

The Maidens Stolen Away: Obsidian Damascus

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West of the old capital there lain a ruined cloister, in which stood an enormous pagoda, several hundred stories high. Its very top could house only three or five people and could only be discerned from below by the keenest of eyes.

Not far from it, the beautiful Yun Luanling continued her directionless flight; without destination and without purpose. For weeks, flight was all she knew as she fled from those who pursued for what they had trapped inside her. She ran from her hunger, ran from her thirst, ran from her fatigue, and ran from the knowledge that she was affected by these things no longer.

She grabbed at her head as a great wind crushed into her, screwing her eyes shut as the paper talisman anchored to her head fluttered violently about. Only when the gale ceased, did she open her eyes and find herself atop the pagoda. A man, in the fashion of a gentleman, stood at her side.

His disposition was polite, disarmingly amiable. He declared their meeting fated, that it was their own Mandate of Heaven that would have them very happy...if only she chose to marry him. Luanling refused. He smiled kindly and said that until she changed her mind, she was to remain atop the pagoda. Then, he produced enough bread and wine to satisfy her hunger and thirst before leaving her completely alone. Luanling ate the bread and drank the wine, for that was what she was still familiar with at least.

Day after day, he would come to ply for her hand in marriage and every day, she refused. He removed portions of the stairs to prevent her from climbing down and would carefully close any opening in the pagoda-top with stone tiles before he left. He always came with food and drink to sustain her health, but also brought with him the sorts of things young women desire: powder, dresses, jewelry, furs, and trinkets of all varieties from the nearby markets. The gentleman hung up a great carbuncle stone so that the pagoda-top was lit by a soft, red glow by day and night. However, neither they nor he were what Luanling wished.

Her constant refusals eroded the gentleman's pleasant demeanor and one day, he forgot to completely close the pagoda-top in a frustrated haste to leave. Luanling peered through the small opening to see jagged wings crawl out of his shoulders, his plain hair wildly slick in cinnabar-red, and formerly lithe body bulge and twist in grotesque bulk. The ogre glanced back briefly at the pagoda as he flew down to earth, but it was enough for her to see the gnarled tusks, expansive mouth, and coal-black eyes marring a snarling face. She watched until he landed on the ground and shifted back into the gentleman once more.

Luanling was terrified. Perhaps on the next visit, the ogre would decided to either force himself upon her or kill her. There was nowhere to retreat with the stairs broken and the pagoda-top was open only to the bare sky. But perhaps, there was no longer a need to run. For uncountable days, she was locked in this pagoda-top and saw no other soul; no sign of her pursuers at all. No one knew she was here, except the ogre.

She picked up a stone tile that was supposed to cover the opening. It was a sharp, edged thing not meant to fit neatly together, but bite instead and form a crude weave of stone blades over the

pagoda-top. Fitting work for a creature of violence who pretended otherwise. Luanling took firm hold of the paper talisman on head in her left hand and scored it completely through with the stone tile held in her right.

When the ogre returned the next morning as the gentleman, he looked at Luanling and thought it strange she rose to greet him, her face shadowed and ominous under the red glow of the carbuncle. He smiled and spread his arms to welcome her when a stone tile fit itself neatly into his throat.

He staggered back. She continued forward, a single eye shimmering the color of rose quartz. There was a question he could no longer voice, but was answered as she broke him onto the stony fangs of the opening and hurled his body out into the bare sky: "Why?"

"Because **We** wish to remain."

In scathing symmetry, Yun Luanling was content to bide atop the pagoda until her existences gentled into obscurity and all her pursuers as well as their legacies became less than memory. She would wait until her eventual descent into the world below could be met with true freedom. Until such a time, she was possessed of herself, to herself, and that was more than enough.