

Statue of Limitations

a short story

by **Patrick Welch**

"Most impressed, most impressed indeed," the master of Harjung beamed as he shook my hand. "The Guild was right about you, Brendell."

I blushed as my arm was nearly torn out of its socket. To be truthful, the Thief's Guild had chosen me for other reasons, but Tijor Bhen and the council of Harjung didn't need to know that. "It was a most ... interesting assignment."

"Yes, I'm sure it was. Please, you must tell me how you accomplished it!"

Again I smiled shyly, but this time not from modesty. Guild members are by necessity private about their methods. But then again this particular contract was by no means a standard one. I debated, then decided the Guild would not be angered if I revealed at least some of the story. "I really must be leaving; my transport departs within the hour. And," I pulled out my purse, "I have yet to be compensated."

"That we shall rectify immediately." The council master fumbled a few minutes opening a nearby safe - one I would have unlocked within seconds - and pulled out a sack of gold coins. "For a job well done," he handed it to me.

I quickly counted them and dropped them into my own purse. "Now if you have some wine and some time, I will briefly recount the details." He did, a most excellent vintage by the way, and therefore I did. Later that evening, safely aboard my ship and out to sea, I sat in the small lounge with a flask of plebeian wine and reviewed my fabrication. Once Bhen and the rest of the council learned the truth, they would be angrily contacting the Guild. I knew I would be in for a session with a Guild Secretary, so I decided to rehearse for the inevitable.

It was a contract nobody wanted, the Guild Secretary of the Ravenshead office had explained as she sat me down in her office. "What the council of Harjung is requesting is, well, probably impossible."

"Then refuse it." I had been summoned from nearby Talonrest and was still tired from my ride.

"That is not Guild procedure and you know it, Brendell. Every client, if they have the funds, deserves our best efforts."

"And yet you are hiring a mere apprentice?"

She smiled for the first time. "The Harjung council need not know that. We will merely explain afterwards that the contract is too difficult for anyone to succeed."

This was not going in any direction I wanted to follow. "Is it particularly dangerous? Is magic involved? Assassin's Guild?"

She shook her head. "The object is the problem. They want us, you, to steal the Weeping Nun."

"I'm sorry, never heard of it."

"It is chiefly of local interest. You can research our archives if you wish. But do it soon; your ship sails for Harjung this evening."

I sighed. The Guild charges for its assistance. If, as my superior was saying, this was a fool's errand anyway, there was no need to increase my expenses. A fool took the contract from her desk and placed it in my satchel. "I'll read it later," I said. "And thank you."

I managed to hide my anger until I was outside. Again the Guild was taking advantage of my apprentice stature! The Baron Mardou, Professor Grimmire and now this. As my boat set sail I vowed that if the Guild expected me to fail, I would fail in the grandest manner possible. Which, in hindsight, was exactly what I did.

I was ushered into the offices of Tijor Bhen within an hour of reaching Harjung. He was startled by my appearance, obviously expecting an older thief, but became all business when I handed him the contract. "We must have that statue," he slammed his fist on his desk. "It must grace our village, our courtyard!"

"Yes, you should," I said. *Now tell me why.*

Instead he asked, "What are your plans? How soon will it be here?"

"I have to do some reconnaissance first. There are several approaches I'm considering but I have to determine which will be best." Actually I had no plans, having spent most of my voyage in the company of a most delightful and eager serving wench.

"So you will be leaving for Cardinaul soon?"

So that's where it was. "Within the hour."

"Then may the beneficence of Our Lady Wisteria lead your every step." Within minutes I was out of his office and searching for a stable. Less than twenty minutes later I was following the well-worn path to the village of Cardinaul.

I found the Weeping Nun almost immediately after finding the hamlet. The difference between the respective towns startled me. Although Cardinaul was no larger or more strategically located, its prosperity was evident everywhere. Shops that circled the town square were gaily painted and festooned with banners and ribbons; their windows promising a vast array of rare and expensive wares inside. No less than three inns were available for weary travelers, as well as several taverns. Unlike Harjung the streets were crowded with people, mostly well-dressed. The streets themselves were brick, not the dirt and rock common in most villages. Capital, thy name is Cardinaul, I thought as I found a stable to bed my horse. I returned to the village square and studied the statue of the Weeping Nun, placed prominently in its center. It was easily thrice my height, although not much wider, and apparently carved from granite. A small moat surrounded it and I noted several people tossing in coins, probably for a blessing. Making a counterfeit, a ploy I've used successfully in the past, would be futile.

I was walking to the back of my intended when a friendly passer-by stopped me. "You are too late, my friend," he said. "She will be crying no more this day."

"She cries?"

"Of course. Every day when the sun is high. Like clockwork she is. A most beautiful sight, most beautiful."

"Then I shall return on the morrow," I returned his smile. "Traveling all this way, I would certainly not want to miss that."

He nodded. "That is what they all say, and most delighted they are when they witness the holy event. Praised be Our Sister."

Later that evening I relaxed in one of the inns. Crowded it was, and not just with the residents. Clothing and accents told me that most of the patrons were from elsewhere. Which meant something in Cardinaul had attracted them and I was confident the Weeping Nun was the reason. I considered my options. Now I knew why the Guild was cautious about the contract; outright theft was impossible. It would take a team of men, equipment and horses to haul it away. And what use would the statue be to Harjung? Once it was discovered, the good citizens of Cardinaul would demand its return. After another hour of consideration I could come to only one conclusion: the citizens of Cardinaul must give me the Weeping Nun.

The growing din from outside woke me much earlier than I desired. I looked down from my room and saw a crowd amassing near the statue. If I hurried I could probably still find a good place to stand. Instead I enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and left the inn well before noon.

By now the village square was bursting with the curious and the faithful, and I tingled with greed as I made my way amongst them. If I wasn't under contract, I could have easily come into possession of a wealth of jewelry and purses. Since I was, I could only admire and sigh in frustration.

I noticed a group of red-robed men standing off to one side, gathered near the moat. They were engaged in casual conversation, ignoring the growingly-impatient crowd around them. I also noticed that it was getting increasingly warm and uncomfortable, that some among me had neglected to bathe, that flies were beginning to gather. If something didn't happen soon, I was going to have to return to the inn and relieve myself.

Suddenly trumpets blared from behind us. Everyone hushed as the men in robes made an arc near the statue. I turned and saw the crowd parting as another group of brightly-clad men started a procession to the statue. The leader was an old man wearing a tall white hat and carried a golden staff; his retinue were clad in the same red robes as the men now standing at the moat. No one said a word as they made their slow way to the Weeping Nun. The leader turned and stepped forward, his followers fanning out behind him. Then they stood silent and waited.

The crowd was waiting as well, as silent and still as well-behaved schoolchildren. And waited and waited. I noticed a drop of sweat on the end of my nose and began to wonder when it would fall when I felt a slight tremor.

It wasn't my imagination or my breakfast. The leader suddenly raised his staff, then abruptly turned and pointed it at the statue. And the crowd gasped and screamed as the statue suddenly began to weep.

It only lasted a minute, but there was no question. Water streamed from her eyes, down her robes, into the moat below. The crowd was silent throughout the spectacle, then broke into cheers and tears. Their work done, the robed entourage made their slow way back through the rapidly dispersing crowd. I lingered, watching as the faithful approached the moat, knelt before it and prayed. I was growing impatient when the last of the pilgrims finally left, leaving only a small group of the robed men to remove the offerings from the moat. That was when I approached.

"Hello, wayfarer," one greeted me. "Have you come to honor Our Lady Wisteria?"

"That is the name of the statue?" I pointed.

"Indeed. It is the pleasure of our order to serve her."

"I see." I looked up at the statue. The heat had already dried her completely. "Does she do that every day?"

"Yes. Each day she weeps for our sins. Are you a believer?"

I blushed. "I follow a different path."

My comment troubled him not at all. "As long as it leads to your salvation, you are indeed blessed and welcome."

"I thank you for your kind words," and I handed him a gold coin. "For your order and your continued good work."

"Thank you. May Our Lady smile upon you always."

We'll see. I looked up at the statue one more time, but could learn nothing helpful from here. Which meant that later I would have to go there.

It was late the following evening, well after the pubs had closed and self-respecting people had gone to bed, that a non-self-respecting person left his room. I couldn't go through the lobby since I was dressed in black and carrying a long rope, so I lowered myself over the front porch and down into the quiet streets. I quickly made my way to the Weeping Nun and walked around the moat. Trying to throw the rope up and over would be nearly impossible, so I tied one end around my waist, then waded into the moat and wrapped the remainder around her. Then it was a simple matter of pulling myself up, finding some purchase, loosening and then flipping up the rope, then climbing up some more.

Well, not that simple, not on the smooth surface with wet shoes. I almost slipped once, and when I bounded briefly off the statue I heard a muffled boom. That's when I realized the statue was not stone at all, but metal. And hollow.

Still I reached the top of Our Lady in little time. I hung before her severe countenance, clenched lips, beak nose, heavy eyebrows. "What is your secret, young lady?" I whispered as I ran my free hand along her features. Then I found it beneath her jutting eyebrows. Slits, hidden from view, over each eye. Large enough for me to insert a finger and feel the smooth, hollow interior.

I was smiling when I started back down. Even my eventual fall into the moat didn't dampen my excitement because now I knew how I could steal the Weeping Nun.

One week later I returned to Cardinaul. Actually it was my third trip, since I had made a brief visit the night before. This time I was dressed in humble brown robes, ragged growth of beard, rope belt and woven sandals. I made sure to arrive early before the crowds gathered, but not so early that the brotherhood of Our Lady Wisteria wouldn't be present. I found them making their benedictions before the statue and preparing for the upcoming ritual. Which would be quite different this day.

I took a deep breath, then ran up to them. I was markedly sweating and out of breath when I reached them. "Good friars, good friars, I have fearful news," I said between gasps.

They looked at me as if I was some stray dog invading their garden. "What is this? What are you saying and who are you?" one demanded and approached.

"Danger, great danger," I said. "Something dire is about to happen. I must talk to your leader."

The man frowned. "My name is Koros and you shall talk to me. You haven't answered my question. Who are you?"

"Brendell. Of the order of the Most Holy Thistle. I have traveled long to warn you."

"I do not know that order."

"We are far from here."

Koros sniffed. "And what is this danger you are babbling about?"

"I don't know. Not totally," I added quickly as he began to turn away. "I had a vision of an evil darkness striking Cardinaul. A curse has been placed upon you, I fear."

"A vision, you say. A curse. Are you sure it wasn't something you ate?" And he laughed.

"I was sent by my order to help you. My leader insisted upon it."

"You are not being very specific."

"Visions are never specific, as you well know."

"Yes." He looked back at the village square. Already the people were gathering to witness the daily miracle. "We can't have you running around alarming the good people of Cardinaul with tales of your 'vision.' You will stay with us until the ceremony is over, then you can talk with our leader."

"Thank you, thank you," I said and knelt at his feet.

"On your feet," he whispered. "There is no reason to call attention to yourself."

"Yes, master." I rose and allowed myself to cry in appreciation.

"Stay near me," and he elbowed me in the stomach. "And be silent."

I nodded and followed him as he returned to the rest of the now curious monks. Yet we remained silent as the expectant crowd grew and the sun climbed toward midday. I was beginning to regret my choice of apparel when Koros whispered harshly, "Stand straight and be quiet. The ceremony is about to begin."

So it was. Again I heard the trumpets and saw the procession approach us. I waited until everyone had taken their positions, then I turned to my benefactor. "Master, I can feel it. The evil! Something terrible is about to happen."

"Shut up. You can take your concerns to our leaders after we are done." Another elbow to my ribs convinced me to obey.

Once again I felt that slight tremor; once again the old man turned from the crowd and pointed his staff at the Our Lady Wisteria. Once again the people gasped as she began to weep for their sins.

Then their gasps turned to screams as they realized that what flowed from her eyes was not clear tears but an angry red liquid.

The monks stared in amazement as the moat around her began turning red as well. "My vision," I let my scream join with the others, "my vision was correct. The Weeping Nun is becursed!"

The monks huddled in stunned confusion even as the square began to empty, the onlookers fleeing in fear. "What is happening?" the old man with the scepter asked anyone in earshot.

"My vision didn't lie. A great evil has struck Cardinaul," I yelled.

He glared at me, then looked at the monks. "Who is this man?"

"He claims he is Brendell, from the order of the Most Holy Thistle," said Koros.

"I had a vision ..." I began but was cut off.

"Not here," the old man said. "In private. Come."

No ceremony now; we walked quickly and directly to a tall brick building at the edge of the town square. No one spoke until we were seated inside around a large table. "What is this all about, Koros?" the old man asked.

"I have no idea, Mayor. This," he turned to me, "Brendell insists he was sent here because of some vision."

"I dreamed your village was cursed," I confirmed.

"Ridiculous," the old man said. "How can a geyser become cursed?"

So that's their secret. "Not the geyser," I said quickly. "The statue."

"But why would our statue become cursed? How?" The old man shook his head. "This makes no sense at all."

"You saw what happened," Koros said. "Something is not right."

"Obviously." The old man sat back and sighed. "And what do we do about it?"

"My vision," I offered.

The Mayor glared at me. "Now what?"

"Part of my vision. I saw myself in the company of a tall dark figure. Now I know it was referring to My Lady Wisteria."

"What are you saying?" the Mayor asked, leaning forward.

"That I must remove the Weeping Nun from your village. Only then will the curse be lifted."

"This is ridiculous," and the Mayor sat back with folded arms. "I do not believe in curses."

"It matters not what we believe," said Koros. "You saw what happened. The people panicked. The word will spread. *They* will believe unless we take immediate action. I do not necessarily believe in visions either, but Our Lady has protected us. Now we must protect Her and Cardinaul. What this Brendell proposes just might accomplish that."

"And if we don't, our visitors won't come back," the Mayor mused. "Our prosperity will be ruined."

"The geyser will still be here. You can commission another statue," I said.

The old man rubbed his chin. "Yes. It will be expensive but it can be done." He slammed his fist on the

table. "And it will. Koros, do what is necessary. Brendell," he looked at me and for the first time smiled, "thank you for your courage."

The leaders of Cardinaul were as good as their word. Early the next morning the monks were busy with block and tackle. I came from my room to find the moat drained and the base of the statue already loosened. A sturdy cart and team of horses waited nearby. I watched as the Weeping Nun was raised and secured to the cart, revealing the geyser and the dirt around it that had been stained by the dye I had poured into the statue through its eye slits two nights previous.

"That soil is cursed as well," I said and pointed. "Dig it up and place it in barrels so the enchantment can be totally removed." They obeyed and within the hour I was ready to leave.

"You are a brave man, Brendell," Koros said as I sat in the wagon eager to leave. "Please give my heartfelt regards to your order."

"I will, and thank you. I am sure you will have nothing further to worry about." With that I gave a whistle and tug on the reins and I was on my way from Cardinaul in possession of the Weeping Nun.

Tijor Bhen was ecstatic when I made my slow way into Harjung three days later. "You've succeeded, you've actually succeeded!"

"Of course," I smiled shyly. "What shall I do with it?"

"We will put her in our town square, of course," and his eyes gleamed with avarice. "Soon our village will be filled with pilgrims coming to worship at the feet of the Weeping Nun!"

Not if you don't have a geyser. Not if you don't remove the curse. "I'll leave that up to you," I said as I got down gratefully from the wagon. "Let us conclude our contract. My ship leaves this afternoon."

Which we did, and I did. And two days later I was summoned again to the Guild headquarters in Ravenshead. "What have you done, Brendell?" the secretary greeted me not at all warmly.

"I fulfilled my contract." I gave her a puzzled smile. "The Weeping Nun sits in the square at Harjung even as we speak."

"You were supposed to *fail*!"

My smile became even more puzzled. "I don't understand."

"Why do you think we used a mere apprentice for this assignment? The people of Cardinaul have granted the Guild many lucrative contracts in the past. Thanks to your interference, their prosperity is now ruined!" Then she sighed. "Perhaps Harjung will make up for that."

"Not very likely." And I told her what I had done.

When I finished her frown was even deeper. "Then I will be hearing from Tijor Bhen very soon."

"I would expect so. What will you tell him?"

"What can I tell him? The contract was fulfilled. There were no other conditions." She slammed her fist on her desk. "But don't think for one minute that the *Guild* will consider it fulfilled."

I groaned as I left her office. The payment was mine. Yet it was not going to help me achieve my most cherished desire: my journeyman's card. As I made my way to the docks to wait for my ship arriving that evening, I wondered if that same serving wench would be aboard. I could only hope.

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