

A Test of Patience

This story is a standalone Djinn tale featuring Ashan and Jonathan. The setting is India, 1857, at a place called Bibighar. The setting and actions depicted here are, to the best of my ability, historically accurate. I chose to tell this story from the point of view of one of the Englishwomen at Bibighar, but a similar story could have been told from the viewpoint of any of the thousands of Indian women who suffered just as terribly at the hands of the English during this same period.

Atrocities in wars cut both ways.

Patience Verity Cadwallader Jones.

She repeated her name to herself, a rosary of despair for all that she wasn't Papist. For as long as she could remember her name, she would survive, no matter what happened, no matter what ...

The smell. Oh God in heaven, just when she imagined she'd grown accustomed to it, could bear it just a little, it turned in her throat and choked her. She whimpered a little, and tried not to move. Tried not to breathe, except in light, exhausted gasps. It was so hot, and she'd been so long without water, and the weight pressing down on her ...

She felt pressure lessen against her shoulder. Something had moved. Some body had moved, but how as that possible, they were all dead, weren't they ...? How could anyone have survived ... and how had she? She'd felt herself going away, and then ... and then she'd been back, waking in the heat, the rot, the vile horror of living.

She heard voices, speaking in foreign, liquid syllables. Richard's words came back to her. There's no need to learn the language, Patience, the servants all understand English perfectly well or they wouldn't be employed here. You need never speak with the locals directly, nor would it be proper for an Englishwoman to do so.

He had said that in February, and now it was July, mid-July and so stunningly hot, the heat like wet wool, and she was lying under a pile of decaying corpses and she wished, oh God she wished that she had learned how to beg for her life in the tongue of the natives.

Another rustle and shift. The voices came nearer. They were pulling bodies from the pile -- burying them? She felt a surge of sheer horror. Bad enough to be trapped here, smothered in rotting flesh, but still worse to be dumped in a grave, covered over, left to die alone with a mouth full of dirt. She would scream. She must.

Another body rolled away, this one from atop her back, and she could not resist a deep gulping gasp. The sound was lost in the continued keening. Male voices shouted in a confusing babble, and she felt a foot press into the flesh of her lower back.

She was able to turn her head, just a little, and through the tangled dark veil of her hair, she saw a scarecrow of a woman struggle up from the pile of corpses just a few feet away. With an icy shock Patience realized she was Leticia Grainger, although this bloody, battered skeleton was so far from that fine, sheltered young lady as it was possible to become. She had been a shallow little thing, much given to gossip and flirtation, and now ... now she was quite insane.

Patience watched as another woman rose from the pile as well, staggering, bleeding profusely from a dozen slashes to face and body. She held a blond-haired boy in her arms, oh sweet merciful Lord, still alive, there were children still alive ... More than one. A third woman rose from the corpses, and lurched after Leticia Grainger and the others, and behind her came three -- no, four small children, all screaming in raw, hoarse, agonizing little voices.

Nowhere to run. The crowd in the courtyard, all dusky faces, held no forgiveness and no mercy. There was one escape, and one only: the uncovered central well in the courtyard. Leticia leaped upon the stone rim, and without ceasing her terrible mad screams, jumped. Her screams echoed for long, long seconds. They seemed to go on forever.

The bleeding woman with the child in her arms followed, crossing the open space in a drunken stagger, and pitching headlong into the darkness. The third woman hesitated and looked around, as if hoping that a redcoated savior would suddenly burst from the crowd and spirit her away. Patience saw the hope leave her, and only a sere, terrible serenity take its place.

"Come," the woman said, and reached out her right hand for the smallest child, a girl of only two or three. The little girl took it, staring up. Unasked, another child moved closer and took her left. "There's nothing to be afraid of, my dears. We'll only fall a little."

They were gone in a bloody flutter of skirts. The last child, older, burst into tears and tried to run, but there was no rescue except for the waiting black hole, and in the end, he jumped.

Patience slowly sat upright. Incredibly, no eyes turned toward her. She studied the faces -- dark, hostile, unknowable faces -- and she knew that she would die soon, as soon as they troubled to notice she still drew breath. She wished she had the courage of the other women. All she could do now was wait.

A hand closed on her shoulder, and Patience was pulled to her feet without seeing who it was who held her. She waited for the sword thrust, or the musket ball, for it had been guns that had started this, she knew, the new Enfield rifles with their cursed greased cartridges that used the fat of cows and pigs, things forbidden to Muslims and Hindus ...

"Up," a light, cool voice said in flawless English. A pressure of a palm beneath her elbow, and she somehow gained her unsteady feet. The same pressure kept her upright, balanced, and she looked over her shoulder at what must surely be her executioner.

He was a tall, strong, straight-backed man in nondescript gray robes, hair of the same silvery-neutral shade. Pale skin. And his eyes -- She had never before seen an angel, but surely angels had such eyes as that.

"Come," he said, and she went, never thinking why or how, never questioning until their steps led away from the stinking, suffocating pile of corpses in the courtyard and into the blessed shade. She flinched when he moved her toward the building itself; the memories screamed in her, unbearably loud.

As if he understood, he directed her around the corner, and it was the oddest thing, it seemed that no one beyond it could see them. She had been used to the stares of the natives; any time she had ever ventured from the small quarters she maintained for Richard she had endured the constant pressure of eyes on her. But now she might as well have been one of the dusky women in their saris. Or not even that, perhaps; no one glanced at her, or her princely escort.

No one at all. It was as if they had both become completely invisible.

She faltered again, felt the world spinning, smelled corruption, and knew that she was going to die now, because the story of Patience Verity Cadwallader Jones could not be a happy one, could never be now, after what she had seen and done ...

"Careful," he said. "You're weak. Take it slowly."

His hand was between her shoulders, holding her upright, and her cheek rested against the cool fabric of his tunic. He smelled of cloves and cinnamon, hot metal and a light tint of something like dust.

She could not imagine what kind of reek she must give off.

"I can walk," she said. She was surprised at her voice. It was a faded, cobwebbed ghost of what it had been, before the morning that Nana Sahib had promised them all safe passage from Cawnpore to Allahbad, with the promise of mercy and boats. Richard had explained it. Richard had always explained everything, until he'd been slaughtered at the river, and she'd been taken to Bibighar with the other women and children who'd survived. "Where are we going?"

Her savior raised silver eyebrows. "To safety," he said. "You do not need to know anything more."

"Your name," she whispered. Angels did have names, after all.

"Yours first."

"I apologize," she whispered. "I am Patience Jones, the wife -- the widow of Lance Corporal Richard Jones." This was foolish, this polite fiction. She was filthy, smeared with blood and other vile things, and she reeked, she stank, she was a staggering scarecrow no matter what she might want to pretend, and he was as clean and distant as a pagan god ...

"Ashan," he said, watching her face. "My name is Ashan."

Hardly an English name, for all his appearance and flawless command of the language. How odd.

"I don't think I can go any further," she said. Her legs were trembling, and her head felt light and stuffed with bees, all abuzz. "Leave me. I should die here too."

For answer, he simply stepped close, slid one arm beneath her shoulders, and bent down to slide another under her knees, and picked her up. She hissed and clutched at his tunic, but his grip on her was solid. Strong, this angel. He stood as if her not inconsiderable weight was air and shadow.

"There's been enough dying here," he said. "Sleep."

He bent and brushed his fingertips along her forehead, and sleep came instantly, a heavy black blanket that smothered the fears and the pain and all else, until there was only peace.

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She came awake, and wherever she was, it was quiet. Someone had taken liberties; her bloodstained dress was gone, and her skin was clean, and she'd been covered with a decent white high-necked nightdress. She lay on a soft mattress, under a soft cotton sheet, and beyond the tented rise of her toes lay a window, open to a tranquil green garden with a vast faded-silk sky.

The room was lovely, like a dream. It was also deliciously cool, and how could that be? India was unremittingly hot and humid at this time of the year ... she had never felt this kind of delicately gentle weather beyond the best late spring of England.

She sat up slowly, and realized in a rush that she no longer hurt. Not a single twinge of pain anywhere on her body. She skinned up the arms of her nightdress with trembling fingers, half-mad with fear, and discovered not

even a faint scar where gaping hatchet and knife and sword wounds had been -- she clearly remembered feeling the cold strike of steel on her arms, then her back as she turned away, and then ... then an icy sensation across her throat, followed by searing heat, and ...

And then she'd gone into darkness, and woken buried under dead weight, cold blood dripping slowly down her face.

"God help me," she said aloud in a shaking rush, and pulled her knees close to her chest, cowering in the luxury of the bed, staring with tear-shattered intensity out toward the serene day beyond the window.

She was, simply, insane. That was the only explanation.

"You could say he already did." That same light, cool voice. Her angel -- Ashan -- stood in the doorway of the room. There was something so still about him, and yet she felt he was always on the edge of motion, or of violence. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," she said. His stare was bold, but she could not find it in herself to feel offended. Manners were a foolish memory, and angels surely could not violate the standards of propriety. "Are you from heaven, sir?"

He smiled, and whatever answer he was about to give was cut short by another voice -- rude, loud, and in no way angelic. "Trust me, Ashan's never come anywhere near heaven."

She turned her head, and saw a glorious tangle of light in the doorway that, when blinked away, resolved into a tall, lean man with a rather sharp face and a longish tangle of light brown hair, threaded with silver. His eyes were dark, and he looked altogether more ... normal ... than her savior. He was wearing a working-man's rough cotton shirt, and had his hands thrust into his trouser pockets, and he was staring at her with a bold, uncompromising expression. Patience clutched the neck of her nightgown, although it wasn't necessary; she had, at least, been provided her with decent clothing.

"Jonathan," Ashan said. "This is Patience."

"Patience. Really." He was an impudent sort, lounging there with that wicked smile on his lips. "Charming. I thought you said you'd never give one of the New Djinn the time of day, Ashan."

Ashan sent him a filthy look, turned, and left the room. Patience felt unreasonably naked without his presence, although she could not possibly say why. Jonathan didn't watch him go. His stare remained on her; it was warmer and more human than Ashan's, and yet there seemed to be a vast, uncomfortable distance to it as well.

"Sir," she said. "If I may ask -- where is this? It isn't Cawnpore, nor Lucknow ..."

"My house," the one named Jonathan said. "That makes you my guest."

"I am very ... grateful ... " Her voice faded, burned away under his regard, because it was like nothing she had ever felt before. He looked a normal man -- more of one than the fabulous chilly silver of his friend, at least -- but there was something terrible in him. Black, black eyes that swirled with sparks of silver like stars. Her voice came back to her, thin and hollow as a reed. "What are you?"

"I'd tell you, but you really wouldn't understand," he said. His long, strong fingers wrapped her wrists, laid across her pulse points. "The question really is, what are you?"

"I don't --"

"You do." His eyes. "You know. You feel it."

There was something vast building inside her, a scream, a silent explosion of panic and light and heat and –

And she knew. She knew.

“I’m dead,” she whispered.

“No. You’re a hell of a long way from dead.”

“I’m an angel.”

“Of a kind, maybe,” Jonathan agreed. “What we are is called Djinn. You’re a New Djinn. You were human once, and now you’re not. Now you’re like me.”

She hadn’t seen him return, but her rescuer was standing in the doorway again, all chill and silver and an unblinking stillness. “There was a massacre at Cawnpore. A few hundred British soldiers and their dependents died at the river. The surviving women and children were held prisoner, about two hundred of them.”

“What happened?” Jonathan directed the question to her, not to Ashan.

Patience somehow found the words. “Nana Sahib promised we would be protected, but – yesterday, men came. We weren’t told – they just began killing us. There was panic, so much terror – there was nowhere to run. No way to fight.” She swallowed and closed her eyes. “They killed us all.”

“Soldiers?” There was no emotion in Jonathan’s voice, but his hand, touching hers, seemed extraordinarily gentle.

“They didn’t bother to bring soldiers,” Ashan said. “They used butchers. They piled the bodies against the walls.”

“Not the kind of thing you usually care about,” Jonathan said.

“I felt her waken. I felt –” Ashan hesitated, and his eyes seemed to take on a hard, silvery shine. “I felt her confusion. If you won’t go out to gather in your new recruits, I suppose someone has to do it.” He sounded harsh, and almost angry, but when he turned his attention back toward Patience, she saw something else in him.

Jonathan didn’t seem angry. In fact, when he spoke again, he seemed amused. “Thanks for doing my dirty work, then,” he said. “I’ll leave you to it.”

And just like that, he was gone. He’d been sitting on the edge of her bed, holding her wrist in his warm, human fingers, and now – now there was no sign he had ever existed.

Ashan didn’t seem to find that alarming. After a moment of continuing to watch her, he inclined his head and said, “I will leave you now.”

“Wait. Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for saving me.”

Ashan blinked. “I didn’t save you. You saved yourself. Your will to live brought you through.”

“Not – not that. I’d have gone mad if you hadn’t found me. I was – very near to it.” Strangely, that trauma already seemed to be left behind, in the distance of Jonathan’s dark eyes. “Will you tell me what I am? What I’ve become?”

He seemed ready to refuse, ready to vanish in the still, quiet sunlight like Jonathan before him, but instead, he came to stand next to her.

Ashan slowly extended his pale hand to her, and she took it. "You should choose a different name," he said. "Something that leaves your human self behind."

Patience Verity Cadwallader Jones. It had been her touchstone in the darkness, her only whisper of sanity in a world of darkness. "May I keep Patience?"

"If you wish," he said, and helped her rise to her feet. Her white nightgown swirled around her, transforming into light, then into a sky-blue walking skirt and matching jacket. It felt weightless on her newborn skin. "Let me show you my world, Patience."

It was her world now, too.

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