

Tales From The Bear and Lion

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TALES FROM THE BEAR AND LION

Collected Fantasy Short Stories

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Contents:

Jar of Hearts

The Eyes of Illiat

Andore and Illiat

You Bury Me

The Last Stand of a Dying Soldier

Note: Following each story I have provided a short commentary discussing the process and creation of the story.

Jar of Hearts

*Old Man Dudden,
He's comin',
Old Man Dudden,
He's comin',
Lookin' to fill his jar of hearts.*

-- Children's Song

III

Leaves crackled beneath running feet as terror forced the youth through a darkened autumn wood. Moonlight shifted, and shadows played across the footpath as a chill wind nudged the naked branches overhead. The familiar scent of crushed ferns and new sweat filled the air.

Wide blue eyes stared into the darkness, searching. Uncertain feet snapped twigs, and skittered across the loose pebbles of unseen creek beds as the youth dashed madly forward, his hands extended before him in a vain effort to detect unseen thrusts of the forest.

The commotion of his passing barely registered with him, the pounding of blood in his ears far too thunderous. He crashed through patches of bramble and small stands of stunted saplings, but felt very little over the thumping of his heart in his throat.

He was being followed, pursued by a dreaded legend that the village boys often mocked; one he'd even scoffed at while dancing in a ring with his friends. Now the fairytale, that man forced to drag his twisted right foot as he worked to fulfill an ancient and horrible debt, was out there, trailing through the wisps of autumn fog. And he clutched to his side a large jar with a rotted cork stopper, the contents of which had the fleeing boy stumbling in his effort to escape.

Cutting sharply to his left, hoping it would lead back toward the village, the boy felt his feet slide out from under him as mud turned traction elusive. He toppled to the leafy forest floor, his arms shooting out to break his fall. As he struck the earth, sorry thoughts filled his head, hopes cultivated by the unlikely position in which he found himself. Someone in the village had to be looking for him, had to have heard his clumsy gallivanting and would come rescue him. A distant voice in his head chirped about the futility of such wishful thinking. He should never have ventured out past the common field; never should have stepped slowly, feigning bravery, into the North Wood. Especially not this night, when Old Man Dudden was said to travel the land, filling his jar of hearts.

A shadow rose before the boy's eyes, a wall that made the dark of night impossibly darker. The sounds of movement, the slow and meticulous soughing of a cripple, drew him up to his knees.

Moonlight broke through the bare branches overhead, tumbling down to land upon a withered face, lighting it in a milky glow. Lines cut vagarious across that leathery skin, and patches of thin wispy hair lay across chin and cheek. The eyes were cold and blue, hateful in that small illumination dripping from overheard. They stared down at the boy, gleaming with ghostly venom.

It was impossible to look away from those eyes, large balls of ice like frozen ponds on a barren land. And the longer the boy stared, the clearer he could see himself there, trapped behind those solid blue-white orbs.

Old Man Dudden stepped forward, his body twisting as he struggled to pull his right leg along with him, the appendage a terrible burden. The contents of the jar clutched to his side shifted as he moved; the watery refuse lining the bottom slurped sickly within the glass confine.

“Another heart,” Old Man Dudden said in a hollow, tired voice. He lifted a clawed hand and reached for the boy, a frigid whisper leaving his throat.

The boy tried to scream, tried to give substance to the fear immobilizing him. Nothing rose from his clenching throat but a faltering breath. The hand fell upon his chest, both icy and hot. The sensation wasn't painful, but the boy didn't dare glance down. It was quick, a slight tug that caused the boy's back to arch. And then, as Old Man Dudden claimed his prize, the forest rose up to claim the boy, a kind and pitiful gesture. It pulled the youth into the loam, into the tangles of roots that scratched through the earth, wrapping him in a stiff embrace.

The cork left the jar with a hint of a pop, and the shaking hand of a man long damned deposited the wet muscle inside. Stopping the jar once more, Old Man Dudden turned to shamle away, his thoughts dark as he counted what he carried. Too many hearts.

I

A perfect sun burned in a perfect sky above a long stretch of highway. Age was difficult to place upon the lone woman travelling the lane. The pastel blue of her dress went untouched by the dirt of the road as it swayed out around her ankles. Her long hair blazed red in the afternoon light, loose and flowing around a face that spoke of years yet shined with the light of youth. As she followed the rising of the road leading to a quaint village she happened upon a young woman, one balancing the end of her teen years, sitting in the short grass beside the highway. The girl's eyes were red with hard crying, and still her tired weeping shook her willowy frame. Small hands were folded in her lap, tangled in the stained apron bunched between her legs.

“Whatever is the matter, child?” the woman in blue asked as she stepped off the road.

The young girl glanced up and wiped at her eyes. For a brief moment she marveled at the beauty of the woman come to her aid, and all at once felt shame at the concern etched on those flawless features. “I am sad, lady.” The girl turned her eyes down. “My heart is broken.”

“Broken?” the lady in blue asked as she took a seat beside the girl.

The young girl nodded, the action tossing her earthy hair in slow motions about her heart-shaped face. "I thought he loved me. Or that he would love me." Here she gave a small, wounded laugh. "I was foolish."

"That is the bane of the innocent," the woman in blue said. "Tell me your story. I have heard many troubling things lately. Your tale will not burden me more."

The young girl ran the back of her hand across her eyes, trying to create a semblance of equanimity. She gave up quickly. The images inside her, the whirling of emotions that tugged at her heart would not allow her to pass her story calmly. So she began, struggling for clarity of words that were pushed around wracking tears.

"His name was Dudden." The memory brought a faint lilt to her voice. "It was along this very road he traveled, smiling like the day. I was here, picking flowers for a wreath that would decorate my parents' door. I do it every summer. And he came upon me as a storm comes upon a dusty field. I am not ashamed to say that I was drawn to his face, to the line of his jaw and the brightness of his green eyes. Call it youthful ignorance if you wish, but I loved him from that very moment on."

The woman in blue placed a hand on the young girl's back and gave her a gentle pat. "It is not ignorance, child. Trust me."

The girl looked up and gave a heavy smile. "He was so good with the village boys. So caring. He gave them the whole of his attention, sparing me a smile now and then. It was wonderful how well he got along with them. There was love in his heart." She paused, sniffing. "We walked that night down to the lake, right up to the water's edge where we skipped rocks. He was not very good," she said with a laugh. "So I showed him how to properly throw a stone. It was in that moment that I felt a connection with him, that a part of me had been given over." She shook her head. "Later, I gave more. I wanted to receive the same affections he'd bestowed on those boys." She lifted her head, eyes strained. "How could he leave me after that? After what we shared?"

"Men are curious creatures, child," the woman soothed. "Some, I would offer, a bit more than others. But you mustn't let this eat at you. You must use it as a lesson. Some things are far too valuable to give away simply because you're smitten with a pair of eyes and the arbitrary angle of a man's cheekbone."

"I am embarrassed," the girl admitted. "And it pains me all the more that you had to suffer my telling."

"It is fine, child. Sorrow is not best left in the heart." The woman in blue stood, casting down a smile that penetrated the girl's heart, pulling forth a hidden joy. "I think this man will soon learn the folly of what he has wrought."

"The gods?" There was nothing of hope in the girl's voice, only a dejected tone of pain.

“They do not look kindly upon those who disrespect those worth respecting.” And with that the woman dressed in soft blue turned and moved down the road, her smooth steps taking her from the girl much as spring rains took winter’s face.

II

His step had always been light, his whistle a pure and clear thing to draw ears. Who wouldn’t cross the face of the world with a ready smile and hopeful heart who found all things within his reach?

Dudden was a lively man, a man born with the symmetrical visage of a statue, and with eyes that cradled the light of a spring forest. To his utter pleasure, women adored such beauty. But, added to his looks, Dudden carried in his mind a wit capable of fulfilling a woman’s most passionate fantasies.

He’d been a merchant’s guard once, for a beautiful young girl who’d admired the scar on his neck he’d received while shaving. He’d been an actor, proven by the clearness of his voice and his ability to recite a single page of that great play *Andore and Illiat*. He’d been a swordsmith, a soldier, a sailor. He’d been a mystic, a prophet, a priest, as well as holding other titles that entitled him to glimpse the mysteries of the world. Through it all, he’d claimed many professions with the ultimate goal of bedding the woman awed by his history and musings.

But the woman before him now would need a steadier hand, a more finely tuned tale of heroism, and perhaps a lofty bit of articulation.

She was highborn, obviously. If not the cut and color of her dress, then her faultless skin and rich red hair proved her heritage. There even seemed to be a shimmer about her, as though the sunlight itself circled her, savoring the nearness of her body, giving an unreal life to the soft blue of her long dress.

“I have traveled many places,” Dudden said in answer to her question. She had found him at rest, sitting beneath the thick boughs of an elm, chewing solemnly upon an apple. He looked like a wanderer, she’d said. Was this true? “But never in all my days have I been so privileged as I am now.”

“Oh?” the lady said with a tilt of her mouth.

“You are surely the fairest woman to grace this earth. And if I may, I admit a measure of aptitude in this assumption. I served in the Kommorean army for three years, and in that span I travelled the whole of that northern nation, and the chill air never brought to me a beauty of your caliber. In the south I sat on the court of Emperor Pansu, and no lady of noble birth could stand at your side and deserve her place as a woman.”

Here, the lady lifted a single brow.

Dudden stumbled over his breath. “I apologize. You see, I can’t find the exact words to say what I want to say. And, as a man who once wrote three books outlining the history of the gods, I find my failing descriptive prowess embarrassing.”

“I see no reason for that,” the woman responded, her voice airy and melodious. “You seem like a man who has done much, a man youthful and untouched by a life that surely hasn’t been easy.” Here she twisted her words, as though questioning Dudden’s honesty.

“I’ve had a difficult time of it, true enough,” Dudden responded, lifting the corner of his mouth in a half-smile. “But I come from good stock. I’ve traced my ancestry back four hundred years to the conqueror Ariin Dosean. He held the world in his hands before turning thirty.”

The woman nodded. A strand of hair pulled loose from her ear and hung before her face. “I am familiar with him. That is blood to be proud of.” She gently pressed the strand back, her dark eyes watching Dudden with a newfound intensity.

“Could I escort you down the road?” Dudden asked. “This stretch of the highway can be a dangerous place.” He extended his hand to her, encouraging her acquiescence by flexing the muscles of his outstretched arm.

“Actually,” she said, ignoring his arm, “I was thinking that maybe we could find some privacy nearby.” She stepped closer, resting her hand lightly on his forearm. “Perhaps you could, in another fashion, convey exactly how beautiful you think I am.”

Dudden felt his arm begin to shake at her offer, and quickly he lowered it. He nearly swallowed before realizing his mouth was dry. “Certainly, my lady.” He lifted his arm again and took her hand, leading her away from the road and through the thick foliage that made a natural wall between highway and forest.

They moved through the trees, circumventing a small pond that had settled down in the midst of the wood. Frogs were pumping their throats, and the frightened ducking of turtles beneath the water filled the air. Dudden ignored it for the most part. His heart was filling his throat, and he battled himself to ensure that the hand pulling the lady along didn’t sweat.

A clearing emerged as the trees backed away, settling to bunch up off to their right. The grass wasn’t low, but it wasn’t high either. And it was soft. Dudden lowered the lady to the ground, settling himself beside her. He moved his hand along her leg, sliding it up her body to her face where he took her jaw and leaned forward to plant a careful kiss upon her mouth. She leaned into him, accepting his affections. Her hand slipped around his back and she pulled him down to her.

The sun lumbered overhead, passing as it did with an hour. Dudden removed himself from the woman, admiring her body one last time before his passion for her wilted. And as he stared, horror slowly twisted his glistening face. Where once her skin had been soft and even, it now looked rough and wrinkled. And, indeed, the more he watched the more her skin aged until she lay before him as a shriveled old woman, not even an echo of the young lady he’d just lain with.

He backed away, eyes moving across the impossible body propped upon the earth, revulsion filling his breast. "What are you?"

The woman smiled, her face sunken, teeth yellowed and black. "I am what your actions have made me. A bitter thing; a woman who finds no comfort or joy in herself." She pushed herself from the ground and stood before him, her nakedness a triviality. "You will make amends for the things you have done, for the horrors your selfishness and vanity have created."

Dudden was still backing away, shaking his head.

"For every heart you broke, I demand one in recompense." As she spoke, her horrible façade faded, morphing into the softness and eternal perfection of the divine. "You will not rest, and you will not know love until this task is complete."

Dudden turned to flee. But in his rush he didn't notice the gopher hole behind him. His foot fell in the hole, his momentum twisting his leg to a horrible angle. The snapping of his bones filled his ears. He cried out as he toppled to the earth, the pain of his now ruined leg enormous, overtaking any thoughts of escape.

The goddess was standing above him, the summer sun bringing her body into terrible clarity. "They will be the hearts of boys," she intoned, the sounds from her throat seeming to fill the whole of the world. "Adolescents with all of life before them. In this, you can take no pleasure. In this, you can find no vindication."

His head shook as he tried to deny the request. His eyes blurred as the pain riding his body filled him with an unquenchable agony. At the same time a greater hate filled him, quickly overshadowing his prior ambivalence for women. "I will not," he managed, a feeble gesture of defiance. No matter what, he could never bring himself to such actions. Boys were the strength of civilization; girls only worthwhile when their skirts were up. He clenched his teeth, refusing to listen to the call flooding his mind.

The goddess smiled. "You think this is for you to decide? Your life is in my hands now, granted to me by your wayward touch upon the heart. The guise of love is not a means by which a man should satiate the burn of his loins. It is a precious thing, a tender thing, a fragile thing. And you have sullied it with clumsy touches and idle thrusts."

Dudden managed to pull his leg from the hole, and he sat before the magnificence of the goddess as a broken thing, both physically and emotionally. Already he could feel the knot in his heart as a craving for young lives filled him. Would no one step forward to save him? Would the other gods truly allow such a curse to find fruition?

The goddess shone brighter and brighter, forcing Dudden to raise his arm before his eyes as pain scoured his skull. Then came the darkness. Not darkness for lack of light, but a darkness that took the place of hope, of happiness, of the timid anticipation of the future. With the departure of the goddess, Dudden's life vanished. She had tied her strings within him, secured them more readily than any lie he'd whispered upon an ear.

END

Commentary: This story was inspired by Christina Perri's song of the same name. I was listening to the song one day and couldn't help but visualize her words, and they came to me as the image of Old Man Dudden carrying a jar. From there I had to ask myself why he had the jar and why those specific contents, as well as what happened in his life to place him in that position. And because I brainstormed the story from the end to the beginning, I decided I would present it in the same fashion. That's why you are given the scene with Dudden taking a boy's heart and then shown what led him to that point.

The Eyes of Illiat

The man was over the table, draped like a bulging lime cloth. He had been long in his cups, spending too few moments on breathing. There had been a tenacity in the way he tipped his tankards back, as though the wine couldn't flow into his throat fast enough. It was misery being drowned.

The youth, sweeping a far corner of The Bear and Lion tavern, had never seen such drinking. There were whispers in the room, low, spoken only into palms, but they were all for the man downed by wine.

Whoever he was, he'd taken a back table, one distanced enough from the hearth that the chill of night raged through a window, the fire but an impotent observer. By the blush of the man's face, the table might have been chosen judiciously.

Garann leaned his broom upon the wall and crossed the tavern floor, interested by the dress of the man, by the careful rise and fall of his chest, and of the way the other patrons had settled on giving the stranger a fair amount of space. Garann was a collector of stories. One day he would use bits and pieces of people's lives and pen the greatest play the world would ever know. That was his dream, at least.

"Damned fool," one man said as Garann passed.

"Poor fool," another corrected. The scent of beer and spirits was cloying, filling Garann's nostrils and throat as he passed the tables. The natural scent of straw filled in the soft gaps left by alcohol, an odor Garann tried clinging to.

The stranger's face lay upon the table, tinged in scarlet, the right side pressed into the wood. The eyebrows were a heavy black, thin and expressionless. They matched the trimmed but disheveled black hair topping the man's head.

Garann was mindful of the men and women seated at long benches, enjoying The Bear and Lion. Those that were not quietly gossiping were leaning back in uproarious laughter, while others turned to spit on the straw-sprinkled floor. Along his course he had to duck from the long-crossed paths of serving girls and their tray-encumbered arms. He tried smelling them as they passed, nearly as young as he, short into their teen years; too many smelled like lilacs and hard perfume, and too few like apples.

As he passed the benches and reached the open floor between the common customers and the stranger's table, the man stirred, faintly, perhaps aware he was being approached. It was a small tremble of his outstretched arm, a slow rock of his hips in his seat. Garann paused and watched as a bleary eye popped open to stare directly at him, a blue as bright and muddled as the frozen water of Bitler's Pond.

It seemed a tremendous struggle as the man lifted his head, neck searching for balance. A metal tankard rolled off the tabletop to give a dull clank as it struck the floorboards. "Can you liken a woman's breasts to the moon?" the stranger asked, his voice wavering from too long in drink. Garann shook his head, uncertain in his reply. "Her nipples to the sea?" Garann thought for a moment on that one, wondering if it was actually a possibility, then shook his head as he decided it was not. "I can," the drunk man muttered hotly. "But I cannot, for the life of me . . ." He stopped and blinked in what seemed an effort to coalesce his thoughts. He lifted an arm and gently brought it down atop the table in a frustrated motion. ". . . can't," he continued, "describe her eyes." His mouth scrunched up in a mass of lip and chin. New hairs hinted at a beard.

"Who?" Garann dared to ask. He was moved by the man's earnestness. And a little more than interested in the drunken stupor before him. He'd seen men taken by their drinks, but they were often slumped upon their tables, snoring. Or they would wander toward the corners and attempt to relieve themselves before Tuud and his cudgel provided them with a swift and discourteous exit.

"Who?" the stranger questioned back, appalled at the fact he would have to explain. "Her! Doesn't that tell you all?" He tried to straighten himself, tilted back in his chair, then swiftly gripped the edge of the table and steadied the swaying of his slender frame.

Garann shook his head.

"Have you seen the careful manner in which deer drink from a lake at sunrise? That is the way she moves. Have you ever heard the sound a shooting star makes as it crosses a cloudy sky? That is the way she breathes. Have you, boy, ever stood beneath a waterfall and drank yourself sick on whiteberry wine? *No*? Well then, perhaps you do not know her." He raised a single brow, suddenly curious.

"Sit," the stranger said as he gestured to the seat across his table. Garann accepted. "How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"Ah. A ripe age. Fresh for the picking."

Garann squirmed a bit as he tried riddling out the man's meaning. He was certain there was a suggestion of something inappropriate, but couldn't find it.

"A tale, then," the stranger said stiffly. "From the silver-lined lips of I, Andore, the poet who cannot summon words." He turned and looked out of over the floor. Raising a hand, he shouted, "Drinks!"

Garann glanced out over the gathered. A few men turned their heads but quickly averted their eyes once they found the source of the voice. He suddenly felt ill at ease. But a poet! His heart jumped at the opportunity before him, while at the same time wrinkling with embarrassment.

“I write,” Garann said.

“You?” Andore said.

Garann nodded. Then his voice flew from his lips. “I know more words than all the boys in the village together. Master Uthen lets me sweep his floor in exchange for teaching me. He used to live in a real city, and he went to a real school. I’ll write plays and they’ll be performed by troupers all through the country. They’ll even be played for the king himself.”

Andore cocked his head to one side. “That is an ambitious undertaking. One better left to men distrustful of coin.”

Garann didn’t follow. By his dress, Andore was obviously wealthy. But Garann chose not to press the issue. Andore’s tongue was growing a bit sharp, no need to provide a place for its sticking. “Why are you drinking alone?” Garann decided to ask.

“Eh? Alone?” Andore appraised the common room, seeming to notice for the first time the measured distance of the other patrons. “I’ll be,” he said to himself as his eyes continued to scan the room. He turned back to Garann, eyes heavy as a summer evening beneath those dark brows. “Misery isn’t the most amicable of companions.” Sensing Garann’s growing puzzlement, Andore leaned conspiratorially over the table, bringing his face within inches of Garann’s, then whispered so only Garann could hear. “I’ve seen the loveliest woman to taste breath. And they refuse to take part in my emptiness, my curse. It’s that, or they can’t stand the smell of—” he looked at the room and raised his voice to a shout “—divine shit!” His eyes lingered on the patrons. Garann could feel his neck warming. Andore turned back to Garann and said, matter-of-factly, “I was shit upon by the gods. Can you smell it?” he asked gravely. He sniffed the air. “Smells a bit like adleberry wine. Figures.”

A sense of unease came upon Garann. He knew people were watching them, laughing at them. Why had he wandered over to sit with this man, with this drunk? Hadn’t he learned his lesson before, when that noble from up north almost stabbed him for being a “Nosey little inbred”?

Garann’s mouth opened to excuse himself, but Andore spoke quickly, intimately. “Illiat, who danced at Bathen’s tomb until the gods were pleased and returned the young warrior’s breath. Illiat, who the world gave a city.” Each time he said her name his voice took on a new quality, a new strength, as though he’d never touched a drink in all his life. “Illiat,” he said once more, “the woman no human hand has ever touched without being burnt away.” He lifted his palms and glared at them, openly furious at their mortal shortcomings.

“It is as though my organs have been removed,” he said as he lowered his hands from before his blue eyes. There was a tortured silence crossing his face. “I have no lungs, so cannot breath. I have no stomach, so I cannot eat. And my heart . . . it is still there.” He placed an open hand upon his chest, pressing in the fabric of his cloak. “I can occasionally feel it beating.” He paused to listen, turning an ear just so. “But it is a small thing in lieu of the clangor it once made.”

He pulled back from the table, face quizzical. “The bark of an oak tree after a summer storm. Is that what her eyes are like?” He shook his head. “Overturned soil. Not the black kind. Rather, the kind that has harbored crops, that has known the struggles of families, that has felt the rough drag of a plow and the strong hooves of horses. Are her eyes that color? Damn it! No!” He thumped the table with a fist. “Drinks!” he yelled out once more.

Garann could feel the poet’s frustration as though it were sparks from an unwieldy flame. This inability to describe a woman’s eyes was a poker stabbing the roaring fire of his inadequacy. There was usually only one solution to such a situation: more wood for the fire. So Garann decided to toss a few logs of his own into the conversation.

“I’ve seen a leather strap worn thin through much use,” Garann said. “It was a burnt umber, like the thick roots of a mulberry.” Andore opened his mouth to speak, but Garann raised a hand, stalling the reply. “The strap was old and supple, but still it stung. It was sharp, and moved about the body with a terrible will. I’m haunted by that strap, by the smell of its oil, and the tears it could pull from my eyes.”

“Is that what it is, then? Her eyes are like a band of leather that’s taken to the backsides of obstinate youths?” He cracked a smile and barked a sharp laugh. “You’re right.” He laughed again, long and blustering. “You are damned right, boy.”

Ree, a brown-haired serving girl, came up to the table, two metal tankards balancing upon a tray. She set them down and passed a startled eye at Andore’s slow giggling.

“Thank you, Ree” Garann said as he lifted one of the drinks and took a tentative sniff. Wine. Rich adleberry wine, the type few could afford. Garann took a quick drink. The taste filled his mouth, and his head swam at the medley of fruits and spices.

Andore had gathered himself, and his breath, and lifted his drink in cheers. “To men and words, and the employing of both to know women.”

Garann lifted his tankard and the two mugs met over the table with a soft ring. Andore pulled his drink back and took a deep draught. Garann did the same, choking a bit as his swallow was a bit more ambitious than his throat could handle.

“And wondering how the pleasures of life are often followed by pain.” Andore gave a rueful smile at his musing and downed another mouthful. His eyes then turned toward a near window, admiring the block of night framed by soft linen curtains. Watching Andore’s face, the longing of his expression, Garann sensed the man was watching events happening miles away. No, not miles, years. Or at least years in terms of what the poet’s heart had come to know.

END

Commentary: Andore’s drunken stupor gave me this story. I was sitting down one day, just scribbling out some random lines, mostly passages of description. The one that stood out to me

immediately was one of a poet draped over a table, weary with drink. Almost as soon as I jotted that passage down I knew where the story would go. This would be about a man pining for a woman he couldn't have, a woman so beautiful and intoxicating that the poet had no choice but to drown his emotions with alcohol.

I'm sure you noticed the reference to Andore and Illiat in Jar of Hearts. That particular tidbit was added later, after this story was written, as I was searching for the title of a play for Dudden to brag about.

Andore and Illiat

The world was a long, red-brown hell. Andore knew that, and feared such knowledge, even before slipping free of the un-dreaming sleep of wine.

He forced one eye to a slit, cautious of the thin sunlight coming in through the curtained window beside his bed. He groaned, rolled over, and pulled the woolen blanket over his face. Light was never a pleasant thing to Andore's mornings; his nights' dedicated inebriation saw to that.

As he lay there, head pulsing with the beginnings of a raging headache, he reached for the deep sadness filling his breast. It was there, waiting, a squatting darkness that stank of agony. The sorrow was a special kind of torture, one he willed only on himself. It was loneliness and longing and futility all bunched together, a collaboration that had Andore curled in on himself beneath his blanket.

Eyes closed, he watched her dance inside his head, a child of the new world, an untamed wildress that made ghosts of mortal women. Illiat, a creature destined to drive him mad like she'd done so many men throughout the ages.

Even in memory, her beauty was fast and sharp. Her limbs were long and supple, the skin pale by millennia spent dancing under the heavens. She moved as though donning slippers of air. But there was nothing upon her feet, much to the delight of grasses and dirt and rock. Her hair was colored with sunlight, shot through with glittering beams, and when she would move, her head would shimmer as though the tresses were braided with the finest, cleanest diamonds. Firm breasts hung upon her chest, rounded and strong. They moved with her as she rolled and turned and swayed, accentuating her lithe frame.

And her face, lovely as adleberry wine was sweet. Cheeks glowing, nose small and straight, eyes . . . Andore could see them clearly. She wore sunbursts in her brown eyes, and the contrast was haunting. He had thought they were the color of tree bark after rain. But that wasn't entirely right. He'd called them overturned soil, hearty and full of life. That too fell flat. Then, last night, the tavern's sweeping boy Garann, who'd found Andore in a less than cognizant state, had offered they were the color of a leather strap, quick and wicked. Andore had readily agreed. But he'd been drunk then.

Her eyes were all those things, and still so much more. They pierced him now, watching him from a lost time, from a current nightmare.

Tossing the cover away, he found it wet with tears. He batted at his cheeks petulantly and greeted the small morning light with a snarl.

“You are jealous,” he said, “because you can’t shine as bright as her. Cannot warm a heart as she does. So you pester me!” He growled the last, lifting his feather pillow and throwing it at the window. It struck the white curtains tenderly and sent them fluttering.

He moved atop the bed like a broken toy, the hinges weakened or useless, the paint old and worn and chipped. Placing his bare feet upon the wood floor of his small rented room, he lowered his head, cradling it with his palms. He pressed knuckles into his eyes, clearing the remains of heartbreak, then ran fingers through his dark hair, straightening himself to a respectable degree.

“This is not a device of man,” he said to himself as the pain within his breast sought to explode. “This sting was no mortal mind’s doing.”

There were times when he was uncertain whether or not he would survive the yearning in his heart, the deep ache that filled him with each breath taken. A full year had passed since he’d found her in the Eastern Wilds, and yet he’d not found a single day where she backed from his thoughts. A single day! Hours could not pass that did not see him pining for her. Stories abounded of her curse, of the beauty she was that followed men for the rest of their days. Those stories had become Andore’s reality.

“Balain shambled across the face of the earth,” Andore whispered to himself while tugging the wrinkles from his gray tunic, “eating and drinking only when hunger and thirst pulled his thoughts from her. He drowned himself in the Far Ocean.

“Judei would cut himself, lining his arms and legs, opening his face and chest, all in an attempt to outweigh the deep pain for Illiat that drew him from the eyes of men. He died in a pool of his own blood, of his own doing.” The names were familiar to him, a recitation that he followed religiously. There were more, of course, but he only said the two in the mornings--the others being hardly palatable at the youth of day.

He had resolved that he would not end like those men. He would not grow so weak and weary that life abandoned him.

He would not allow death to let him forget her.

With a tired motion he tugged his boots on. He was always tired now. It was his dreams, he knew. In them he chased her through wildflower fields, danced with her in the false illumination of night, and made love with her beside blue rivers and vaulting mountains. And they sapped his strength so that upon waking his muscles were as granite blocks, almost worthless in the locomotion of a human body. At times he shambled, much like he pictured Balain had. But he never cut himself. He had a better remedy than that, a far more pleasurable means in which to blunt the hollowness of her distance.

At the foot of his bed stood a dented metal flagon. He reached down and lifted it, feeling the weight of warm mulled wine inside. Pulling it to his lips he drank deeply, forcing the spices down his throat. Red rivulets spilled out around his mouth. He pulled the flagon back and drew a deep breath, choking on the taste of air. Could he but constantly drink.

He felt his arm shake, and glanced down at the pitcher held in a tight grip. The red wine inside rippled. It was like staring at blood. Had Judei seen this very thing as he opened his veins to empty his life out around him?

The flagon fell from his fingers, struck the wooden floor, and toppled. Adleberry wine rolled out, pooling along the slats. Then, slowly, the liquid drained through the cracks to the room below. Andore's arm still shook, an uncomfortable shiver that touched his breast.

"Balain could do little other than fawn over her," he said, watching the wine. "Judei died because of her. What chance do I have?" His drink was smeared across the lifeless wood, an undefined shape, a twisted blob of chance. "I'm as erratic as spilled wine," he said, clutching his arms tight against his chest, eyes searching for some recognizable pattern within the liquid.

Why? he asked himself. *Why did they suffer so? Why do I let this be?* But he knew. There was no shaking her. Illiat, who stained men's minds. "What if I went back to her?" he thought out loud. It was madness. It was illogical. But so was this adoration owning him. Illiat was a wild creature, a child of the fey, a daughter of gods. But the idea stuck. "What if I captured her as she's captured me?" It was her nearness he craved, that ability to touch her that he was presently denied. Of course, her touch was fatal to mortal flesh. But a quiver awoke inside him, a timid hope that lit his soul afire. "I will go to her," he concluded, ignoring the impossibility of the enterprise. "I will take Illiat as my own." It was an unattainable goal. Illiat wasn't easily found, she was happened upon; a serendipitous encounter. *If it takes the rest of my life, I will find her again.* And, deep down, where common sense couldn't reach, he knew he would die if ever that goal was achieved.

He rose from the bed, a sudden verve to his motions. After tucking his pant legs into his boots he left the room, shouldering his faded satchel that held his cloak, and descended the tight stairway leading to the common room.

The Bear and Lion was empty of patrons this early in the morning. Though whether because it was too early to rise or everyone had already risen and left to go about their business, Andore couldn't tell. He'd been granted a room on the second floor, a gracious gesture since the lone inn of the small town was brimming with cantankerous travelers.

There were but two occupants in the once-packed room, seated together at a long oak table near the quiet hearth. Andore recognized the boy from last night, Garann, the future playwright who had shared Andore's wine and tale of woe. The man huddled with the youth was the tavern owner Master Uthen. With a thick finger he jabbed the page of an open book that lay upon the table. Garann leaned in close, peering hard at the page. The boy shook his head. Master Uthen gave him a sound slap. Garann's heavy brown hair jumped at the blow, and the boy cowered into his shoulders. Andore marched across the floor.

"Breakfast?" Andore asked amicably as he neared, gaining Master Uthen's attention. The robust man glanced up from the table, frowning with the whole of his pudgy face. He twisted upon the

bench, facing Andore. The apron stretched across his paunch was a dingy yellow splotched in browns and greens.

“An hour ago,” he said shortly. “No doubt cold by now. Probably a bit fly-ridden, too.” He swatted at something before his face.

Andore gave a smile. “Nothing like a few flies to spice up a meal. Besides,” here he took a seat next to Garann and gave the boy a wink, “I’ve seen Bandorian tribesmen eat a paste made from crushed flies. I figure, if one people can subsist on such a diet, why can’t I?”

“It won’t be free,” Master Uthen said.

“Never expected it.” Andore pulled a silver coin from his pocket and slid it across the table. “Some wine, as well? Adleberry.”

Master Uthen peered suspiciously at the coin, as though it were somehow different from all the others Andore had passed out last night. With a *hurmph* he nodded, took the coin and stood. “Keep your nose to that page, boy,” he said to Garann as he moved to retrieve Andore’s meal.

Once the man passed through the door behind the bar, Andore reached for the open book. “What do we have here?” he asked to himself as he pulled it close.

“*The Trials*,” Garann replied, almost wearily.

Andore took in the page Master Uthen had been so insistent upon. “*The Trials*?” Andore said mockingly, emphasizing the obvious significance to which the book owned its content.

“Of King Bathen and Queen Yildain,” Garann said.

“*The Thousand Swinging Men*,” Andore said with a nod. *Bathen, whose life Illiat danced for*. He bit his tongue to silence the thought.

“Is that a story about the trials?” Garann asked.

Andore shook his head. “No, that is the *reason* for the trials.” He skimmed the opened page. “How much of this have you read?” It was nonsense.

“Not much. Master Uthen was just touching upon it. He wanted me to understand that King Bathen and Queen Yildain had been given unfair trial.” Garann pulled the book back from Andore’s hand. “See, here.” He pointed to a paragraph. “The magistrate had refused to let either of them speak. Both were bound in heavy chains, and their mouths closed by metal bands.”

“And who should have stepped in to see the trial performed to the standards of the law?”

“Well, because the king and queen had no heir, the Council should have been in charge.”

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