

The Fugitive Waits

by Jack Ales-Oruam

It was a three-dog night. A lone hooded figure stumbled amid the darkness, slamming periodically against a head of lettuce or a fence post that lined the uneven, rocky path.

She turned now to look over her shoulder — nothing — and fell headlong into yet another garden patch. Grimacing from either the pain or the cold or both, she dragged herself up, spitting dirt.

Her sore head echoed with her friend's reasons for running from her father and living in the dingy three-room shack with its serpentine dirt path.

She stood there in the cold, under the good-as-nothing hood, wondering.

How could her friend, so blessed, all of a sudden renounce her doting father's love? How could her friend like an escaped convict, submit herself to hunkering down in obscure corners of the earth, changing her name at a whim just to avoid his ever-watchful eyes? And her excuse, "He loves me too much"....

The hooded woman frowned and shook her head. She was filled with questions. Why was she coming here — to this ramshackle hovel of a friend so ungrateful? The wind rushed by her and she heard the faint sound of barking. And then she knew why she was coming. And she ran.

Her feet flew in wild abandon. The cushioned plod of each footfall upon the dirt path was just audible over her sharp intakes of breath.

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She couldn't tell that she was in pain, she couldn't tell that she was afraid, she couldn't tell that the air around her nipped her numb.

Until she tumbled once again. There, on the edge of the path, she tossed another cursory glance over her shoulder as if she were tossing away water from a listing boat.

She tried to reorient herself, feeling on hands and knees for the path so that she would not venture off of it. As she looked around, a flickering light in the distance caught her eye. Though it was still some ways away, her weary body told her that she had only one option. So, she returned her attention to the near-impossible task of navigating the winding, narrow peat path in the dark. She hadn't traveled it in a few weeks and, even when she had come around regularly, it had always proven miserable or, at the very least, annoying. She was encouraged, though, by the open arms of the light and the warmth that she envisioned beyond it.

She shivered as a gust blew — the chilly teeth of a comb, ridding the world of stragglers.

Between her half-frozen ears and flushed cheeks, a battle between a hopeful smile and an exhausted moue idled at a stalemate.

As she neared the shack, the fickle lantern light cast an eerie silhouette over the residence and the surrounding garden.

As if she had a chronic tic, she cast another furtive glance over her shoulder and realized that she wouldn't have seen anyone coming up behind her anyway. It was dark. She would never grow accustomed to the dark.

Her eyes shone out like beacons from beneath the shadowy hollow of her hooded shawl. The freezing night air bit through with

ease, a sieve to the fearsome barking dogs from below. She shivered in her soul.

A purr met her as she closed the distance separating her from the slanted, sagging wooden porch. A smile lit her face as the tug-of-war tide turned. She tossed back her shawl. Her ears clawed out with icy barbs of protest, but she threw them no consideration as she scanned the tall grasses that now lined the path.

She continued moving forward, locked into her thorough search, until her face was scratched by the raking fingers of the stupid tree. She grunted, muffling a curse that was gliding its way up her throat, and pulled her head away from the tree's calloused touch. Some of the smooth and glossy jewels hanging temptingly low from the tree brushed against her bosom like needy dark hands. She swatted them aside and looked around her, wondering how she had meandered so far into the deepest entrails of the tree without noticing.

Then, with a drawn-out insistence, came a second purring and she forgot about the tree and set about on her search again.

She found Bast, the pensive, yet adorable, white kitty lounging on the pillow cushion of one of the twin wicker seats that sat on either side of the porch's welcoming mouth.

Scooping the cat up from his cozy enclave, she revealed a mouth of sparkling white teeth, each a bead of crystalized joy. They had been of little use as of late. She put the hood of the shawl back over her head and rapped at the flimsy plastic screen door, hoping that this would not be the time it keeled over in a dramatic-staged death that it seemed to have been plotting for months.

Through the door came a curse and the forced shuffling of feet. Bast curled up in the woman's arms, tucking her tail over her face

and resuming her repose while adoring fondles of love fell upon her from the hooded woman.

The bead curtain behind the door parted just enough to reveal the downcast gaze of a once-comely woman who had evolved to take on homely features. Her neglected face cried out for more than make-up, but for purpose and cheer. But the orbs of sadness lurched backward into her face, like the diffident eyestalks of a snail., A tentative but genuine smile crept across her face, eating her countenance in a deliberate, almost ruminant manner, as if it didn't know what to do when set free.

“Steph!”

The hooded woman's eyes stole a quick glance away from the cat.

“Hey,” Steph mustered from under the paisley shawl.

“What're you doing here?” the woman at the door inquired in a voice laced with enthusiasm and curiosity.

“I...I...uhm,” Steph stammered from her dark recess. She shook her head, turning her gaze to the warm, soft purrs emanating from her cradled arms. She shifted her weight between her feet. “Can I come in?” she finally asked, more to the cat than to the woman at the door.

“Of course, of course,” the woman at the door ushered her in, opening the door with one hand and parting some of the bead curtain with the other. “Please do come in. It must be chilly out there. I can feel it from in here.” She continued, closing the door behind Steph. “I actually had some tea on the stove. I'll toss on another cup. Make yourself comfortable.”

Her bare feet padded off down the entry hallway, the only one in the house, from which all three living spaces branched. An avid conversationalist, she didn't leave the air between them quiet for long.

"You know that your mom was around here the other day, practically tearing her hair out trying to find you?" she called out to her visitor over the din of clanging china from the kitchen. "I assumed that you didn't want me to say anything, so I told her that I had no idea where you were, but Lios...God.... Lios has a damn big mouth! I heard that he told her anyway. Probably broke 'er heart."

Steph had made her way through the door in no particular hurry and, after a few steps into the hall, she had turned into the cove of couches that fed off of the hallway. There, she dropped herself onto the middle section of the curving mouth of couches with a sigh, keeping a careful eye on her precious white bundle so as not to disturb its sleep.

"Steph? You gonna say anything?" asked the once-pretty woman as she maneuvered around the island center-table, setting down two saucers and two cups, and plopped onto the far end of the bay of couches. She took a sip from her cup and set it down again. As she swallowed, her eyes took in Steph who was engrossed in petting Bast. "You and cats...they're going to start calling you Purr-Stephanie someday."

The comment elicited a grin from her hooded companion who sighed again before setting Bast down beside her on the couch. The cat's ears perked up as it reacted to its new position. Bast made as if to protest, lifting her head an inch before seemingly deciding that it was too much work, and resituating, with an almost-huffy air, upon the couch.

"Evelyn, I..."

"It's Lyn, Steph! Come on! Get it right!" she barked with a scowl.

At the outburst, Steph shrank back further into her shawl and, within seconds, Lyn had crawled over the wool couch and put a hand on her friend's shoulder.

"Sorry, Lyn," Steph mumbled.

"No, I'm sorry," Lyn replied, raising her friend's chin and pushing aside the shawl. "I shouldn't have yelled at you."

Steph's usually innocent-blue eyes were dry and red as if someone had left them outside on a summer day. Her face was gaunt and near-ghostly as opposed to the creamy, beach-sand hue that had always lit Lyn green with envy. Now, looking eye-to-eye, Lyn's eyes grew wider as she looked into a face that she didn't know.

"What's the matter, Steph?"

"I...I'm his, Lyn," she said, her voice flat and devoid of emotion and hope. "I can't be his, Lyn!!"

"He can't be that bad, girl," Lyn smirked and nudged her solemn friend. "Don't you like those go-getter types?"

"Lyn, you don't understand," she swallowed, brushing some maverick wisps of hair from her face. "I never wanted him, but they tell me that I must marry him."

The resignation stumbled off her tongue. Her eyes were aloof. Her hands refused to stop fidgeting.

"Hm. I heard a rumor that your mum was gonna withhold a few months-worth of food and stuff to bargain for you..." Lyn mentioned

before trailing off to a low mumble, hoping her next comment wouldn't upset Steph. "I kinda thought you might get along with him."

Steph shook her head in a definite "no" and picked up her cup of tea from the center table. It was black tea, like they always had. Steph brought the cup to her face, surveying her sanguine reflection in its agitated surface. Staring into the cup, she seemed to drift away, losing sense of time and place. The reddish surface reminded her of the lifeless depths from which she had come and sent chills throughout her body.

She shivered violently and the tea sloshed up out of the cup onto her lap. It was still piping hot and she winced as she felt it contact her skin. Out of her momentary trance, she looked back at the cup with wonder and fear. She didn't want the memories that came with the black tea, so she put it aside again.

Lyn pretended not to notice.

The house was dim and hazy and in the silence between the two women, Steph dared to sniff the air. She picked up an odd, fruity smell that wafted along like a lazy bird on a high current.

She spotted the source of the smell in a sconce hanging halfway up the wall in the hallway across from the couches. Sticks of incense peeked out like hatchlings from a nest. Light wreaths of the aromatic smoke took flight before beginning their deliberate, parachute-ride down and finally disappearing amid the rest of the almost-heavy vapor that hung like a low cloud.

She watched as one ribbon of smoke wriggled like a fish out of water and was preparing to identify another member of the vaporous menagerie when, suddenly, Bast hopped down from the

couch and pattered over to the hallway, tail raised. She disappeared down the hall in the direction of the front door.

Lyn coughed.

The silence was overbearing now and she struggled to break the stale air that stood not even an arms-length between them.

“So...umm...”

Like a saving grace for an actor who had forgotten her lines, there came a scratching sound at the door and they heard the parting of the beads. A familiar man stepped into the hallway and his eyes darted over the women seated together.

“Hey dear. Hi Steph. Hope I'm not interrupting something.”

“No, no, honey, you're fine,” Lyn replied with a wan smile.

He held a half-eaten apple in one hand and a thick black briefcase in another. A dress-shirt and slacks fit tightly on his stocky frame. His eyes flitted like flies. He chewed with his mouth open, smacking with vigor.

“Honey,” Lyn began, freezing him as he took a step to leave, “didn't the doctor tell you not to eat before your surgery tomorrow?”

“Mmmph,” he managed mid-bite, spitting some apple amid the uncouth consonants. “Yeah...docs, they say all kinds of weird shit.” He munched along. “This apple shouldn't cause any harm. I mean, they're good for you, right?” More munches. “Anyway, they say an apple a day'll keep a doctor away, so maybe I won't have my op, t'morruh.”

The sounds of more eager munching followed him further down the hallway.

“Oh, and Steph, you look like a mess,” he called back at them. “Psychiatrists will be following you around like stray dogs. They're worse than docs, ya know. You should try an apple.” The sound of a door opening and closing reached their ears.

Lyn shook her head in amusement, but that died like the tide against craggy rocks when she saw that Steph had pulled her shawl back over her golden locks.

“Oh well,” she thought, hoping that her friend would take her sadness home soon.

Instead, as if on cue, Steph's voice rose from the hood. Each of her syllables was slow and drawn-out, enunciated to a T. Her eyes were still on the sconce and she appeared to be talking to herself.

“So, how are you, Lyn? How are things with your dad?”

Whatever smile Lyn had left became magnetized straight toward the center of the earth. She fidgeted and her eyes joined Steph's on the sconce.

“He...uh...he called today. He found us.”

“You didn't expect to be able to hide from him forever, did you?” Steph asked, now resting her eyes back on Lyn.

Lyn shifted again.

“Well...I was hoping that we'd move again, stay incognito...”

She went quiet.

“So, what are you going to do?” Steph prodded.

“Well,” Lyn conceded, crestfallen, “There's no use running now.” She nodded further down the hall. “Hubby doesn't know yet. He'll flip.”

Steph nodded, somewhat interested.

“Umm...he's supposed to be here some time tonight, not sure when,” she looked up at Steph, alternating between wringing and clenching her hands together until they blanched. “Uh...you know...” she continued, “since he's coming, he could help you figure out what to do with your situation too.” Her voice fell to a whisper. “Maybe it'd take some of the heat off me and hubby.”

Steph ignored the fact that she was being used. She smiled.

“That'd be great,” she chirped, some life returning to her voice.

Lyn shook her head to herself, wondering how anyone could stand her father, but grateful that Steph had agreed.

“Yeah, he's like a jack of all trades, so your thing is definitely up his alley.”

“Lyn,” Steph corrected her, “he's the jack of all trades.”

“Hm, yeah,” Lyn nodded absent-mindedly. “Well, I'm going to go change before he comes. Might break the news to my sweetheart too.”

She rose from the couch, cleared the saucers and tea-cups, and shuffled on down the hall.

“Make yourself at home, Steph,” Lyn called out over her shoulder.

Steph rose, a little livelier than before.

“I’ll actually wait for him outside,” she said to nobody in particular.

Gathering her hanging shawl close around her, she stepped into the hallway, past the bead curtain and the screen door, and out onto the porch. The chill remained and hounded her anew, but she bore it this time. She stood at a corner of the porch where the overhanging roof hung a little lower than the rest, but allowed her an unobstructed view down the path.

The garden stood, imposing on either side, and the trees stood stock-still like dark sentries. She recognized the distinct outline of the tree under whose cavernous arms she had trespassed earlier in the night. She picked up the lantern and stood it on the railing so that the rays illuminated the section of the garden closest to the porch.

In the glare of the beams, the deep crimson apples swayed in the wind, like beads of sacrificial blood ready to drop. At the base of the tree, Steph could now make out the broken figures of a few rotting apples, their lives long gone, like lies.

She reached into the depths of her shawl and felt around until she had gathered up all of them. She pulled them out in a fist and, with one great heave, tossed out the last of the pomegranate seeds toward the tree.

She backed away from the railing and put down the lantern. As she did, the wind carried the sound of a hissing to her ears. She said a quick prayer and shook away the thoughts that plagued her

mind as she settled into one of the wicker chairs. She brought the shawl a little closer and leaned back, looking out into the garden.

Moments later, something pressed insistently into her lap and she looked down to see Bast pacing, circling, and finally settling into her lap again. They sat there together, warming each other and waiting for him.

