

Lost Sleep

by Hejjeka

A Tékumel Short Story dreamed early AM 24th July 2001

"I hate bodyguard work. I awake with more nightmares about those ignoble, accursed jobs than almost anything else I've done for the Emperor. [Forever may they reign, if not live ...]

It's not the work itself. Most of it is an exercise in meditation. The senses only follow that which is out of place: the awkward gesture; the misplaced courtesy; the pupils of a food taster who sampled the after-dinner powders- before his task...all the while gazing soft-eyed and insouciant at the finery all around, wearing little more than the arrogance of the nobleman I pretend to be.

That's part of the job. The magi and sense-gifted look, however they may, and search for untoward sorcery, as I, and the rest of us servants of the "All-powerful Blue," do our non-magical duty while trying not to get fat, stoned, sleepy, or otherwise bored unconscious.

The part of the dream that awakens me comes after it's too late. I see that strange head-bow. I awake with a hiccough, or some other unpleasant sensation, sit up, listen, scan the room (and whomever might be sleeping with me) and pause in silence, redirecting the energies of my body. The blockage in my head and stomach flows into my pedhetl, for later use, and drains out between the second and third vertebrae, as it should.

Re-balanced, I return to sleep and dream the entire scene again, this time in order.

The first poet after dinner wasn't quite up to the affected standards of our host. My noble charge turned up his nose and said, "La, the performers of epics aren't what they were, neh?" to the sycophants and 'those without productive work' around us. He removed several coins from the small pouch before he handed it to the young woman who had just finished reciting an epic from memory. She gave polite thanks and fled, as manners would allow.

The dancers that followed pleased Lord K- and his retinue much more. The five men and women of the troupe were lithe, strong, gymnastic, and uninhibited. They performed a raucous, and blatantly sexual routine, with two drummers and a low-pitched foreign stringed instrument player as accompanists. [I had already examined all the props used by all the performers before the show.] They cleverly incorporated one of the two N'luss standing guard beside the performers' end of the room.

After a nod of approval for our host, they climbed and gyrated all around and over him, much to his amusement- but not to that of his female partner across the room...When they finished their long set, everyone present was smiling, and only I wasn't thinking of later entertainments.

They took their bows, received their extra purses, discreet huzahs, and offers of later employment, and bowed out. They each "saluted" some portion of the N'luss guardsman, and conscript dancer, on the way.

The next epic poet stepped forward, from the same "stage door" from which the dancers exited. She looked even more uncomfortable than the first. She paused, cleared her throat, and politely asked for a moment to compose her mind.

Our host was not amused: "What has proper entertainment become? Are dancers to upstage "noble" tellers of the epics? Get on with it, the jugglers after you will make us forget your incompetence."

"Please have patience my dear Lord, she may do better," chided one of his wives.

The harmless comment provoked a look of rage in Lord K-. He burned his eyes through the somewhat older woman and said, "So may I," as he looked at the make-up covered bruises on her face, which everyone else in the room had to pretend were beauty marks.

He turned back to the poetess and said, "Get on with it."

She did. It was not, however, a recitation of the anticipated epic. She began with what everyone recognized as the Tale of Melisethe', Beloved of Dilinala. Her audience was so surprised at the change that they listened carefully for quite a while. Her delivery was not only better, as Lord K's wife suggested it might be, but flawless.

Her alto voice smoothly copied and enlivened the lines of the story, until she did the unthinkable again: she changed it. In her version, Melisethe' carried on her latest dalliance with a powerful nobleman, not his wife, as in the version with which all were familiar. She continued the affair until she discovered how he beat and abused his other women, as he could never do with her.

The gasps started at about the point when the tale described the heroine's plans to stop her lover's ignoble behavior. Lord K- shook off his powder like a dog coming out of a swamp, pushed himself to his feet and stumbled down the daises toward the performer. She continued as if she were unaware of him.

He punched her, hard. That shocked most everyone else in the room, but didn't bring me to my feet. Her fall did.

Like the epic performance, it was perfect. She rolled with the blow on the chin the instant before she "collapsed" back in a heap "like a woman." Only the two N'luss and I saw how she "sold" the punch and, broke her fall like a Hirilakte arena acrobat. It was already too late when we moved.

The Aridani N'luss guardswoman tossed me her shortsword, as she drew the great one from her back. I caught it as I sprang to my feet, scanning the room to check for accomplices.

Her lover, the other N'luss guardsman across the room, drew even faster. The poison one of the dancers had already injected into him coursed through his veins with his sudden action. He started falling before his third step.

That was almost simultaneous with the red fountain from Lord K's throat. Our poetess had thrown her knife true to form: from the sitting portion of the roll back to her feet. She sprang to the falling N'luss, and had his shortsword from his scabbard before he hit the floor.

I yelled a warning to his lover. Stupid, passionate, barbarian: she loosed a scream of grief and rage, as she struck to take the assassin's head, on the run. The strike deflected less than a palm's breadth over her target as she ran by, now trailing her insides from the simple blade-tip-down cut in return.

The N'luss died on the floor together. I faced off with the poetess. The rest of the guards would arrive in moments.

She had to deal with me before she could run for it. The strikes came low, high, then across my body. Each took me a fraction more off guard. The last would have left me like the N'luss woman, but I slid back to disengage. [As you can see, I kept the scar.]

She stamped in to finish me, like a gladiator. I blocked, then stop-thrust in her face, the point almost above her nose. She paused, just out of reach, as she glided back onto guard.

Before the flash, I saw what I swear was a slight bow of her head, her brown eyes never leaving, nor focusing upon, my face. The image seared in as the clay "egg-shell" she dropped shattered on the floor and released its contents. I heard her bare feet on the hardwood as she ran.

The "poetess," "dancers," and "jugglers" of the Assassin's Clan had cut their way out of the house, and into the underworld, before my eyes cleared. I ordered the relieved guards not to follow them down.

The healers, Servants of the God Ketengku, arrived soon after and did what they could. They could not revive my charge, but they did calm his fellow clanfolk, rather quickly. His first wife seemed particularly consolable.

Her clan brothers and sisters, when informed of the incident, seemed unsurprised and relieved. They posted a reward for the murderers which has never been collected.

I received my promotion a few months later. The lack of hearing, or a tongue, has improved my writing. It also forced me to learn the sign language of our Legion, which seems so second-nature now.

Sorry to have awakened you. Thanks for putting up with to another one of my stories. Go back to sleep."

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