

Cloth Cutter

Our one God is veiled and sequestered. No one in our clan is permitted to see him. Those who need guidance consult the sacred writings, which have been compiled over centuries from historical accounts.

My over-father, the man who began my family line, was the first cutter of the cloth. How he fell into that job is impossible to say. The only suitable explanation now is Divine appointment: the one God assigned him. Answering that call, he found blades in the rocks and disrobed the frayed Splint Wood to make the cloth. No one is certain where the statue came from; nor speaks of it.

It lives in the ceremonial cave. Or so say the cave dwellers, those whose sole purpose is the ceremony of the Seeing. They are the only ones, besides the infrequent Chosen (the Eyes, as we call them) to look on the statue with any regularity, to maintain its secret habitat. It is through their pious assurances that we know of the statue. We believe what we are told.

I am the only one whose Faith has a supplement of fact. I have seen the statue in its chamber. I have dressed and undressed it. Always modestly. Always spreading the new cloth over the old one. Only then do I pull the old one free, out from under the new one, so that nothing is revealed.

I do not touch the statue either, never once in 20 years. As occurs in my clan, I will die of old age very soon, before I turn 30, and if the cave dwellers decree, my four hands, like those of all my fathers since the first, will be cut from my wrists and planted in the earth for new Splint Wood.

The only grove of it is beside my small cottage. I sometimes gaze at it coldly from the window by my worktable. I cut the cloth like my fathers and think of our hands while I work. They are clasped across time.

It is not unusual for me to think this way, although I would not share the ideas out loud if the chance came. I am the only member of the clan to live alone. I am lonely at times, despite ceaseless devotions.

Of course, the cave dwellers need a son from me to continue the work of cutting the cloth. Periodically they deliver a female to my door, instructing her in whatever methods they imagine for engaging me. They must be aware I seldom participate, or else why send another?

I am waiting for the last one. I am convinced my fathers did too. I can feel it in my blood that my conception was another man's final mortal act. A last cutting of the cloth that was himself. I am the extracted tiny square.

Or else we are too much aware, after all the isolation, that the cave dwellers will never let cloth cutters see their own children. And how painful it would be to produce any in that darkness. To know they're out there. Unknowable. Doomed to a life as a cloth cutter, if not already in one!

No, the imagination prohibits encouraging that outcome. The end will draw near soon and I will do my duty to the clan, but not before. I will concentrate on my work and never forget why I am waiting.

It is not like I run out of cloth to cut, cloth to make, cloth to make and then cut. I visit the Splint Wood too often, I believe, but each time I find its long nails need pruning and its joints push new fingers.

I take the clippings inside and unweave them. The loose fibers are fine and strong. I am nimble by now and a large pile begins to form. It is the moonlight that changes it from silver to black.

After that I can re-weave it, not into its original small pieces, but a unified cloth of sufficient proportion to conceal the whole statue, whose dimensions I dare not record, and prefer not to remember.

It is like I am guessing each time, so I try for something large. It is critical for a cloth cutter that he doesn't under do it. The one God must not feel the damp air of the chamber directly, except where the cloth has been cut.

Then again, overdoing it is also a blunder, and the cloth cutter must balance these hazards on the edge of his blade. He must never force the Splint Wood to yield more than it prefers. It will curl into fists.

I have never created that gesture, but I see it in my dreams when my sleep is speaking to me, warning me of arrogance, recklessness, pride. I awaken before the window, familiar by now with how I got there. I stare over the grove and stretch my fingers toward the two shining moons as a pledge.

They claim a filament of silver for each dream, so that all these years later, the resulting blackness in my knuckles is absolutely undeniable. When it swells to perfect darkness, my last days will be cut.