

Backstory (Monk)

The poem spins before you. Morning's first sunbeam through the window of your father's workshop dances along the verses you've written in clay. Your fingers swim through the rhymes and rhythms of each stanza in perfect time with the rising and falling of your foot as it guides the lever spinning the wheel.

"Snas I told you to rest this morning what are y-..."

You turn and see a face you've known for 16 years, but now can hardly recognize. It's your father's face. The face that - in this same workshop - you've seen wear every possible expression of disappointment, frustration, and strained patience as you've rinsed clay from your eyes after the thoughts rambling through your twitching foot caused you to spin the wheel too fast, scrubbed soot off of every bench, table and tool after letting the kiln run too hot, or smeared the paint you were trying to remove after another botched brushstroke. The wheel stops. The poem. .. *your* poem ... comes to rest. Your father's face remains almost entirely frozen in this strange new expression, the only movement that of his eyes darting between you and what you've made.

"You need to go."

You float off of your stool, past your father, and out of the workshop. As you open the front door of the modest cabin your mother and father built years before you were born, you feel a velvet warmth ripple through your scales. As the sensation reaches your toes you follow it back up through your legs, torso, chest, and finally out your nostrils, just as another wave flows in. When your mother places the porridge, egg and toast you've eaten every morning for as long as you can remember on the table in front of you, the first bite, and every one after that radiates that same warmth until you feel almost infused with it. You can still hear the ceaseless cautions and concerns of your mother's timid anxiety that are the daily tradition of these meals, but somehow, when usually this barrage of worry would make eating breakfast a gruelling battle against your clenched jaw... today...it just kind of...washes over you...almost *into* you. Even as you notice your mother speaking a bit more quickly, wringing her hands a bit more frantically than usual, the frustration, boredom and annoyance you'd usually feel are absorbed by the care emanating from your morning meal and transformed into understanding, appreciation, gratitude.

You float across the table to embrace her, and float out the door.

You didn't always used to float.

As you continue over the dirt path that connects the many homes and alleys of your neighbourhood to the main road, the rising sounds of your hometown steadily stirring awake begin to blend with your memory of the night before. Chirping birds and rustling leaves become the chimes and whispers of medallions and shimmering fabrics. Loose stones and gravel underfoot scatter and skip in time with mallets, bows, and picks playing instruments you've never seen and sounds you've never heard before. A dancing couple glides past you in an ocean of colour, or was that just the curtain overhang of a shop being unfurled for shade? You hop out of the way of a rickshaw headed for the morning market, and as you catch the eye of the passing mule, it's pupil becomes a thin vertical slit, it's fur now orange and striped, the tongue that gently nips at your outstretched fingers giving the lie to the threat of it's foot-

long front teeth.

Why is it that this morning the streets of the Pomarj, bustling as ever with carts, carriages, barkers, busybodies and buskers, doesn't feel like its usual swarm of chaos. It feels like a dance. You step and sway with its rhythms, and a plume of smoke rising from a nearby bakery curls into the same shape embroidered in the open flap of the tent. That's where the scent was coming from. The one that wafted through your open window. The one that drew you out of bed and through the night until you could just make out the flicker of torches and campfires through the trees. The one that kept the constant warnings of your mother silent in your mind as you continued onward towards the tent.

As you enter, you catch yourself just before tripping over the first step of the grand staircase leading to the monastery. Taking a beat to regain your balance reminds you that you're not actually floating, it's just felt that way since you left the tent last night. As you float up the steps, you notice the urns that run along their outer edge - the same ones you've passed every day since you started your training here. As the clouds overhead sift rays of sun into ripples across the beautifully crafted ceramics, the paint seems to come alive, and animate the story you know so well.

It's the story of your people. The horrors and shame of their past as servants of Iuz. The willing among your ancestors whipping the resistant into submission or death. Pupils dilating as they consume the forbidden root, and their terror is transformed into an ecstasy of rage and blood lust. Halfway up the steps, an urn divided in two shows on one half the waves of death that some of your elders can still recall, and on the other, a sun beginning to rise over a burned and barren land. Then the rebuilding, the redemption, the rising sun of the monastery you're currently climbing towards, and the final urn, completely blank, in the very middle of the top of the steps. The promise of an unwritten future. You know this one best of all. You remember watching your father make it, as he did all the others in the years before your birth.

As you place your palm upon the cool clay, you notice a movement out of the corner of your eye. A black tunic, just like the one you're wearing, being anxiously tightened and matted into place. You slowly turn and see your friends and classmates stretching, jogging in place, meditating, pacing...normally everyone would be shuffling into class just about now...and the only one looking this nervous would be you...what's everyone so worked up about...Your father's voice echoes into the front of your mind "Snas I told you rest this morning..." you see your mother's hands wringing more intensely than usual.

Final trials.

Today.

"Damsu? Snas Damsu?"

Right now.

Your master's door floats towards you. Well...at least you're still floating...In fact...you know that you more than anyone should be beyond freaking out right now. You prepared like crazy for every single trial since you began your training, and even though you always (just barely) passed, each one ended with your uniform absolutely drenched in sweat. How are you even still conscious after not thinking about it once from the second you woke up until literally this exact moment?

This exact moment, in which you're holding a pose longer and with less effort than ever before. This exact moment when you're switching stances in motions more fluid, focused and balanced than those you've seen from even the best in your class. This exact moment in which meditations and mantras that you could almost never hold onto are flowing in, around, and through you. This exact moment that you're receiving, redirecting, and reading the footwork and feints of your master as you spar in the final trial.

With every step of the dance you watch the astonishment grow in his eyes. The same eyes that always gave the kindness and encouragement you needed when the difficulties of your training, the disappointment of your father, or the worries of your mother became more than you could've handled alone. The eyes that never flinched or furrowed when you fell. The astonishment becomes joy, becomes pride and there it is. You've seen this look exactly once before. It's the look you saw on your father's face this morning. The dance ends, you close your eyes, and exhale for what feels like the first time in 16 years.

You open your eyes, and see...

Pain?

"You have consumed the forbidden root".

For the first time all day you feel the full weight of your feet on the floor as the pain in your master's eyes turns definitively, resolutely, to anger. The forbidden...?

Back in the tent, cloaked figures carry small kettles glazed with patterns that seem to blend into the surrounding haze, as they fill cups which they hand to the many gathered who graciously receive them. As one is placed in your hand, you recognize the sharp, almost piercing yet somehow velvety texture of the aroma that drew you here. It fills your nostrils, your throat, and, as it reaches your lungs, echoes into the clear chamber of your mind. As you take your first sip, you're filled with a calm and lightness you've never known before, and by the time the cup is empty, you're floating. You float back to your father's workshop, place a mound of clay on the wheel, and begin your poem.

"It is on your breath"

You're not floating anymore.

You watch the rest happen as if to someone else. Your parent's shock and terror as your master delivers the news without looking at you once. The long silent walk home. The meal eaten in the solitude of your room as you hear your mother, through sobs, trying to convince your father that surely an exception can be made, surely they need not adhere so strictly to the customs.

After a sleepless night, you rise out of bed, into the first day of your exile. This is, has always been, the sentence for anyone found consuming the root. As you prepare your things and put on your clothes, you notice a weight in your pocket. You reach in, and pull out a small, soft cloth bag. As you turn the pouch in your fingers, you detect the faintest whiff of that now very familiar scent. So much of the past 48 hours have been a blur, so you can't quite remember, but someone must have handed this to you as you floated through the tent. You hear your bedroom door creak open behind you and quickly shove the pouch back into your pocket, just as your mother enters. Not that she would've seen anyway...since she's making a very clear and strained effort to look every single place she possibly can that isn't at you.

Your parents remain behind the door as you step out.

“Snas.”

You turn to see your father back away from the door, turn, and disappear into the house. He returns a moment later holding an envelope with a seal you've never seen before. The ink is iron grey, and you see two laurels encircling a pair of outstretched wings.

“Go West. Follow this.”

He hands you the envelope, and a piece of parchment with what looks to be a crudely drawn map.

“When you arrive, present this.”

He indicates the envelope.

“And this.”

He hands you your poem written in clay. As you muster the courage to meet his eye, you can't be certain, but you think...for the slightest moment...you catch that same look from yesterday morning. Your father steps back, and calmly, but firmly clasps your mother's arm, draws her back as well, and closes the door.

A moment later you see the drapes close behind the window, and the feeling lands. It's time. You turn your back on your home of 16 years, and take the first step of your new life as an exile. You walk out of your neighbourhood, out of your town, and out of the Pomarj, until it disappears beyond the horizon.