

On the Verge Writing Contest 2020, Second-Place Fiction Winner

By Rowan Ross Baird Lister

Guest by the Pine

Hama woke on the most special of days. It was a day she would receive a guest, and a very special one at that. She didn't get many guests on the mountain, but this one had been a long time in coming.

Her joints ached as they always did in the early hours. After dressing in the shirt made from sack cloth, brown to hide her better, she set to breakfast in the pot that had been a helmet. She washed the mashed tubers down with some nettle tea, always best for her joints. Her breakfasts were become less frequent. Already the food dwindled. She stepped through the door, picking up the old sickle that lay beside the steps. It was worn from the many times her father had used it to reap wheat and, in the end, souls. Now she used it to gather herbs. Today she'd had another task for it.

Behind her, the crags of the mountain stretched to the sky, framing the great blue with white capped spires. How nice it was to live on a mountain side, even if she had been driven to this ledge, for fear of death.

At the bluff, where the grass started to give way to the basalt beneath, she could see the whole valley, her body shaking not from the cold, but from fear. Down there a sprinkling of lodges squatted by the river, cooking smoke and song carrying their trails into the air. Pleasant though it seemed, murderers lived down there. She remembered the mint that used to grow by her house on the water, how it always stuck to father's clothing. She heard his voice in the wind, explaining the properties of chanterelles, cupping one in between his worn brown fingers. She bit her lip.

"Damn raiders." Hama muttered.

Her orchard was quiet as ever as she cut the sage and heather in bundles, her hands working dexterously. There was no sign of her guest. No smelly scat among the roots of the barren apple trees, nor the stink of his urine. Perhaps he'd chosen to stay home today.

She bent down to examine the growth of oyster mushrooms on an old stump. These would be good in a stew, if only she had any rabbit to put in with them. Her guest did have such a large appetite for rabbits. He was a carnivore after all.

She straightened and walked towards the headstones. It was time to visit the family. She bundled up the sage and heather into small bunches, laying each at precisely the same place in front of each cairn. Scraping the lichen off of relatives, family members, even a sister as she passed them by, she whispered the words of honor to each, making sure the carvings describing their deeds could be seen. This was her job. The frail old women who looked the dead.

Tending to them was lonely and thankless. If there was one thing she wished for more than to meet her guest, it would be to have someone up here, just to talk to.

The nettle tea was doing its work, and Hama scampered all the quicker, excitement beating back the despair at the prospect that of finally ridding herself of a chronic pest.

Could she do this deed? If she had indeed received this guest, could she go through with what needed doing? She couldn't exactly offer him nettle tea now could she? He had been a fair share

of trouble himself, and it was her duty to stop him from ruining things. How lonely it was to have to make decisions on her own.

She made up her mind, heading over to the western corner of her mountain ledge. Here were her only companions, aside from the dead. The rabbit-hutch was a squat and worn affair, moss covering the rotting box. It had been painted red when it was first build, but the color had long since peeled off. In it, Hama saw her own wrinkled skin. Like Hama, it was becoming a relic of the past.

The lodgepole pine which stood behind was upright, not bent. That was encouraging. She tightened her grip on the sickle, advancing the same way she had seen the Lowlanders march.

She smelled him now. The air carried the rank scat and the oily musk he seemed to leave behind on everything. She imagined his grey fur and yellow teeth, no doubt half a rabbit in his mouth. These were familiar smells, but she had never had the pleasure of a formal meeting. It was time to greet her guest.

She turned the corner, anticipating the delicious look of humiliation she would get to see on this thief's face as he hung from the lodgepole pine, not cautious enough to avoid the rope snare which had been laid at the very base of the rabbit hutch. Her father had taught her to trap before he died. She had worried that this would not be big enough to catch him. And she had been right.

The rope had sprung, dangling from the top of the lodgepole pine, but it had been gnawed short and the snare which would have caught the thief's leg was gone with him, likely to some crag higher up on the mountain.

"Bloody animal."

The rabbits were fine in their hutch, no blood nor fur strewn about the ground, but she felt annoyance at her guest's rude absence. She couldn't even catch a damn thief, let alone keep herself hidden from the killers that lived below. She drew in a deep breath. Why was his smell still in the air?

A low growl sounded from behind her. Turning slowly, she saw him.

"You!"

He was beautiful in a way, all grey and silver fur, teeth not yellow but white. His face had a roguish look about it, like her husband Hakoda's before they had killed him. But it was his eyes that caught her. Rose gold, like the copper bangles she had tucked away from her mother.

But there was danger beneath the beauty. His lips were curled back to reveal his white teeth and he had flattened himself against the ground, ready to pounce on his hunter.

She raised the sickle over her head, her heckles up as much as his. Her hand hovered there for a moment. Could she end his life? He was wounded, starving more like it. His stomach as hollow and curved as her own. He was hiding from those below just as she was. He didn't mean any harm; he was no raider. He was just hungry.

That stopped her. That she could not abide by. She would not be a raider. Reaching into her tunic, to one of the herb pockets, she pulled out a piece of dried rabbit meat, having saved it for lunch that day. She held it out to him, his ears pricking all the more and lips drawing back further. Then he smelled it, and his mood changed almost immediately.

“You’re a hider like me aren’t you my boy?” she asked comfortingly. She coaxed him and cooed to him and finally threw the bit of rabbit to him. He snapped it up, licking his chops and sniffing for more. When the realization that there was no more hit him, he did not growl, he did not bark, he simply stared at her with his great yellow eyes, silently regarding her.

Then, something caught his nose and he started towards the headstones, as quickly as he had come. Hama let out a sigh of relief, walking back to the cabin on the edge of the bluff.

She smiled to herself. Perhaps tomorrow she’d leave some blueberries out for him. He’d like that, she was sure. It would be nice to finally have someone to talk to.