of the wyvern as it lands scatters her tiny campfire in a hail of coals and ash. You haven't smelled anything but salt and sea for days, and the scents of the sand and the dense tropic green and the sweet flower oils off the maiden's dark skin make you shudder with pleasure despite yourself.

Her irises are almost as black and deep as her pupils, and her eyes are wide open, and they reflect the scattered campfire in flickering red light. She is alone on a broad stretch of white beach near heavy jungle. You move toward her. Tiny shells and glass coral crack and turn to dust beneath your feet. You don't even feel the coals you step on, still bright and orange against the night. She falls to her knees and clasps her hands together as if in prayer, eyes wide with fear and surprise. This is where she begs. Often they beg.

"Please," she says. Soft waves crash on a near shore. You feel the response already forming in your throat like destiny. When it is time, nothing can stop you. Not even yourself.

"Please," she says. "Take me with you!"

The words twist and halt in your throat. You feel upside down. Standing over her like this, it is almost as if she is praying to you. You reach out your hand, heavy and cool, and place it over her clasped fingers.

For ten days atop the wyvern's back, through calm skies and one light, tropical storm through which you pray nonstop, silently like a young boy, the maiden hardly ever stops laughing. She smells a little sweet, like firewood ash.

* * *

She has copper hair and the dark, sandy skin of the isles you took her from. Eyes like new moons. She is very beautiful.

They are all very beautiful. Sometimes you fall in love with their eyelashes, like little wings. Sometimes the constellations of their freckles, the bend of an ankle. Once you fell in love with the life-line on maiden's palm. It seemed, to you, heartbreakingly short. You always hate this part. This love forced through your body like a potion replacing your blood . This time, you fall in love with everything.

She has suffered. Her father, her brothers, her mother wrapped around her like chains. She was set to marry a wild man with shockingly white skin from the continent north of the islands. She hated this man, the way his breath always smelled like meat, the way he would not let her touch his bow or knives, the way he would not hold her hand but drag her places by her thin wrist. Many have suffered, you think. Suffering does not make one special.

But she is special. That first night, when you land together on the roof of the north tower and the dark forests extend all about you like another kind of sea, she hops off the wyvern as easy as dismounting a horse. Her skin is burned from the high sun and chapped from the hard wind, but she spins on her heel and hugs the wyvern around its huge neck. It turns to look at you, with a slightly tilted head, a confusion in its eyes.

“What’s her name?” the maiden asks.

“That creature has no name.”

“Can I name her?”

You say nothing. The night howls with silence. You do not know if the heavy, sick love you feel is you or your curse.

“I will name you Comet,” she says to it. “Because you are so free. Not even the earth can hold you.”

* * *

She asks to hold your sword, as if she does not know she is your captive. You wonder if you will have to explain it to her.

“You may not,” you say. And she looks so disappointed that you let her into the armory and she picks another sword, much too big for her figure, and swings it clumsily like a club. Laughing as its weight pulls her whole body behind it.

She does not cower from you, like most, or even scheme ways to murder you or escape you, like the smarter ones do, the tougher ones you sometimes have to lock in the dungeons. After a few weeks in which her arms grow toned and strong from swinging her new sword daily, she can lift the sword easily, and she asks you to teach her swordplay. The idea of this makes you happier than you have been in years. To have a student. To discuss the sword. And this happiness makes you feel pathetic.

However, you are desperate, and always in love, and you show her the first form, The Eternal River. She is eager and

intelligent. She absorbs it like a plant absorbing water. The second form, the third, the fourth, the fifth.

You spar with her once she has understood the fifth form, and the curse that is always wrapped around your body like armor, like skin, feels very far away.

You pause. She sips water from a ladle. Silk moths flutter near the torches and cast dancing shadows. She's sweating. You are in love with her sweat. She's breathing hard and you are not. She wipes a strand of copper hair from her brow.

"Why am I here?" she asks. It has been months. She will not look at you now. She is frightened, as if she expects you to throw her away.

You tell her how this works. You show her that the armor does not come off. You lead her to the back of the armory and show her your coffin. She runs her hand, freshly calloused from the sword, over the inside surface of the coffin, and you shiver as if she has touched your bare skin.

"But you're so powerful," she says, still breathing a little hard. The sweat dries on her skin, and goose flesh rises on her arms. You have never felt any need as great as the need to protect her.

"I am a prisoner," you say, in the only voice you can remember ever having now, "as much as you are."

"Whose prisoner are you?" she asks.

“My own.”

She looks up at you. Torchlight dashes across her face like blush. “I want to be here,” she says.

And you try, you try so hard, not to believe her.

* * *

Sometimes you take her flying on Comet, and she screams into the clouds, into the lightning, screams laughter. You are both soaked afterwards. You have not prayed in months, and it feels like being set free. She finds ways to make food better. She uses black fire powder as seasoning and puts ground fire chips directly into the stew. You had forgotten food. Sometimes the two of you watch the firefly comets together, sitting in opposite corners of the huge window in the east tower. The light plays in your armor, she says, like the midsummer light on the seas of her home. The air is clear and thin here, and the stars are brighter than she’s ever seen.

A year passes. Two. Time flickers like a fire. She now sleeps in the room beside yours in the east tower. You have taught her how to read, but sometimes you still read to her as she falls asleep. Sometimes you tell her stories of the countries you have seen. The creatures you have slain. Wraiths. Bogmen. Lychen. Harpies. Men. She is wide-eyed at these tales, and hungry. There is a clean joy and desire in her. A purity which you did not think existed. She feels what she feels, and nothing

else. You feel like both her father and her lover and her great devil. Is the curse purposely giving you more time with her? So that it will hurt even more when she is taken from you.

You show her the seventh form, Sparrow's Fall, spinning and leaping in the practice hall while she watches from the edge holding her own sword loose at her side. When you land in the final stance, low with the sword high above you ready to flow into any other step of any other form, she tells you that she thinks she is in love with you.

Slowly, you lower the sword. Sunlight peeks through the slight windows high above as white and brittle as ice.

"I am always in love with you," you respond. Your voice echoes in the hall and inside your own helmet. "With all of you."

"I'm not joking," she says, stepping toward you. You step back. She smiles, and it is like iron. "I love this castle. I love Comet. I love the storms and the lightning. I love the sword, god be damned I love the sword, and the firefly comets and the stars. I love hunting with you in the forest. I love that there are no laws here. I love falling asleep under quilts so heavy they make it hard to breath. I love the library. I love when you read to me—"

“Stop.” You feel dizzy. You know not to trust yourself, or that rotten apple in your chest that you call a heart. Truly, it is a bundle of betrayal. It is a bundle of smooth poison.

“Most of all,” she says. She has backed you against the wall. You want to believe in her like you want to believe in God. The high blush on her cheek, her heavy breathing, the wild shine in her eyes. Is she afraid? What is she afraid of? You want to hold her, to be held by her, to die in her arms, and at the same time, you want to strike her with your sword. “I love—”

“When your knight comes,” you say, “he will destroy me, and he will take you from this hell and into a beautiful future from which you will forget this place completely. You will have children and a warm touch and a life. And I will be here for a long time after that. For a very long time.”

“I don’t want children.” A beam of light falls across her face, sharp and bright, and she turns her eyes briefly away and down. Her hair glows as if it has been freshly forged. Her dark skin gleams. You are in love with this motion of hers. With every motion. “And I will never forget you.”

“When your knight kills me,” you say.

“Stop calling him ‘my knight.’”

“When the knight kills me, you will.”

She’s silent. The family of white day owls that live in the rafters flutter like impossible butterflies. You can see her mind

turning like a planet crossing the sky beneath her skin. What is she planning? To trick you? Or to trick fate? She smiles into the hard sun. Her teeth white as wolf's and just a little crooked.

“Not if you kill him first.”

* * *

You, slay a knight? Impossible. Even your elder sword, capable of piecing a golden dragon's scales, has shattered on a simple knight's shield. It regrows with the rest of you. The curse never allows you to kill the knights. It lets you be just strong enough, lets you remember just enough swordplay, just enough of your own body, to push the knights, push them to their furthest edges but never enough to break them. You pray to encounter demons or bandits or sword masters just so that you will have something you can fight with your whole body, just so that you can move without being held back. You are probably the best swordsman alive and the worst at once. There is no one left alive who knows the thirteenth form, and only you know the twelve.

Soon though, the maiden may know them to.

She trains day and night. She swings her sword in her sleep. She slashes spare suits of armor packed with wild boar meat into scraps because she says she needs to feel the sensation of a real body, real slashing. She cuts apart shadows. She is very hard now. None of the girl that she first was. Slim

and soft as a tropic beach. She is a black oak carving of a woman. She cuts her hair short with a dagger. She trains with a single mindedness that is almost feral, animal. She is a natural force. She is the sun and moon. She is the silver river.

Once, where you like her?

The two of you sit in the window together. The east tower is the tallest, and it is very cold up here. The firefly comets write impossible stories in the sky, and their long, thin tails fade as slow as lives. Somehow, she still smells like sweet, firewood ash.

“I’ll do it myself,” she says. “I will kill whatever knight comes. And you and I will live together in this castle for a long, long time. Maybe forever.”

“Comet can be our child,” you say, and because she laughs, a true, high laugh, full and whole, and because the wild light tangles in her short hair and her teeth like gentle fingers that could be your own, you do not even hate your own tattered voice.

She tells you that she loves you.

You don’t have the heart to tell her, that when her knight comes, she will fall into a heavy sleep, and you will carry her into the west tower and place her on a stone bed like a corpse, and you will lock the door behind you.

You have no choice.

Instead, you say that you love her too. And it is true. It is always true.

* * *

Another year passes. She has mastered ten forms and is working on the eleventh. You watch her. The arc of her sword has all the grace of a devout prayer. The kind you could never truly manage to make.

You feel her knight enter the forest. He is on the shortest route.

“The knight will come tomorrow,” you say.

She halts. Slowly, she lowers her sword. She is facing away from you. She breathes steady and low. Shoulders rising and falling just lightly. A fine sheen sweat over the new animal of her body like sweet oil. She is the most perfect creature you have ever seen or read about. You want her to stop, to never turn around, to never change. You want to be her.

“Show me the twelfth form,” she says, without turning around. The scent of her, fire and sweat and sweet ash, is everywhere.

You would like to go flying instead. For the first time in years, you feel the urge to pray to that great nothing that holds you, and that feeling makes this moment seem all the more

hopeless. The sky, the lightning, the comets, have always been your only church.

“You’re not ready,” you say. She turns to face you. She has more natural talent with the sword than you’ve ever seen. Besides yourself. That is the face a woman who knows what she is. Who is what she wants to be. You believe in her now completely. She is your faith.

“I don’t care,” she says. “Show me.”

The twelfth form, The Lovers Struggle.

* * *

After showing her the form, the two of you take Comet to flight. You ride high and hard over the forest, and you wonder if her knight can see the two of you from somewhere far below. You ride as far as fate will allow you, the land blurring below you. A haze of color and light. A small village. A perfectly round lake. Grass hills. Dirt roads crisscrossing and thinning out and disappearing like people’s intersecting lives. You almost make it to the ocean. In the distance, you can see a strip of metallic blue water shimmering with reflected stars. You call for the maiden to look, but she has already passed into a deep, deep slumber.

You carry her like your child. At some point, they all feel like your children. The halls are cold and dark. You don’t

bother with torches. You know this castle almost as well as you know your own body. Comet whines as you leave her behind. You don't look back.

The gray stone you lay her on is carved with flowers tangled around swords. It smells like dark magic in here, lilac and poison ash. She is talking in her sleep. She is repeating the steps in the last form. The embrace. The tear. The scar. She is struggling to open her eyes. No maiden has ever opened their eyes.

* * *

You are standing on the bridge. You are always standing on the bridge. It is before dawn and the firefly comets are in frenzy above you, and they cast enough light see everything in a shimmering way. The silver river glows beneath you. This knight is an early riser, you think, or perhaps he has traveled all night for his maiden. His maiden.

There are three figures at the end of the bridge. You spot the knight immediately. He is standing on the left. The light is yellow and silver and blue and red and it casts deep shadows in their skin and makes their faces look like handsome masks. He has a wizard with him in red robes and a priest with a heavy silver mace. You hate silver and the ugliness and inelegance of maces.

The knight has dirty hands, and two exquisite knives in his belt, and a huge bow made out of black elder wood. A relic from the same age as you. His face is perfectly formed, and his skin is white as scar tissue. He radiates confidence, and that confidence emanates from a deep skill. You can tell. Normally, you would enjoy such an opponent. How many forms will he drag out of you? Six, seven? No knight has ever allowed you to go past nine. Most cannot push you to use three. But this morning feels like the last morning. This feels like the end of time. Like the end of the world.

You raise your great shield, a slab of phantom iron caved into the head of a demon, and charge them. Despite your size and the heaviness of your armor, you have great speed. Your speed surprises them. It always does. You hear the wizard begin to chant. A heaviness curse, for your armor no doubt, or perhaps your sword. The priest shouts something in a new, ugly language (could it really be a blessing?) and charges you right back. Arrows slam your shield like falling stars, and the shield is almost knocked from your hand. You hold. Blazing light falls all around like strange snow.

You slam into the priest and he stumbles back. You drop the shield and spin right into the sixth form, Storm's Eye. An arrow flies right beside the priest's stumbling head and glances off your breastplate, knocking your form off half a step. A

nearly miraculous shot. You have placed the priest squarely between you and the knight. The priest shakes your weak blow off his shield swings his mace like a child swinging a bat. You slip easily away, and an arrow buries itself in your hip, right at the joint of your armor. The pain is immediate and boiling. You step back. A faint. Pain would never make you step back.

The priest's teeth click together in a tombstone smile. He is blond with dead blue eyes and huge white teeth. He charges you. You pretend to stumble back from his shield push. He hefts his mace, grinning a wild man grin, and you split him right in half, shield and all. The eighth form. The Cleaving Sun.

Your armor weighs suddenly a hundred pounds more. Stone cracks beneath you. It grows heavier with each bounding step you take toward the wizard. Another arrow slams into your shoulder. You swat another out of the air with your sword. The wizard screams and a ball of white flame flies at you, but you turn and take it on your already dead shoulder. You slam your pierced burned shoulder into the wizard, and a look of shock spreads across his face as you send him flying back and over the edge of the bridge. He falls into a sea of silver light and is lost.

The knight manages to put two more arrows in your stomach and chest before you close the distance. He drops his bow and jumps back, ducking your clean strike, and draws his

daggers. They're made of petrified yellow glass, and they fly like comets.

One of your eyes has melted in its socket from the fireball. The arrows have some kind of acid poison on them, and you feel your muscles melting where their tips bury in your cool flesh. Your armor is at least three times as heavy now and getting heavier each moment, and the forms are starting to drain from your body like a second kind of blood.

Here is where you would normally surrender. Where you would normally allow your shattered body to collapse on the knight's blades. The sun has still not risen. But the light is wild above you. And this feels like some great fête to which you are finally invited.

The knight is nimble as a wood fairy. He cuts at the joints of your armor with his yellow knives. He laughs, actually laughs, as you shakily swing your sword after him in pale imitations of the true forms. You think, he is the perfect man. He is so confident and strong and whole. And you are all fragments. You are all pieces that don't quite fit together. You are the whole world's villain. You are the best swordsman and the worst fighter. You are the oldest hunter and the worst cook. You are excellent at kidnapping and terrible, so terrible, at protecting.

You laugh too. You laugh and laugh. Your laughter is a horrible thing. Smoke and broken voice and metal echo in your helmet, and the knight falters just a half step. You swing your sword in the first step of the first form, the only one your body still remembers. The one that is most a part of you, buried inside you. The form in which you store your soul. The Beginning. You have swung your sword thousands and thousands of times. Uncountable times, over uncountable years, and this is the most perfect strike you have ever performed. This cut could sever fate. This cut could kill God, or, perhaps, resurrect him.

Every string of your body breaks in the process.

The knight's glass knives shoot into a clean X, defending himself even as he jumps backwards to avoid the blow. Your sword shatters his knives in bursts of light. It shatters time and air. Its tip cuts inches deep all the way across his perfect face. Your sword goes flying.

And you both fall.

* * *

For how long do you lie there? You watch the firefly comets disappear in daylight, with your one good eye. You watch the sun roll across the soft blue of the sky. You do not pray. Your flesh is liquid under your skin where the four arrows pierced you. Your outer skin throbs where it was burned with

curse fire. Is this what freedom feels like? You can hear the struggling breath of the knight nearby. He has not risen.

Your armor weighs more than the moon. The sun sets. The stars slowly come out, then the comets. Their wildness is comforting tonight. Their unpredictability. There is no fate to their paths. No curse to their existence. The light is heavy on you and the dying knight.

You hear someone approaching. Did the wizard survive his fall? Impossible. You hear the shing of metal sliding against stone. Someone has lifted your blade.

“That man was a very famous warrior,” the maiden says, from somewhere outside your vision. “The Light Archer, he was called. He freed the Crescent Islands from the headless king by one-on-one combat. He has slain countless demons and villains. He was my betrothed. But he couldn’t beat you.”

She walks past you, dragging the tip of your father’s sword over the black stone of the bridge, trailing blue sparks. She wears slim dark armor threaded with gold that she must have taken from the armory. It fits her like it was waiting for her. Like it was smithed for her ages before she was born.

“Wait,” you gasp. There is the wet, stabbing sound you know so well. The sucking pop as the blade is withdrawn. You can’t hear the knight breathing any longer.

She drags the sword back to you, and it spits sparks like a tiny, angry dragon.

She stands over you like your new God. You feel upside down again. She lifts your huge sword easily. It is becoming hers, a part of her, just as it was once a part of you. She examines the ancient blue edge in the flickering firefly light.

“How many women have you kidnapped?”

“Too many.”

“How many women have you hurt?”

“None.”

She smiles, laughs a little, and it makes her seem violently pretty.

“How many women have you handed over to violent men?”

“I couldn’t stop them. Any of them.” Beneath the visor of your helmet, you are crying again.

“You never tried.”

“I did. I tried so hard.” You are always crying. These tears, like the voice that you hate, or the armor that is your skin, are a part of your curse. “It wasn’t me.”

“Your curse?” she says.

You try to nod, but can’t. You are a ball of pain in the shape of a man.

“You are your curse.”

“I’m not. I’m more.”

“You want to be more, it’s true.” She slowly reaches down and lifts the visor of your helmet. It swings open easily for her now.

“Wait,” you say. The armor has become so heavy, you fear the bridge will collapse, taking you both with it. But what most worries you is how your face must look at this moment. Once you were handsome. Now you are an old, old man. Your hair is white and thin as light. Your bones are brittle. Your skin is gray as old paper, and half-burned and black, and all of you is as sunken as the lost continent. You are weeping blood from your one good eye. You are always weeping blood.

“I do love you,” she says. “And I don’t love you.”

“I know,” you say. There is wind on your flesh for what feels like the first time. It feels so good you want to break apart. “Take care of Comet?”

She smiles, and nods. She has always been a mixture of false and real smiles, and your curse has made it all real for you. And you are not even angry. She is right. You are to blame.

“Do you know what I love most?” she asks.

Free of the helmet, you nod. It’s hard to nod. Your body is becoming stiff. You are dying again.

“*Freedom*,” you say. And you know she has confused freedom with strength, and dominance with right. Just as you

once did. But it's all right. The firefly comets dance above her like an infinity of twisted halos, and she is already lifting the sword above her head, in the first step of the first form, and you wish you had more time to teach her. To show her that perfect strike.

But she will get there on her own. She will find her way. She is a better student than you ever were. It hurts a little, even now, to admit that. When you say the word "freedom," she smiles, and thanks you for everything. The arc of the sword catches light and shines a hard elder blue in the air, and it's not as good as yours, but it's very, very good, and it cuts even the light, and it makes you think something mad. For a moment, you think that a brand new comet has been born. And that you are its only witness.

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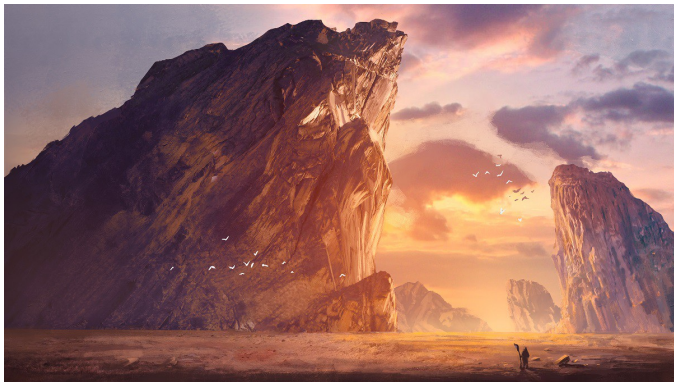
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COVER ART

“Land of Giants,” by Ashley Dotson



Ashley Dotson is a professional fantasy artist in the game industry who specializes in illustration and concept art. Her keen sense of atmosphere and mood lends her to aim to create a strong feeling in the viewer with everything she paints. She has an art streaming channel on Twitch where you can watch her paint live. Her artwork and a contact for work inquiries can found at www.artstation.com/artist/ashleydotson.

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