

FREEING MIHA

By
Jodi Ralston

It was the smell that drew Miha to a halt on the dirt that made up the main street. He had been following moh, but it wasn't death he smelled, because their red wings were like distant flame flicks in the sky and they whirled over just as distant--beyond the city, over the barrens, near where he had buried Buul. No, this smell, not a meat smell, but a burning, herbs, spice, something nice, but not edible. Not Keepers' scent either; that was never nice for anyone but them.

But close.

It reminded him of--out there. But none of the smells he bought for home smelled like this.

He sniffed. Behind the Giving House. He stared through the gaps between the great, old bones past convicts had dragged from the refuse pit, like he had dragged Buul. What Keepers finished with and tired of they dropped, like Buul.

Nothing in there. No food, no clothing, no jingle-jangle of Keepers' torches drawn by bondsmen following their masters.

Nothing on the street but Miha and the end of the smell. The lack of eyes on him made him feel naked. He adjusted the knot on his sarong to better hide the supply of flesh over his hip bones. After three females, it was male they would be wanting now. They favored healthy ones. They favored loners walking roads over loners burrowing under warrens of adobe or sticks, because what looked like pep drew Keepers like flame to . . . Keeper oil. So he hoped there were only him and the smell. That smell almost like home.

Almost like nothing, then.

But still, almost something.

Something was better than nothing. He followed the smell.

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As he hoped, it was not Keeper; but it wasn't like home either. These folk were different. The man wore pants, not oil-slick layers of clothing--that enfeebling oil got easily into everything and refused easily to remove. But he did not recognize the pants or shirt with long sleeves from any fashion he recalled. The bound and gagged woman wore scarves and thin strips of cloth from head to toe, he couldn't see her arms or hair, but the amber lamp oil the man poured over her made her clothing stick, made her sex clear, if not her identity. What were they convicted for? Why were they allowed to keep things?

The man tossed aside the lamp and it clunked against the House. That wouldn't remain there long, and it wouldn't remain in convict hands long either. The man yanked off a single article of clothing from the woman, the head scarf. She lifted her head and glared at the man; her stubble of hair was golden.

Almost like his wife.

New hatred or old love--or constant pain, which encompassed both--drew him forth, with the start of his conviction, "I am Miha--" That drew forth the man's eyes. Blue. No one had blue eyes.

But the stranger did not wait for him to start over. He stepped forward and shouted, fists raised, but Miha couldn't understand him. That meant the man couldn't understand Miha. Which was impossible. There was the prison, the barrens, the wilderness, home--the slave yard--Keepers quarters somewhere else, and then Freewoman's domain; the only language was their own and hers.

He had questions, but no one to ask, and he had rules to obey, even if these people wouldn't or couldn't listen. So, he continued, "I am Miha who makes the Feast of Men for Freewoman. You cannot harm me without harming you, for this pleases Freewoman, and she has no regrets."

The man said something again, in that impossible language, but Miha understood enough when the man wrapped the woman's scarf around a stick, made blue flame in his hands, and lit the torch. The gagged woman writhed and screamed, for she understood too.

This woman who wasn't his wife, but was almost.

That wasn't enough to make him watch or walk away from murder, so he lunged forward to grasp the flaming stick, and the stranger swung it at him with another shout. Miha caught it. No pain. He held on, and the strange flame traveled not up skin but lit his veins. No pain, but fire in the veins--or on oiled cloth--was not a friendly act, and the will of Freewoman blinked awake in his belly. "I warned you," Miha said. He mourned the lost opportunity to ask: "Where you lived, did you belong to a Freewoman, too?"

The fire left his veins, ran backward, up the thickly clothed arm, and under the skin, too, he suspected, and it consumed the almost murderer's flesh. Swiftly. He suspected oil would have made it slower, last longer. Freewoman's will snapped shut again, and the man's flesh turned grey--ash--and showered down over Miha and the road. No screams, much pain--and nothing left for moh.

Except for the woman, if he left her like this.

He knelt and untied her. Freed her mouth.

"Thank you." She grabbed his hands. "I am Genie, and you saved me from death." Then she released him to take a handful of the almost murderer's ash. With it, she drew on her forehead a symbol he didn't understand. "For each limb you saved--" She removed some scarves and drew on her hands and feet four more symbols. "I give you five wishes."

He was about to say, he rather have five answers, when she smiled.

Even without golden and sharp-filed teeth, he knew that smile. Full and nasty and beautiful. He had been right: she was almost his wife. He no longer cared how she knew his language, how came to be here, who she was, who the ash had been; he knew that smile, and that smile was never good for him.

He left her for the main road that would him back to meat and moh.

"Do you not believe my words, master? I will show you. I will grant you your first wish."

He looked back at her. At the golden hair. The missing smile. But her skin was dusky, darker beneath the oil. Her eyes weren't golden, but black. There was another difference between the two: his wife had never "granted" him anything.

"Five. . . wishes?" He stepped out of the slatted shadow of the House, and looked about. No eyes on them, and no moh in the sky. His meat was gone, wasted. Like his life. "What good are wishes?"

"That depends on what you want."

What he wanted. . . he had had all he wanted and could have, and he had lost it. He couldn't ask to be free. He couldn't ask to go to the dead man's world. He couldn't die and not make Freewoman's Feast. He couldn't erase his conviction. He couldn't even ask for what the Keepers and conviction had erased of him--names of family, names of wife, of brother, of the crime his wife and brother made up. If he tried, Freewoman would fix it, for it would please her, and she had no regrets--and if he tried, he would have plenty more to add to his cache.

But what if he wished for something else? Something unnoticeable.

"Ask." Genie stepped closer, breath cold on his arm. "Ask for anything, master, and I will grant it."

He would see, or he would see how much like his wife's lies Genie's were. Like the lies lovers whispered--even to lovers clutched close because they looked the one who dropped you here. Buul was still on his mind, longing and pain--though dead, and in death, she had gained what everyone wanted.

But she had wanted something else, when she was with him, when she was not, in every moment, she wanted someone else.

"I want Buul--" What would be enough to identify the single Buul he meant? He cared for only one of her conviction, not all of them. "The Buul who made oil for Freewoman's Feast, a few takes back, the Buul I buried. I want her alive and with her lover, and her lover never able to be rid of her again."

Genie smiled. With teeth. White teeth, not gold. But still.

Before he could take back the wish, the mark on her forehead peeled away, floating like a feather into her cupped hands. She blew it away. Far away. Further than the moh, he suspected.

He watched it and felt a little weak-headed, not enough to stir will of Freewoman, but he did watch--

and see nothing. Just . . . nothing. Just like wishes: nothing but annoyance or pain.

He remembered how much Buul's wishing hurt her, filled her short days here.

"Would you like to see, master, the result of your wish? Do you have a source of water, master?"

Water? "We have troughs." But you wouldn't call what they contained at this time of week water. Scum, yes, with a trickle of oily moisture to float upon. He wouldn't risk his cache for a nothing.

So he guided her down the street, away from the House, and he no longer felt so naked as eyes, hidden in many buildings, watched. As he walked, the feeling of weakness did not pass, so he thought he would find his cache anyway--after he was rid of Genie.

They came upon a trough, pulled from the pit so long ago, no one knew what it once was--ironically fitting for convicts. But that didn't matter most of the time; like now, it was overgrown with the slick scum, full of bubbles like eyes. Bottom of the food chain, not even moh nibbled on it; they'd eat their own wings first. Genie sneered and drew back from it. Much like his wife would. She always had him stomp on such scum so it would feel pain for its trespass, for its existence. He scooped off handfuls and felt it quiver in his hands, and he dropped it to the ground. It slithered off shiver, by shiver, wanting wet, dark safety--and would likely reach it since nothing was desperate enough to eat it here.

"Thank you, master." Genie dipped a finger into the clean window of water, but it wasn't even a finger deep. It wouldn't stay clean long; even now, the remaining scum shivered nearer to take its brethren loss. Genie scraped water into her hands quickly, and held it out to him in cupped palms. "Watch."

In it, he saw the image of this place, as if he walked down the main street. Saw the burrows called home, the House, then the barrens moh-red from their excrement. He expected next to see the grave. A pillaged hump in the ground. Instead, clawing its way out of it, were two figures, one like a shadow, but thin, brittle, black, clutching a man who looked a little like Miha. Buul . . . still desiccated and drained of precious liquids, even more so than when she had been returned and living. Buul clutching lover, lover crawling away toward the prison city.

He felt sick again, but different this time. He closed his eyes.

"Master." Genie touched him, with a damp hand. "Does your wish satisfy?"

"No." But she already knew that. She would be smiling.

"Would you use your second wish to fix it?"

You fix? "No. I'll do that." He opened his eyes and moved away, to the House and he ripped at a broken piece, ignoring the tearing of his skin, until a sliver the length of his forearm came off. Will of Freewoman stirred, but had nothing to tear at yet, so it slept again. Genie wasn't smiling or touching him now, and hers weren't the only eyes on him. Gripping the sliver, he marched off the road, onto the burning red ground, and met Buul and lover circling the grave.

The presence of a smell, of death, wafted his way. Miha knelt and wrapped lover's trembling fingers

around the sliver, because lover couldn't stop turning his head away Buul, who was trying to slip her tongue into his ear, like she would to Miha right before she whispered the name she made up for the one who dumped her here. Now her tongue wasn't jerky, and she had no proper throat to whisper with.

Miha had to grasp Buul's hand over her lover's and guide both to stab his side. If possible, when convicts came to him, he liked them to stab the curse in his belly, stab her; now it wasn't a curse to him and wasn't feasible to get that pleasure.

The splinter jerked out and slipped through both lovers' sides, with a thick sound and a crack of jerky flesh. They fell down, together, and stopped crawling together, their hands still joined in death.

So this was the handiwork of his wish.

"Master, wouldn't it have been easier to kill them yourself? Directly?"

No. "I did."

"Mmm. So, she was an oil-maker. Did she fail to please?" Genie knelt beside him, dried excrement clinging to her legs. If it hurt her, as it did him, she did not show. "How do they treat Miha of the Feast of Freewoman if he displeases?"

Displease? How could he? No past Miha had, no future Miha beyond him would.

Genie reached out to pick at Buul's long fingers, as if to pick a snack. He caught her hand, and she smiled as she curled about his side. Her legs curled over his, using him as a mat to shield that long, bare skin from the ground. No will stirred at that, and it shouldn't; it had long since ignored the annoyance of barrens. "Are you ready for your next wish, master? Or do you need to recover. . ." She stroked a nail down to his side. "From using your power?"

No, he didn't want any more wishes. No one deserved the first.

Yet he did want.

He could think of someone who did deserve. A couple someones.

"I want--"

Genie leant closer, hands tightening on his clothing. "Yes?"

He had to word this carefully. He couldn't say take his place, or they would become Miha, and that Freewoman would notice and that would displease and that she would fix without regret--and he would regret her noticing Genie before he used this wish. "I want my brother and his wife to live here in prison and I live in her house in the slave yards. Only my brother and his wife. The wife," he added, because his brother could have remarried, or she had, "who was once my wife too." The children were innocent, even if not his, they shared his blood through his brother, and they would not be hurt by anyone's wishing. "That is my wish."

She lifted off his lap, stepped over the corpses, and turned to face him. She held out her right hand before her lips and blew with a smile. Ash hit him; ash filled the air. Grey, hot, clogging, and he couldn't sit without feeling ill. He fell onto his hands. . .on ceramic tile floor.

Tiles he laid in the house of his wife-to-be, his bride service, and his brother painted, in bride service, of the story of the wife, of the husbands, of their families, of their world dying in the plague, of Freewoman's coming, of their people begging for and receiving salvation at cost, of the world today, enslaved. He sat where the Freewoman lay like a string of pearls on the ground in artistic vision, but in reality was a row of fat pustules tended by Keepers. The will in his stomach stirred, as if hungry to be rejoined with the blister which formed it. Or it was confused at the ache in his head and in his lungs and whom to hurt in return.

Miha breathed carefully, very carefully, convincing himself and the will all was fine and unharmed. No danger here. No danger. Don't take me back. Don't fix this. Everything is all right now.

Only after he heard the delighted shouts of the twins did he believe it; only then did her will sleep. He pushed off the last of the wearing journey and pushed to his feet, though it didn't push far and neither did he, but his hands felt fine, better than fine, when he scooped the girls to him. More carefully came the boy, twice the twins' age, wearing a small smile to match the girl's laughing ones. Smiles that convinced Miha of innocence again. He clutched them all close and whispered into the good, clean smell of their golden hair, "I'm home."

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Before he felt ready to pull back, he heard a distant cry of a babe. He lifted his head and asked the boy, "Who is that?"

The restless cries and eager touches--and rivalry and less kind touches--of the twins stopped. The quiet smiling of the boy stopped. They were all still.

Genie was not; she brushed against him as she passed by, admiring the room's tiles. No eyes but his watched--saw--her. She was not there to the children; maybe had not been there to the convicts. Better that way.

"Is this satisfactory, master?" She turned and leant against the doorway--the golden teeth designs have been replaced with newer and purer since he had been gone. "Do you wish to see--?"

"We'll see later."

The children's stillness melted a bit at those words, not meant for them. Better they misunderstood and Genie understood, because he did not want to see what his hate and Genie's wish had done to their parents and he did not want the children to see him that way. He had long bloated on hatred, but he wouldn't starve in the presence of the love around him. That was all he needed to see; that was all they needed to know: love.

Later, they would sense something was amiss with their parents, but now, he only wanted to see the

children happy. He knew one way swift way to capture that. "I'm back and I am never leaving again. So, this deserves a celebration--I'll make you your favorites--"

"Baby pastries," one twin said.

The other, "And 'big girl' pastries."

He laughed at the moniker.

His laugh came out airy, not strong, weakening his good mood.

They were too busy dreaming up foods to notice. "And icing dough rings."

The other elbowed her sister. "Dough cones."

"Rings!" She elbowed back.

He had to fight another laugh. "We'll have plenty for both."

"With rednings dip. Real fresh rednings, from the tree."

"I get to pick--"

And he let it lose again, weak or not. "You both can. I'll lift you both up." He tightened his arms around their backs. "High up!"

They squealed and wriggled in his arm.

Then he added, looking to the boy, who waited quietly, watched quietly. "Of course, we can't forget the fried phawl wings. And spice bread. And something healthy to go with it."

Despite the girls' groans at that, the boy smiled, slowly, nodding, believing--as Miha did--that not all important things had been scrubbed away and replaced. That he had not forgotten. They would build new memories to replace those ruined and gone. None of them would be starving for anything anymore.

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Miha hadn't forgotten the newest--and unseen--member of the family either. The baby in the old crib was as golden as the rest, except for the eyes--brown, like his brother's. Soft brown like dirt just waiting for a doting shower. Waiting for him. And she was quiet as his brother too; quieter than the boy. His mother said his brother was like that, quiet, waiting, calculating.

He didn't want to think about him. He was building new, purer memories, and he would discard the old he didn't like. So, those eyes . . . those eyes were like his father's, patient, generous, and the quiet like the babe's strong, thoughtful, watchful--no, protective--brother. Miha smiled, then laughed. "I can guess

her favorite--she'll be the easiest to fix for." He found the mobile crib by the doorway--that was where the old gold design had gone. A soft childwrap draped over the crib, and until he began cooking, that was better. He pulled it over his shoulder, and eased the babe into the soft, golden cloth. She rested secure at his hip, staring up into his face, fingers reaching. He brushed a finger against one and she tightened her grip. "Beautiful."

But younger than he thought. How long had he been away? This beauty's mother was very round with child then.

In the silence of the room, he could hear his head pound, nothing to hide it. Nor could he hide the sound of his own breathing, heaviest in the room. He pulled back his finger, and the babe did not protest with grip or sound, to rub his forehead. It was a little damp.

He had done nothing to earn that.

The children would see that; that wouldn't make them happy.

They didn't look happy. The girls held hands, no elbowing, while the boy looked away to the floor tiles--dirty tiles. Why had no one cleaned this room, made it bright and healthy? He'd take care of it--after the girls slept and the boy studied the talent of art he inherited from his . . . grandfather.

He had to recapture the joy from before, sweet and light, so he didn't have to see them worried about him. . .around the baby. He gestured toward the door with his chin. "I believe some fruit needs picking, and some stomachs need filling." Weak, but he didn't know how else to entice them.

The girls hurried out of the room, the boy a step behind them. They did not look back. Give them a moment, give his breath a moment to even, then he'd follow. If holding a babe left him this way, how would he be able to hold the girls--or labor over the hot stoves for hours? But he would. He promised. It would be worth it.

Genie was gazing at him. No, at the babe he held close. Miha shifted her to the hip furthest from her.

She cocked her head at that and smiled. "Will you introduce them, master? So they may see me?"

"Don't talk to me while they are here, and don't come near." He turned toward the doorway, wanting to forget her for a long, long while.

But she wouldn't let him. "Master? For what crime have you been convicted?"

That he didn't expect. It was enough to make him stop and turn around. Her eyes were on the babe. "I don't know." But he suspected, as she suspected. He shifted the babe closer, so he could see her face. Their lie would take a long time to build over, and longer for all to forget. He rubbed his head. "I don't want to wish it revealed. I will know it when I make Freewoman's Feast, if it pleases her, for she never has any regrets. Not before then."

She nodded. "That was not my next question, master, but this." Her chin lifted higher, aiming toward the window and its light. "How many men came to take you?"

That he didn't expect either. He didn't like that. "I don't know." He rubbed his head, winced at the tenderness, and wiped it on his sarong.

"Interesting." She turned to look at him. "There are ten outside now; would you like to wish them away?"

"What?" He stumbled to the window, but the opening lifted high, high to the roof. Staring up at it made him dizzy, and his vision pulse. So he looked at something else. More slowly, to keep his vision and head clear. The doorway.

It was gone.

Window tiny, doorway filled: which meant the house was responding to an intruder; him. Or rather, an intruder ready to be restrained.

So that was how it was.

The children. Were they safe? They could be outside, waiting for him--or already taken. He called out for them.

The voice that called back was not theirs: "Convict ____." The forbidden name popped in his ears, a sucking of air. It made his head hurt worse, like an echoing scream. "You are surrounded," the voice, a custodian or Keeper, said.

The children. Did they hear that? He called for them. Did they hear that? No response; were they already removed to custody? When?

"Step away from the child of ____ and surrender it to safety."

Safety?

"Perhaps," Genie said and leant into his free side to whisper, "you have the answer of your crime after all."

He turned on her, stepping away. She didn't resist or even look disturbed as he grabbed her arms. "I would never--" Not to any child, especially not a babe. He looked into the brown quiet eyes at his hip.

Maybe that quiet wasn't normal.

No. No. Never believe their lie. If he had. . . done. . . he would have hunted down a Miha of his own.

"Convict ____" The message repeated.

One thing was certain; the children weren't safe with him here. If the babe's own parents used her for lies and manipulations, and forgot to order the house to protect the child from the intruders, not trap her

with one, well, then the custodians and Keepers outside would do no better. The officials made the words, the parents the motions, but in the end, reward of subduing or making a convict was more important than the welfare of innocents, of children.

He took a deep breath and used it to force quiet the quiver in his belly--all he wanted to do was break down that door, take the children, all the children, somewhere else, where no one could find them and use them, use him--instead he had to be calm, be safe, pretend all was well.

"Convict ____ -- "

Starting with that.

He blinked burning sweat from his eyes and placed the babe in the crib. She only stared; not even his shaking hands bothered a cry from her. Then he stepped away from her and identified himself by his conviction. They might not know which their money had earned.

In response came orders of further compliance: To kneel down in a corner of the room, face to the wall.

Will in his stomach tensed; not quiet, but still. He wished his head would be; the will lived when pain came, and this pain he could not still. This pain that should not be.

So he knelt.

"Master?" Miha knew she wore a broad smile. "Do you wish to flee with the children--or be free of your own crime?"

They told him to strip. He wiped his forehead, carefully, on the apron he had tied over his sarong. Then he fumbled at the knot of his sarong--long enough for a repeat order. It should be easier than that--they were made for Keeper convenience.

Like the one that must be outside listening and watching him through the walls. Licking clean the sweat of anticipation from his lips. Rubbing oily fingers down his slick wrappings or over the Freewoman idol about his waist, making the liquid slosh in those beads and the beads clack. Pain swelled in his belly at the memory.

Her will swelled, waiting, wanting.

He had little hope he would be sick and ill enough to spoil the man's pleasure or prompt him into pain.

"Master? Do you wish freedom?"

Now, they told him to close his eyes.

"No. Freewoman will fix it, if it pleases her, for she never has any regrets."

There was a pause in instructions, and from Genie. They couldn't see or hear her, but they could hear

and see him, and they would think him mad. That will make more instructions needed but not lessen Keeper's pleasure. Keeper's careful pleasure. He swallowed hard. The will made him sick with need of a target to hurt, to kill.

Keeper would see; would know; would take his time.

There were instructions again, ordering him to close his eyes. To lie down on his stomach. There was no need for that, but simple pleasure at his debasement. Keeper pleasure.

He disobeyed, he remained on his knees.

They did not repeat the orders. Instead a brown curl of smoke slithered through the window in the roof. Very sweet, cloying, twice as strong as the weaker oils on Keeper bodies and Keeper torches. He watched it amass, until he grew dizzy, and then he looked toward the baby. He hoped it wouldn't hurt her.

The will throbbed in him, like a second, faster heart. He held it with one hand and made his wish, "For each pleasure Keepers receive at a convict's body." His limbs were beginning to turn like smoke, weak, unsupported; his mind would drift like it next. He rushed the words out, "They receive a pain equal in measure. My wish, Genie." He leant against the wall, sweaty palms, chest, face, sliding down it. The angry throb of will in his belly dissipated like this smoke wouldn't, but it would be patient, ready. "My wish."

Genie moved to stand at his side, fingers teasing and playing with the smoke. "As you wish it, master, so it shall be."

He closed his eyes, then, obeying at last, waiting for the pain, all their pain, to fill the city walls and wake him again.

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Miha woke crushed by a heavy, warm weight into familiar, stinking cushions. The Keeper smell did not fade--and wouldn't until he rolled in moh-excrement--but he needed to breathe. He wheezed and wheezed for a drop of air--stupid, if Keeper wanted to breathe too--then dug his face out of the sedan and tried again. Better. He wheezed.

No Keeper was this stupid. The man must not need to breathe again, but Miha did. He pushed up, kept pushing, and pushed some more, until an inch--an inch of air was his--and an arm flopped down, off his shoulder; the arm's red, green, blue, and yellow oil streaks were smudged to browns. Miha's own arms were almost as nauseating. He did not get to look at them long. As soon as he pulled them under his chest to push some more, his strength collapsed and he sank down again. They felt as hard as the bone House, digging into his flesh, his weight digging into their blood flow. Worse, but better than when he woke. He'd give it a moment, then try again. He needed to fill up in air first.

Genie's long legs appeared before him and the edge of the sedan, her right foot bare of mark. So this was his wish. He remembered it now, but not what happened between. Just like when he was first convicted. He sucked greedily at the air, even though it made his limbs softer, mind liquid. Genie leant

over. Reached over. Her fingers wriggled like a worm between their two bodies, and she lifted the weight off him a few more inches. In that moment, she had had done more for him than his wife ever had.

"Are you satisfied, master?"

And she had hurt him worse than all of his wife's moments multiplied by the years and years of lies together.

"Master?"

He closed his eyes and grunted, shifting. She laughed and hefted the weight off; Keeper landed with a thud on his back. Where was this strength when they met, or was the answer easy as recognizing the foul behind a beautiful smile: she had yet to steal it from him? Yet to feed on him. She was feeding on him. Weight gone or not, he still felt that crush, and it came from inside. So he lay where he was, head aching, cheek sinking into ruined, stinking cushions, and he dragged his arms from under his weight. They twitched with renewed nerve and blood flow.

"You wish to know what came of your wish, since it is not so obvious this time." Genie's hands thrust beside his nose, a pool of fresh blood in her cupped hands.

That smell helped revive him enough to look about. Beyond her hip, he could see where--whom--she fetched it from. So, Keeper was not long dead. Breaths ago. Maybe the same breath he woke in. That was satisfying; not as much as watching that breath go, though, or listening to the screams that came before.

Good enough. He could rest now, satisfied. He closed his eyes.

"You should see the full effects, master."

He listened to her voice and the dull beat of his heart in his ears, like a story man's drummer. But the rhythm was too slow even for the most patient listener or story wender. But the topic kept him patient enough to stay awake.

"The men called Keepers," she began, "find no pleasure in the convict, but they do in others. Already the servants of these Keepers who wear lash marks and pain on their backs--

Bondsmen, he thought. Slaves bound to slaves.

"Wear more and take the place of convicts on couches. But the joy is meager, and their wrath ample and growing. They convicts are joyous."

He opened an eye at that.

"For the men they hate have paid in blood and pain."

He knew Genie. She was happy. There was more, something unwanted.

"One convict is not joyous. He screams." She lowered her hands so he could see the image of a naked boy lunging at a ring of Keepers. Them ordering the bondsmen back; them beating they boy down with the strings of idol. Them wincing when pleasure came. Them ordering bondsmen to strike and to toy him with flame. "They call him Utte who makes jewelry."

The boy.

His boy.

He reached for the pooled image of a shattered body, the blood and broken idols strewn about; if he listened, could he hear the sobs of broken hope because there was no name he could remember to curse?

Before he could touch him, Genie let the liquid slip from her fingers. The image broke apart. "Does this satisfy, master?" she asked as she took a seat on the naked corpse and wiped the remnants on his hair. "Or do you want to wish it away?"

The boy was only the first, now they suspected he was responsible. Keepers had paid in blood and pain; and pain and blood built little compassion. What compassion would be shown his family? More--all--convicted? There were dozens of convictions, and there were more than dozens in his family; they would double. Their bodies would be drained for oil. Fat made into soap. Bones into jewelry. Bodies, meat.

All because of him. Because he was unreachable for revenge; direct revenge. But his children were expendable. It would be a long while before the twins arrived here, long after he was gone for meat, for it never pleased Freewoman to take children. Not her flavor or favor. She could only stand the foul, and best yet, innocents--victims--fouled. She liked her meat--her Miha--well spoiled. It would take many years before the children grew old enough to please her, but children could please Keepers now.

Maybe right now.

He gasped, "My children--"

"Yes, master?" She sat up straight. "What about your children. Do you want them with you? The boy free?"

"The children," he gasped the correction himself; legally they belonged to his wife. When he had the breath, he added, "My family. All who share my blood."

"Yes?"

So eager. Careful. She would twist this; but how?

Better not to wish?

What else to do?

"Master?" She got up and cupped his chin, to guide him to more air, to keep him aware. "What is your wish, master?"

He had to. Their only hope. "They--they won't be hurt. None who . . . whose blood is in common with mine. They . . . I don't want them . . . to lose their name. Or become . . . convict. Or used. No one's . . . toy. Safe."

His held felt thick. So she didn't just steal his strength, she stole his mind, wish by wish, worse than the oil, because she was stealing him. But what else could he do?

Genie let him go to grant his wish, and he let go too.

* * *

Genie woke him when she moved him onto his back. Again when she poured something down his throat. Cold, clotty; tasted like Keepers. He choked it up, or tried. His lungs weren't strong enough, but it was strong enough. Will of Freewoman was numb and did not wake.

"Shh," Genie said, and pushed more down his throat. "It is drink your Keepers left." She stopped when he she wanted to, sat back, and rested a hand on his belly. "I did not think it was needed. Your . . . power gives you strength and life; how do you need more?"

But he did, and didn't care about that now. He looked around to see where she found the drink. A basket rested before where the door once was--he couldn't see what little it held, if anything else. Didn't matter. Keepers would feed him, one way or another, for they believed it took longer for more fat to be chewed off than all lean and bone. Not that Freewoman chewed; needed a mouth for that.

Genie stroked his belly again, drawing designs in the dried liquid streaks with a nail. "It took a long while, master, but I granted your wish."

Took a while to turn it foul, she meant. Because she knew so little. Too little of the people, convicts, life. She only saw what she wanted, a way to ruin things.

"Are you listening, master?" She patted his belly. "Your wish." She uncurled her left leg and poised beside his nose. Then she settled back on herself like a hungry moh folding over . . . anything slow.

Did he want to know?

She did not wait long enough to let him decide, so eager to hurt, so hungry to drain. She leant over him, quick, cold breath on his cheek. Then her lips brushed against his ear. "In death, your blood-common are safe."

In death.

Death.

"I would show you master, but there is no more family to see."

They were. . . .

"Lie." He gasped. He tried to sit up. To hurt her. But her hand held him down. "Liar. Not my wish."

"How did I lie? How is it not? They felt no hurt. They will never lose their name or freedom. They will never be hurt or used. They are safe." She smiled. "Are you not satisfied, master?"

* * *

After that, he wanted to sleep a long time, forever, but his regrets kept him awake. So did she. That had been his mistake; she should have burned. Dead. He should not have traded one prison for another. His next wish might kill him, might not, but Freewoman would fix it, him, since it pleased her, and she never regretted, and would it kill Genie? She grew strong as she drained him; but death was another matter. Genie would be . . . safe, elsewhere, if she were smart, or, if not, what? Freewoman's too?

Not good enough.

"What do you want, master?" Genie lifted herself off her seat on the corpse's belly to sit on his, holding herself over him, nose to nose, breath to breath. Many of her breaths to his . . . breath. Cold. "Your family returned?"

Dead. You dead.

Me dead.

Freewoman dead.

Was any of that possible? Please. But no, they had the power. He only had the want. It would end the same anyway--then it came to him: a maybe, a tiny hope. "I want . . . to be Genie."

She reared up. Something on her face . . . he recognized it, because he had worn it for so long. Hate. So he beat her at last. Yes. Finally. But then hatred broke apart with laughter. So it was not enough, only almost a win. But something.

He'd take that.

Genie placed her hand on his dry lips, making them bleed, making the will almost twitch, and then she blew the ash with laughter into his gaping mouth. "So you shall be. For the few breaths I need to take your body."

Energy pooled inside him like sunshine in the babe's room. Freewoman's will was stirring. He wasn't hurt; Genie wasn't dead; it didn't matter.

All regrets faded to new strength, hungry strength, growing. But he could not move.

She touched her body with her fingertips; made slits in her skin with her palms like knives. One down each leg. Down each arm. Up through chin to crown. She folded back the bits over her face, and he saw nothing lying beneath. The skin fell back like a hood. "This body is out of wishes to give." She folded back the bits off her chest and arms. No heart inside; just nothing. "This body belonged to a woman who belonged to a man, in the name of their people and law. Still belongs to him in his death." She pulled her skin down her hips, revealing more nothing. "This body was his wife. This body was married to him since birth." She shuffled the skin down her legs, wriggling on the sedan between his knees. "This body was his sister. When this body ran out of wishes, it was mine, and I was her, and she was aware. She was wonderful."

If she could, she smiled. "Ah, but your world? A feast. Blooming with corruption. A garden of unrivaled beauty. But only on the outside; inside they are shriveled and bear no seed." She peeled the skin off her feet like a tease and tossed it aside. He couldn't see where it landed; his head did not move. "It tortures you so, to see the possibilities here, to pluck them, but find them unfilling and empty. They are bled too much. Your Freewoman's 'fixing'."

He felt her touch, though she had no hands. He could feel her draw lines down his face with her absent fingers. It didn't hurt. Will stirred, but couldn't find anything to give pain to.

"If," Genie said, "I thought your Freewoman were dumb as you I would go to her next." Genie drew slits down his chest and arms. "But I suspect she's not wearable or free. But very corrupt." Down his legs. "The wishes I could drain from her, but I'll settle for something else."

Ah, and she does make lovely gifts, he thought. Doesn't she?

You think you can keep it, her will, and suffer nothing. Take it to each body. But gifts are like wishes, and many things make a prison. Like wishes.

Like homes.

Like bodies.

Like selling freedom for safety, for life.

Like Freewoman's pleasure.

Like that will planted in his belly for her, and it would displease her greatly for it to be planted somewhere else. And then. . . well, at least, he would be Genie until he was fixed.

"Oh, Miha. You wanted to be me?" Genie peeled open his face. "Miha, this, this is Genie." She reached inside his head. "This is me. Only me."

It was then he realized Freewoman's lie--to regret nothing was to want nothing. Freewoman wanted much, as much as Genie, maybe more.

What did he want? What he lost. But they were gone. He had nothing, no family, no hope, no way to fix things, nothing to stop him from letting go, except for regrets, and he was tired of regretting--why regret something that didn't exist anymore?

Want nothing.

Regret nothing.

Let go.

So he did, just let go of everything, and this was real freedom, something ever-wanting Genie and ever-wanting Freewoman could never touch.

This was him.

Free.

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