



Weighty Deity Humors

At night, Honneung was dead bread, like his foggy eyed grandmother made, crisscrossed ceremoniously, hard, and knotted up. He could go outside the walls, where drink and dance partners changed hands in equal measure and softgrass scorpids only lightly nipped at the festivities, but he didn't feel bleary faced enough.

But the day in Honneung was opportunity, the best work, Wokiko be 'praised'. Dani squeezed his way into a clot of people, part of any of the dozens of other clots that composed the greater throng that was only one of many in the mass that was the eastern market. Where the outside met the inside, and non-Honneung, hells even non-Wokikan operators, were allowed to ply, harangue, and demonstrate. The walls were the oldest in the city and had crumbled a century past, judiciously un-remortared by Wokiko's Golden Hand, Choe. Such that it was, the Emperor had no hands.

Dani would trade all of the tidbits about courts and kings for a little more knowledge about the porcelain merchant's schedule. He had been tracking him for weeks, and nothing seemed solid. The pottery baron had even hired guards, terrible ones from a notoriously poor mercenary outfit, but warm bodies ostensibly equipped with eyeballs.

He moved with the clot, whooping and hollering when it seemed appropriate, taking great interest in certain dyes, cinnamons, and other etcetera. The procession was the game as much as buying and selling and if he wasnt into it, what else was he there for? Well-fed men on horse patrolled, not the Emperor's men but in his pay, the minders. They had migrated in the last generation from a vast plain, destitute but dangerously martial. The Emperor had tamed them with religious salvation and the position of taskmasters, overseeing a multitude of slave populations of every size and shape. You could smell the great stables of Goyzargi, attached to the hip of the imperial city, from across a dozen horizons if his cousins were to be believed.

The nomads had taken Wokiko on his deal and wasted no time becoming his 'minders'.

Dani eyed the red porcelain shop again. It was rich enough to have a true covering and roof. A plump bearded man waddled out like he always did, holding aloft a sample: two swirled, bespeckled plates that glinted in the sun. A ridiculous sword that he quickly thought better of in trying to raise above his head. A clown, and Dani could not find a way to lift so much as a cup of his stock. He might drift off with a larger crowd, take a look, perhaps even get inside, but then he would be noticed. Too many times inside without so much as a coin produced and the plump man would take notice. People did not become rich without obsession. He would only have a couple tries at best, and he wasn't sure he was ready on this day.

He meandered, the heat already sizzling his skin. His stomach rumbled fiercely and his mouth was bone dry. *Oh, convenient all of you decide you're needy at once.* Dani sighed, turning off from the crowd and finding a smaller group of people outside a fruit stand. Small for good reason, the crop was poor quality. Flies buzzed about half-gone berries and citrus sircuses.

Dani raised his eyebrow at a contemptuous sign. *"A bag of fruit, a pouch of gold."* The proprietor was in a spirited argument about whether mold constituted extra, for the tonic properties, or a discount. Distracted. *Good.* A pouch for moldy fruit was ridiculous, and he was going to take justice for the barefoot folk...and his stomach. It was after the sun's highest point in the day, time to find food where he always had before.

He shoveled the best looking pomes of the bunch into a sack tucked into the draw of his trousers, taking care to not casually glance about himself. This would be done in a few seconds at most, and none should notice, fewer might care about a bit of moldy produce. The wet fragrance perfumed his hands as he swiped and the residue stuck, slimy maroons and tangential yellows and oranges smeared across his palms. He could feel his mouth salivating. A quick tuck into an alley, then maybe he could enjoy his first meal of a long day of window shopping.

He felt a tug at the knee of his pants and his heart panged. *Swords at my knee?* Dani turned, the bushapple still in his grasp. A child nibbling on a sweet bread tugged again, absentmindedly but with eyes affixed.

Dani winked and put his finger up to his mouth, mocking a "shhh". He turned back, his eyes set on a few more drupes. The stall owner was still arguing, haranguing angry customers who joined in against him.

Another tug at his leg. "Shhh, kid. I'm almost done here," and then a jab at his back.

"Pilferer."

Dani spun around, his face at chest height to an armored, sweaty minder. He repeated again, "*Pilferer*", in the swollen tongue of the nomads. Dani scrambled backward, his arms punching through the fruit stand behind him in his panic. Another minder appeared from the right and tried to seize his elbow, just missing before Dani pulled his arm from the tumbling stack of fruit crates. A third minder stalked from the left, thick hide whip in hand. He snapped it at the air in front of Dani as he careened around him. A trickle of blood oozed onto Dani's

feeling hands as he stumbled against the grain of the procession crowd, pushing women, children, men, animals, and objects onto the path of the approaching minders. He weaved in and out of stalls and ducked into an empty alley, towered on either side by stacked housing, riverlettes of waste gathering and pooling where it didnt collect near the city's waste canal. The sack of fruit flailed against his thigh, a bruising reminder of his crime. He remembered the eyes of his pursuers, hard and unmoved, motivated to chase, armed. He blinked, dumbfounded. *They mean to murder me for fruit!*

Something had changed in them. In frustrated fearful disgust, he threw the sack on the ground, hopeful it would satiate them if they found his escape route.

"PILFERER!" The bellow filled the alley. *Horses! Damnit.* They had parted the way with horses and blocked both exits out. Dani wetted his lips in the shade of the apartments, raising his arms, a plan forming.

"The fruit I picked is on the ground in this sack! I have not had a bite!"

They closed in. "Yahoro-man needs bodies. I need bread. You not much to me, not much to anyone, I take you with me like other thieves. Fruit today, coin tomorrow, ears after."

The horsemen enjoy their ears, Dani thought. He didn't like how bold they had become, and it fed his suspicion that something was deeply wrong with the world now. When he was a child, weak, frail, driven to stupidity through hunger and thirst, the guards were his equal in incompetence. They made a show and dance of chasing him down, but usually could not be

bothered. If you didn't turn an ankle like his poor friend Cut, you'd escape everytime.

Now, they actually made you work for it. Dani lifted his right sandal, tattered at the top where the straps hung loosely around his tanned skin but tough leather at the bottoms, reinforced over years with new layers and mendings. The moldy fruit gave way to his heel and a curdling odor rushed out, following in the rivulets of rancid juice that ran over his feet, his hands, his hair.

He took a wide swing with the bag of broken fruit, holding his gag through adrenaline. Guards held their nose and, more importantly, the horses reared their heads in violent rejection. They wouldn't go near him especially, smeared as he was.

Dani broke into a manic, triumphant grin. That cheapskate stall owner was going to make people eat this stuff! He grabbed a few items from the clothesline nearby, wrapping himself in layers he could shed if one of the guards made a lucky grab, and raced past gleaming swords and baying beasts. A group of girls in enticing front-silks and summer headdresses giggled as he sped past, anguished *aughs!* following in his wake as the bushapple trail reached their nostrils. His hair bounced behind him, crusty with juice and sweat.

I could do this forever!

THUNK!

His leg gave way and there was no protecting himself as he crashed to the dusty ground, tiny glass shards and broken bits that might be mistook for the rocks. They all made their home quickly in his elbows and knees, hair too, as he dragged his suddenly perforated body across the unswept back street. He

seized the bolt with bloodied hands, trying to tame his breath and beat back the black edges in his vision. Wriggling gave no give, just more pain, insurmountably ridiculous pain. Like a stinger, he could remove it but it'd take the rest of his leg with it and he would bleed out before the girl could run over and finish him off.

Which, Dani thought, must be the next step. To pound his skull against the concrete, or pin his throat to the ground. Savagery, under Wokiko's orders, for a bag of moldy fruit. He pushed out reluctant tears as he pulled himself up by the fingernails. The leg didn't hurt so much now, not in a normal way, but he still couldn't move. An eerie dullness was settling over him.

A sharp cry rose up from behind him, exultant. He was a galloper now, game, and she'd nailed the crippling blow. Would they eat him now or did that come later? He propped himself against an abandoned stall, fallen to disrepair in this side alley, long deserted after the grand opening of the main markets. So many side streets had become this, over night. Places for the maimed and disposed. A man with a missing eye who had been appropriating the shady corner near him made quick work of shuffling off, wanting no part of his business. He grunted *'im not here, im not involved'* as he limped away. Stomping boots, tallow-smeared sandals that made a noticeable tik-tak, and foolish barefeet replaced the scurrying man. Dani leant his head back, whimpering absentmindedly.

Guards, towering demons holding stolen underwear to their noses, circled like vultures. He was too preoccupied with the pain, the strangeness that crept from the wound and up his skin,

and the beggar's claws he formed with his hands to scrape at it and keep it at bay. The one with the lucky shot leant in and spat, whispering something in that stung-tongue of theirs.

"Goodbye, street rat."

Her voice was harsh, just as his life had been.

But that wasn't the end, as much as he had wished it right then. Let the gravelly-voiced woman mark her conquest with another bolt right through his eyes. So be it.

Instead, he became the property of the white-robcs.

They waited until the sun peaked in the sky to drag them out. He and a dozen other boys, huddled in the corners of the pen, feverish and sweating black through their tattered clothes. The awful fruit smell he had smeared in desperation was quaint now, another waft among a delirious ocean of smells. Everyone had a wound too, a gash, something bloody where it shouldn't be, even if the white robes had mostly stitched it up. Soon they were on the short march, some crawling on bloodied knees, with blades and bows at their backs again.

Tired croaks of 'what is going to happen to us?' 'where are we?' talked in delirium. Dani knew where they were, the minders had brought them to the central market square on the other side of the city. It was still trading time, but this was a special occasion. Everyone was gathered around, youngsters trying to push their way to the front or pile on top of each other. Stall owners were tying up last second transactions, bundling their stock into their rented cellars, hurrying to stand with the rest

of the crowd. There was only one thing that might occasion such enthusiasm.

The wind from the coast could not breach the high, thick walls of the central market district, a design made for ritual by someone who would certainly never have to live here. Or die here. The air was still as a snake in camouflage, and the sun pressed against his skin until water flowed unrestricted from it.

The stalls and larger tents of the market gave way to the ornate contraption. Dani wiped his greasy eyelids with the back of his arm, but couldn't muster the strength to pull back his soaking shoulder length hair. A minder eyed him with a sneer. Other eyes along the line of marching boys were unbelieving, that the torture could be just begun and yet so conclusive. One stone dais raised a handful of feet from the ground, with five bundles of rope and five stone *kouta* holding the end of each. One each for their arms, legs, and head. Banners not pinned to wooden stakes drooped in the heat, exclaiming something or other he couldn't read.

Passing between them was the unsettling visage of death itself, or a forestalled death. Dani had not thought much of *yahoro* when he lived a life picking pockets or nicking stalls, but thought it coldly appropriate one might reside over his end. 'He' smelled like embalming fluid, though that might have been a trick.

Smell is the most easily tricked of sensations, he'd been told. Dani had found all of them rather manipulable. He wished he could manipulate his fear, at this moment.

"Ah, telelly ytoyo op..." it spoke. No fiery centipedes or pill bugs fell out of his jaw, which stayed firmly applied to his face. It seemed nervous, even jittery, gesticulating and pointing bony fingers at this and that person.

The minder, decked in thin mail and silver knife of commander and paymaster for the mercenaries, considered the cleric's words and interpreted, "Draw lots, he says. One of you is going free. Must means bad omens, usually is more than that..." he muttered.

The first few boys came forward and did so, their pale faces a horrible new hope for Dani, who reached forward into the cruelly festive pot with a trembling hand.

The end of his stick was a dull red. No blue stripes and the furthest from the white of salvation as could be. He could not think as the minder brought him to the head of the line. There was nothing left to think, just endure. The sun stole the rest of his possible grief.

"Oh, bad luck kid. You'll be going first. Or maybe it's good luck?"

One was saved, Dani saw, a smaller boy with a runts face and beautiful fiery curls. He wept and wailed into the wasting arms of the cleric, his strange new tongue garbled but consoling nonetheless, and then into the embrace of the white-robed women who seemed to apparate from the crowd. He would be whisked away to serve the [temple], perhaps for the rest of his life.

Life.

Dani was almost too exhausted, beaten to consider it all. Over a handful of fruit, not even bread, he would die very soon. Anyone who might care for him was across the city, but his

father would be drunk and his siblings wouldn't consider his whereabouts until at least the next morning. The next thing they see of him might be an arm or a leg. Or his head, with that gaping astonishment they were fond of displaying on stakes around the city.

The orange had been so sweet, for as long as he had had it.

The minder grasping his shoulder shoved him into two more, who took his arms and placed him onto the slab. It was smooth and shockingly cold to his burnt backside, out of habit he wriggled but they held him firmly while the ropes were tied.

The bushapple had been so filling, the ones that weren't rotten.

The ropes were cheap, coarse hemp and they cut into his wrists, ankles and neck. He sat flushed with his circulation ceasing and the sun directly overhead. If he were lucky, he would pass out before the drawing began.

The audience that had gathered began to shift in grotesque awe as the kouta's signalled to each other and began to tug. Key to the execution was simultaneity, if the parts did not detach at the same moment then it would be near impossible to do it through quartering. The cleric's blade would have to substitute and the ritual would be imperfect at that stage. Not a complete failure, but not a success.

Dani was not passed out, unconscious, or anywhere in between. He was wide awake. The sensation of vertebrae popping and then snapping, sick cracks and rending flesh. A demon had inhabited him, Dani was sure, and his final moments were of sputtering curses and damning the hallucinations that floated around his vision. They sat, laughing at him, poking his

detached head and the spine that had largely come with it for the full ten seconds until he finally, mercifully, slept.

The yahoro cleric clapped his rubbery, bejeweled hands. Relief was a difficult emotion to trap for his tattered soul, tethered so tenuously to the matter he pulled around. Still, the first had been a success, which was a good omen. Minders loafed in the heat, dragging the next boy to the dais, where old blood mixed with the very new, while women in red robes attended the quinned extremities with anxious haste and busy blades.

"Wokiko wills it, my poor boy," he whispered in an archaic, buried tongue to the head, a ship adrift from port.



Part 2

"What a shame, sister. We are too late," lacy gloves ran over waxy skin. It was cold and colorless, but not yet rotted through. With small effort, the [sorceress] took it in her hands.

"Poor poor boy. Not even a bother to bury the severed thing with its body. That's how you get separation anxiety," the girl giggled to herself with some minor difficulty. The dumping

ground outside of the city had become a makeshift abattoir for mismatched parts, human odds and ends who saw their end at the hand of the minders. She pinched her nose, punctuating her breaths with the occasional *eugh*, taking great care to keep bloody excrement from her embroidered frock. It sashayed teasingly close to the ground.

Dani's eyelids covered soft pupils, mercifully intact and full of as much malice as a harried mouse's, frozen in their death glare. They met the sorceresses' eyes, glinting yellow jewels sharp like topaz. She cocked her head.

"All the way to the peak then? It might not keep till then, sister."

"If you spent as much time learning as you did yipping Junko, you would know how- *erk*" sister, shouting from across the piles of broken ceramics and broken bodies, produced a long, purple python from her throat after a series of guttural coughs. She glared at her sibling, setting a march on her.

"What's wrong? Something caught in your throat?" she cackled. Her glower did not settle, and deep blue veins traced across her neck, up towards her face, and along her arms and feet.

"Oh come now, it was meant to be a gift. Gods know you havnt had a good man in quite some time. Maybe it has to do with that," she poked playfully at a vein, and fountain of light leaked out towards her, fluorescent and unsettling, "something about it *disturbs* their natural instincts."

The older sister pushed her giggling sibling aside, taking the decapitated head in one, pulsating hand. Sores closed and color flushed back from old blood made vital again. Dani's eyes

shot open, as if from the worst of midday naps. Mussed and matted hair sparked, flowing out suspended in a web of electricity. Life returned to the dead, the soul returned through the blue tether of magic wielded by two bickering sorceresses.

"Good morning handsome."

Junko crossed her arms in mock protest, "Oh, now who's teasing, my graceful Chimaka."

Dani blinked. And blinked more. It was all he could do to blink. Wait, *was it all he could do?* A cold terror swept over him, the sensation of unexpected blood loss. And oh he had lost a good deal of blood, this he could remember. Where should his arms be, his legs?

He shook, rolled, wailed in Chimaka's long-fingered hands. Tears wet his warming cheeks and rolled down to where his neck ought, to where the rest of him ought. No words could emerge where caught breaths did instead.

"Shh shh little boy, my poor little boy," the eldest of the light-wielding sisters raked his hair with well-kept fingernails, "back to sleep with you. We'll see Master Uzochi soon and all will be clear. You'll feel much better, I promise."

There was no way he could sleep. No way in a thousand years. His eyes darted left and right, unable to concentrate. His breathing began to slow despite himself, a light blue mist puffing out with every false breath (where could it be coming from?). A great dizziness overtook him, like when he was struck by the minder's blunt flail he could recall with receding anxiety, and he lolled into a deep rest.

★ ★

"I knew we should have snatched one of those planky carriages," the slender Junko remarked, dragging her back foot dramatically as she made her way up the spiraling ascent. Stalks of bright yellow grass shot from weathered cobble steps where the land had not entirely overtaken it.

Chimaka shook her head as she struggled with the one under her arm, "Always quick with ideas once the critical moment has passed!" Her younger sister, still less tamed by their new purpose than she had become, still not fond of keeping her ashen curls settled, still returning most days with tans and peeling blisters from one danger or another. They were magic-born, not invulnerable she spent a good deal of her spare time reminding her.

"And, that's no chariot--"

"*Carriage!*"

"-it was a cage made of fastened sticks with bramble at the end attached to a *big fat shorthorn!* The only riding we would have done on it would have been to the village gallery, to be 'mindered' like our poor handsome-headsome friend here, if we were even lucky to get that far!" she spun out breathlessly, "Honestly sister, you barely think at times!"

Junko crossed her arms, her exhaustion forgotten momentarily in indignation, "Well it certainly didnt *look fat.*"

That it hadnt, Chimaka recalled. Harvests were even more pathetic than usual this season, and this was already a people too destitute to afford metal plowing tools. They removed well developed bramble from the weed vines instead and sharpened

those when it wouldn't do to boil them. She would chuckle if it were not so pathetic. And dangerous. Master Uzochi had played off their superstitions for years, but soon they would become desperate enough to come knocking, even at the door of the 'Forbidden Demon Grounds'. Rumors were, they had begun eating their own...

"Chimi! Up ahead!"

Chimaka snapped out of her ominous thoughts and squinted up where her sister pointed. They ducked behind a cluster of gentle-needed bushes off the main path up the mountain.

Speak of the demon. A throng of villagers, no, several throngs, had gathered. They carried bronze pendant poles with tattered garments of different dyes flapping in the thinning air. Small fires kept them warm enough, but Chimaka didn't believe the fire was an idle occupation. Smaller strips festooned to the poles shouted slogans in primitive pictographic: bring us from evil but also burn the imps, a few exhorting the old gods and a few damning them, and one that simply declared FOOD.

"They mean to burn the sanctum," she whispered, "but they'll start with us if we're not careful."

Junko's mouth sneered up in barely concealed disgust with her elder sister's suddenly changed disposition, "We're concerned with a few starving dirt scratchers? They hardly have the strength to fall at our feet, much less harm us."

"Would you like to find out personally?" Chimaka rasped in a frustrated undertone, "This boy has been executed once already. We can't let it happen again. *They'll* leave nothing left in their hunger"

The younger sister rolled her eyes and in a blue flash enveloped the trio in an illusion impermeable by sight. Not, notably, impermeable to sound. The leaves of the ever-shedding trees shuffled and scuffed around their feet, small twigs snapped, the occasional rock skipped.

But it was unlikely any villager would hear them approach. They were caught up in their slogans, which slowly descended into pitiable entreaties, promising to cast off prior allegiances and enter any contract the demons might have pressed on them if it meant a good solid meal or, gods work, a harvest.

They were invisible to each other as well. Junko wandered into Chimaka and the heady boy with a yelp and a barrage of accusatory susurrations, taking care to tiptoe around the sizable earthenware pots that had been hauled up to the party's location. Boiled roots and whatever skinny bird could be plucked from the sky were on the menu tonight, and they were clearly going to be here for a while. It was a real stakeout, always the prelude to an assault. Junko resisted the urge to snag a crackling bird low over smouldering embers, mostly due to the ear tugging of her exasperated companion.

"If you dare, I'll hand you over to them myself," she hissed.

Soon they were past the spirit border, a religious no-go area on pain of slow, agonizing soul death for any common human who crossed its threshold. Or so the villagers had internalized. Chimaka gave it a few more hours before desperation created an addendum to scripture and superstition.

As light gave way to plum-toned night, the air was pregnant with a dawning tension between the two sisters. Bright pixies

and apparating, tiny glyphs floated all around them and along their path, illuminating in quick flashes fauna reminiscent of an autumnal garden. What the villagers would call rents in the natural world, death sparks liable to suffocate them if inhaled, the sisters ignored as mundane.

Chimaka stroked the head's matted and crackled hair. Her eyes softened as she spoke, finally, breaking the disquiet, "Nothing is going to be the same after this."

"I know, dear sister. But how long have we waited?"

The elder sister turned to her wild, carefree, younger sister. Junko, the impetuous, the bold. She couldn't imagine her accepting this life, sedentary servitude even if for what this boy might be. The end of her childhood was etched on her face, streaked with tears she hadn't even heard, sculpting the makeup on her face in new, unintentional but fitting patterns more akin to her own. She wondered if it was a coincidence or not.

"Too long, and not long enough yet."

★ ★

Forget grace, let the gods make pies from everberry and call it even.

Dani awoke, for the third time in his life and the first time as something other than human. Two not-unpleasant faces regarded him. Siblings? They passed wide-eyed glances to each other, exhaling with smiles that brightened their features in this night-darkened place.

Two pretty girls, with strange get-ups he had never seen crawling around any temple in Honneaung. Had they kidnapped him and made him their love slave like in the one story?

What a way to go.

No. He rolled over on either ear and could see the high, wooden rafters, obscured in dark where braziers couldn't illuminate. *Open flame in such a construction?* Two types of people did that where he was from, where one kindling could mean a thousand apartments in ashes. The stupid, and the faith-touched stupid.

His head ached and Dani longed to sit-up, rub his forehead and take stock of his surroundings. His body felt in paralysis, like when he awoke from unpleasant dreams during a midday nap. He tried to yield a few words to the pretty duo, who wouldn't stop furrowing their brows and breaking into half smiles, but nothing followed. His brain could decide on what to say, but there was no doing. This was all a joke gone on too far.

Beyond them, a great shifting of weight and smacking of lips. Or mandibles? Dani was awash in new terror. He desperately wanted to tell the pretty girls, *kindly move so I can see the horrible thing you mean to feed me to that stands right behind.* But he couldn't move, speak, or do much of anything.

"Because you're only what the stone men left on the slab, Dani," it spoke in a great agitated self-important mumble that shook the stone and made the braziers flicker. "Chimaka, show him what remains."

The older and taller of the two girls took his head in her arms, an odd method by which to prop someone up, but he was beginning to suffer the first of hundred brutal flashbacks.

Chimaka whispered into his ear, "Master Uzochi may be strange, but he truly loves..."

Or was that what she said? Sensations were all easily manipulated, someone had once told Dani.

A sprite might be fooling his eyeballs currently, for Master Uzochi was not a man, not even a *kouta*, but a giant. A colossus, sat uncomfortably in a great throne fit for a heavenly monarch. And it wasn't just the two pretty girls and the giant, dozens of people in mismatched robes scurried past, perhaps servants and maintainers, like the world's largest stable with the world's largest horse.

"Now, point his eyes down, Chimaka." She did. She took the head and turned it to face the ground.

Oh.

Uzochi chuckled, the rumblings causing visible worry on the faces of his attenders. Chimaka looked at Junko, and they thought what the villagers on the side of the mountain would think, waiting for a godly sign of wrath or deliverance. And to get laughter.

His laugh caught a snag, perhaps out of practice, and he coughed in great walloping bursts of jovial cannonfire.

"Don't despair, my dear Dani. You have lost much of what you were before," he intoned between coughing fits, "but you are now something much greater. You are a messenger! A savior!"

"They'll call you Danfo, the messiah."