

The Bear

When she was young, Luka walked the canals that fed into the wide harbor. She pulled a small cart, like all the other children and like her sister before her, and sold clams and mussels pulled from the stone wharfs of the city. When the cart emptied, she ran with the other children up and down the narrow walkways along the water and they dared one another. They tested their bravery, their daring, and their charm in the way the young do: through dares and taunts. Essie could run the fastest and tiny Lyn was always able to beg a treat off shopkeepers. Benna had the prettiest voice and Ves could lift the most, but Luka could climb the highest.

Luka argued it was not her, but the city which lent itself so easily to ascension. The walls were full of holes perfect for narrow feet and strong fingers. The sun baked the bricks to an inviting warmth. The whole city begged for someone to see it the way it saw itself, from above, dotted with plump domes and high towers with ribbons of water cutting across its face.

Once, Ves pulled out the yellow tie that bound Luka's hair and refused to give it back until she accepted his dare. She cried and swatted at him, but he was much taller and held her back with his outstretched arm. Luka relented. He took her by the shoulder and pointed to the silver gleam of the dome crowning the Temple of the Bear. He dared her to climb up and bring him back a piece of silver.

Luka's hands shook as she approached the temple. It was placed on its own island at the joint of three large canals and she felt as if the great stone bears that guarded its bridge watched her approach. As she climbed, her hands steadied. She shimmied up a fluted pillar to the cornice. She wrapped her skinny arms around the legs and necks of the gods and goddesses frozen in sculpture, apologizing to the winged man she stood on to reach the lip of the cupola.

When she reached the dome, she was panting and her tunic clung to her with sweat. The wind off the harbor was stronger high up and her hair whipped around her face. Luka slid her hand under a tile, wriggling it free. Underneath the sliver leaf was the dull red of clay.

She made her way back down, stepping lightly on the stone work, but when her feet met the cobbles, she found Ves gone. Her sister, Mai, stood waiting for her instead. She scolded Luka as they marched home, the cart trundling behind her. That night, in the small flat they separated into rooms with sheets, Luka polished the tile with a piece of cloth. The thick clay was cool to the touch and she could feel the chill of it through the rag. When Mai saw her with the tile, she slapped Luka's hands and cursed her for stealing from a goddess. Luka recoiled and the tile dropped to the ground and shattered.

In the morning, after Luka braided her hair and tied it with twine, her sister wrapped the tile in Luka's favorite scarf, a length of green silk as shiny as Mai's dark hair. Mai took away the girl's sandals and scrubbed her feet raw. When she stepped outside, the rough paving stones scraped her bare feet. Mai lead her to the Way of Gods, a twisting series of roads and bridges leading past each temple, and watched as Luka joined the devout on their pilgrimage through the city cradling the tile in her hands. It was past noon when Luka stumbled into the Temple of the Bear. Her feet were cracked and caked in filth and left tracks on the gleaming steps.

She had visited the small shrines of the minor deities before, but it had not prepared her for the small forest of the temple. A ring of large white pillars carved into trees reached toward the convex ceiling, their fanned branches crisscrossing over a field of painted stars. Luka itched to brush the ceiling and trace the constellations. She had never seen them so clear, unblemished by the light and smoke of the city, but she did not know much about climbing trees, marble or otherwise. Soldiers milled around the open spaces, asking priests in colored robes to bless their

swords with the strength of the goddess. Some visitors were bare foot, like her, and asked for mercy. All of them left tokens, small gifts for the bear and those serving her.

In the center there was another tree in place of an altar, one made of copper and bronze with silver veins and leaves like gold. As she approached, she noticed it was not a tree made of metal. It was a tree covered in it. Coins covered every inch of the tree, hammered between the wedges of bark and flattened against the trunk. In some places the coins were laid three or four deep, one layered over another like petals. In a bole where two branches separated from the trunk there was a relief carving of a bear standing on its hind legs. It was the only place where the wood showed. Luka reached up and set the tile in the tree bole under the bear's fore paw.

"I'm sorry I stole," she said. "And I'm sorry I brought it back broken. That part was Mai's fault, really."

She chewed her lip. She knew less about temples than she did about trees, but they did not seem like a good place to lay blame. But the bear had a kind face and did not appear offended. She was a goddess of forgiveness as well as strength.

As she grew, Luka forgot about the tile. She became too big to pull a cart through the streets and followed her sister into the seaming shops where she mended piles of other people's clothes. The work made her legs restless and her pricked fingers left dots of blood on the fabric. She was sent to city fountains to run water in heavy pails to people's houses, but the yoke made her shoulders droop and her fast steps sloshed water onto the street. One day, when Luka refused to get out of bed to work, Mai pulled her out the door by the arm, telling her not to come back without employment.

Instead, Luka learned the roofs of the city. She learned the fastest way to the docks was to cut through the River District where the ornate houses of the wealthy provided the most room to maneuver. She learned how the people on the streets beneath rarely looked up. She learned that she was not the only one who lived this way.

There were packs of people that moved above the streets like she did, vagrants who lived in the upper levels of abandoned buildings and scavenged what they needed from open windows. Many were criminals, extensions of the gangs that fought each other in the alleys and water ways below. Some were families living on the margins of the city for reasons they kept to themselves. Few were like Luka, who moved independently of gang boundaries drifting between the roofs and the streets to scrape together a life.

One of these few was Boen. Boen told her how he ran messages over the roofs between the guard stations throughout the city as they walked together through the night markets, the heat reducing the stars to warm smudges of white. She sat with him on the hard paving stones in front of a vendor's stall as they ate dripping noodles with their fingers and he told her how he wanted to become a paladin, a defender of the realm. Luka drank the hot broth and tried to picture Boen's face under a helm. Boen told her many things, but the most important was that people pay in silver for secrets.

Secrets were not hard to find from the roofs of the city. She found them unfolding beneath her feet or in the words that fluttered out open windows. She caught them on the wind as they flew from people's mouths and parceled them into facts. A ship of smuggled anodyne was coming on the night tide. The owner of a tavern near the southern gate lined his pockets by selling girls out of a back room. The boy wasn't kidnapped; he ran away and had taken work on

a barge. She spent her days walking the city listening at open windows and watching the coins of the rich fall into the pockets of criminals. The city ran on secrets.

When dusk settled heavily on the water and the moon opened its giant, unblinking eye Luka met Boen in the night market. The two of them walked arm and arm through the night markets, the air humid and thick with the shouts of merchants. Occasionally someone passed close to them pressing a coin in Luka's palm and she would answer their question with her collection of whispers.

It did not make her rich, but it kept her fed and there were no needles to prick her fingers or heavy pails to slump her shoulders. It continued on this way until the end of the summer rains when the roofs were slick and wet.

She ran through the Locks, an old section of the city where giant stone gates changed the water level of the canals to match that of the river they flowed from. The rain fell in a steady drizzle and her hair clung to her cheeks. Night was falling, colder than it had been in the previous months. The change of seasons brought its own problems for her business. The night markets would close for the season. She would need a new place to sell her whispers until the southern winds brought the heat of summer back to the city.

Luka traipsed across the roof of a small granary, making a list of the taverns that would not usher her out for selling at their tables. She gathered her speed to make the leap to the next building when she saw a figure that made her stop short. A man pulled himself over the edge of the building, blocking Luka's path. She slowed to a stop. The man was named Asad, a runner for the gang that controlled the streets below and wanted to expand to expand into the roofs as well. They tried to impose a toll on anyone passing through the Locks. Luka had been hassled by them before, but none of their runners had been fast enough to catch her.

He took a hesitant step towards her. He had not learned the city as Luka had and was still uncomfortable moving across the tops of buildings. "This is our territory, girlie." A small blade slid from his sleeve, as long as a pinkie finger but well honed. The kind thieves used to nick purses from the belts of passersby. "We've told you to either stay out or pay the privilege of passing."

Luka moved a hand towards her waist, placing it over the purse tied under her sash.

"We both know you're good for it." He smiled, showing browned teeth. "Selling everyone's business to pay for your supper."

"How I run my business is none of yours" Luka replied. "Let me past or I'll pass along some secrets about you."

Asad lunged toward her, slashing with his knife. She ducked under the path of the blade, careful of her movements on the wet slate of the roof. He slashed again and she caught him by the arm. Her fist connected with his elbow, bending it at an odd angle and making him drop his blade. His other hand grabbed at her sash and yanked. The fabric ripped and her purse was upended, coins bouncing on the hard slate. Luka wobbled as her balance shifted and a quick shove from Asad knocked her to her side. He scrambled to grab the spilled coins. She aimed a kick at his face. She felt her sole connect with his face and his nose crunched under her heel.

The impact made his head snap back and he reeled towards the edge of the building. As he fought to remain on his footing, one of the tiles beneath him cracked. Luka watched him disappear under the edge of the roof, flailing uselessly against the empty air.

She climbed as fast as she dared down the side of the granary. When her feet touched the cobbles of the alley, she found the broken body of a man. Asad's legs bent at unnatural angles and his eyes stared up at nothing. A red pool was forming under his head, running along the

cracks of the cobblestone toward Luka. On the ground near his hand was a coin, a cut copper worth less than its mint surrounded by broken pieces of slate. She picked it up and held it in her fist, the flat edge biting into her palm.

She did not go to the market that night. When she did not appear, Boen grew worried. He found her in her flat, an attic with a window that let out onto the roof and a mound of pillows she made into a bed. She sat in the center of the pile, her knees to her chest and a copper in her hand.

“What happened?” He knelt beside her and listened as she told him of her encounter with Asad.

“I murdered him.” She turned the copper over in her hands, fiddling with it as she spoke. “I’m a murderer.”

“No. Luka, you are not.”

She glared at him as tears threatened to spill over. “This morning a man was alive, and now he is not because of me.”

“A man who was a criminal.” Boen stilled her hands, covering them with his own. “A man who attacked you. If anything you have done the city a service.”

Boen stayed with Luka, her head resting on his lap. He wound his fingers around her hair and drifted off to sleep. Luka waited until she heard the heavy even breath of sleep. She slipped under his arm and out the window.

She walked the roofs until she saw the blush of dawn over the water, not stopping until her legs burned and her arms ached. Her hands fumbled and felt heavy as she pulled herself over

a ridge of wooden shingles. Beneath her, where the canals met the harbor she heard the shouts of children selling mussels and clams out of small carts. The activity of the docks made her pause and she watched the movements the workers, running between ships hauling cargo scheduled to leave on the morning tide. Her thumb moved absent mindedly over the flat edge of the copper she kept in her pocket.

She turned to look out over the city. She could smell the smoke of morning fires being lit. The streets were still quiet and mostly empty except for the Way of Gods, where she could just make out the colored robes of dedicantes and the clusters of pilgrims starting their journey. The glinting domes of the temples were rose colored in the morning light.

Tired and bitter, she returned home to find Boen gone. Luka buried herself in pillows and fell asleep. She slept through the day, on occasion breaching through dreams of stars to surface in a half-waking where in a blur of restlessness she would find herself in a forest of white trees.

When she woke in the early hours of the morning, her hair was damp with sweat and clung to her neck. She sat up, her limbs feeling wooden and graceless. Luka dressed slowly, her movements clumsy. She struggled into a tunic and belted it to her waist with a yellow scarf. As she stepped into her breeches, her balance abandoned her and she had to catch herself from toppling to the floorboards. When she left her shoes remained by the door.

She moved through the dark city quietly, the only noise being the soft padding of her feet. The cobble stones were cold beneath her and slick with dew. Mist hung over the water ways, raising gooseflesh on her skin. The buildings looked down at her as she passed them, appearing more imposing from below than from above. Luka could not remember a time when she felt so small.

Inside the temple, not much had changed. The trees had not grown and the stars had not shifted like the ones above the dome. No soldiers cluttered the rotunda with thoughts of battle and bravery, and the only one to ask for compassion was her. Even the priests were unseen. She weighed the coin in her palm as she walked towards the coin scaled tree functioning as an altar.

“I’ve asked you for forgiveness before.” Luka’s voice was quiet, barely above a whisper. She did not know if this was how you addressed a goddess, or if words were needed at all. The carved bear did not stir in response. “But this is something I cannot return.”

She searched for a space on the tree where she could see a gap between the coins. Her eyes traced the lines up toward the branches. The metal was oldest near the roots where some of the coins had deteriorated into brittle circles of rust. The trunk was tightly packed with leaflets of copper and silver, a few flecks of gold peeking through. Where the branches separated, the placement was thinner.

From the base of the tree, Luka picked up a piece of cracked terracotta the size of her palm. On one side were flecks of silver leaf rubbed away with time. She reached for a low branch and pulled herself up, her arms protesting. The coins were sleek under her fingers and she feared she might slip. She sat on the limb, twisting to face the trunk, and wedged the cut copper into a gap in the bark. Using the corner of the terracotta tile, she hammered the coin in with the others. She stepped away from the tree and her apology blended in with the regrets and wishes of the rest.