

Justice

By

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Brother Michael stood on the platform next to a tall figure covered by a brown tarp. All Lucy could see under the tarp was the corner of the cement base of the monument.

She sighed. "He's gonna shout a prayer, isn't he?"

"Of course. Be quiet and show some respect."

She looked away from her father and rolled her eyes. "I just want to see the monument. Why can't he just show it to us first?"

"Would you stay to listen to the prayer?"

"No." She looked up at him in surprise. "Why would I do that?"

"That's why he won't show it first." He smiled down at her.

"But..."

"Hush!" He frowned.

Lucy fell into a sullen silence.

Brother Michael spread his arms wide and turned his palms to the sky. He smiled at the crowd below him, then closed his eyes and threw his head back. "Spirits of the Earth!" he cried and his voice echoed through the valley. "We have created this monument to honor the strength and power that we fear in you and that brings the rain that nourishes us!"

Lucy rolled her eyes again and looked around. Everyone else had their palms together at their chests, their heads bowed and their eyes closed. Everyone except Aldous. Lucy could see his blonde head sticking up above the crowd. He was looking around, like he was checking to see if anyone was watching. He saw Lucy looking at him and winked at her with a grin. She looked away.

Brother Michael had finished his prayer and was now speaking to the audience.

"This monument was created to serve as a reminder that the spirits are quick to anger and swift to judgement. I hope that you will listen to those of us that understand the danger and will return with your offerings tonight." He looked angry. He pointed at the crowd with both hands and shouted, "you have brought the spirits anger down upon us. We who have been protecting you from punishment have suffered on your behalf but we can no longer hold back the tide of retribution!" His voice was rolling across the valley like thunder. Lucy covered her ears and bent down with her eyes closed until his voice dropped back to normal. She looked back towards Aldous, but he had disappeared.

Brother Michael was still speaking. "Today we unveil more than a symbol of our responsibility, more than a monument to the spirits' strength and good will. Today I present to you a talisman through which

the spirits power will be magnified and directed to enforce their laws for the good of all citizens of Heartcenter.”

He reached behind the monument and pulled. The tarp fell to the platform, and there was a collective gasp from the audience. Lucy looked up with awe at the magnificent figure. The face was a caricature of King Harold, the founder of the city of Heartcenter. He was the first High Priest of the Gaian Brotherhood and initiated the Earth Rites that Brother Michael had accused the crowd of violating. He was a figure of great power who inspired awe and fear in the villagers.

The head was composed of two distinct halves, which contrasted in color and tone. The left side was made of the purest white marble roughly in the shape of a crescent moon with a pointy chin and nose facing to the right and a bright yellow eye wide open and staring at the crowd. The right side was set back slightly, as if the figure were wearing the bright magnificence of the white half as a mask. It was made of dense black marble which was rarely seen in Heartcenter. It was featureless except for a heavily-lidded eye with a slight yellow glow hidden behind it. On it sat a crown of yellow and red gold with a large green stone set in the center of the king’s forehead.

The rest of the figure was covered with a black velvet robe, clasped at the throat with a gold medallion of three interlocking rings. Protruding from underneath the robe were two white marble hands, each holding an enormous sword pointing straight towards the sky.

“Almost worth the wait,” Lucy muttered under her breath. Her father was staring blankly at the monument and didn’t hear.

“Behold the Earth spirit whose power animates the monument!” As Brother Michael shouted these words the right eye opened wide and a bright yellow beam of light shone out of it. It passed back and forth over the crowd as if searching for someone. After a few passes it stopped on a gray-haired man standing next to a young girl. Lucy recognized Maggie Clementine. The old man, who must have been her grandfather, was terrified and fell prostrate on the ground.

“Please don’t hurt my grandfather!” Maggie was on her knees reaching her hands towards the monument. “We’ll bring our offering, we promise!”

Brother Michael was staring at the young girl. The bright light faded and the eye snapped shut. “You have been spared for now, Master Clementine, thanks to your granddaughter’s promise. Let this serve as a lesson to you all, you cannot hide your sins from the Earth spirit. Let us say a prayer of gratitude...”

Lucy didn’t hear the prayer. She was still staring at the eye of the monument in astonishment. As she stared, the lid snapped open again, but no light came streaming out this time. Lucy thought she saw something appear in the eyehole, something familiar, but she was too far away to be sure.

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Later that night, after everyone had gone home for the evening, Lucy walked into the kitchen and found her father there rummaging around in the ice box. Several fish were already thawing in a small bucket. He emerged with two more, one in each hand. He was looking at them wistfully.

He looked up and saw Lucy. "Ah, you're here, good, I need you to take this bucket of fish back to the monument and leave them as an offering." He sighed. "I was really looking forward to eating these two." He dropped the last two fish in the bucket and closed the door to the icebox.

Lucy grabbed the buckets by their handles and left the house. It was dark and the street was quiet as she walked towards the central square. As she approached, she could see the monument standing in the center of the lawn. A line of people stood waiting with their buckets for their turn to make their offering. An older woman was walking toward her, empty buckets in her hand.

"May the spirits protect you." The woman smiled and nodded her approval of Lucy's offering.

"And also with you" Lucy muttered. She avoided meeting the woman's eyes. She had never understood why they had to give away the best of their catch. She had never seen any evidence that the spirits did much to protect them. They didn't stop her teacher's house from burning down, or old man Peterson from drowning in the river last year. Just because Brother Michael shouted at them didn't mean the spirits were even real. That beam of light from the monument was pretty impressive, but it didn't hurt Maggie's grandfather, and afterwards she would swear she had seen someone looking out at them through the empty eyehole. Someone very much human.

She walked to the end of the line to wait her turn. The eye of the monument was open and the light was shining on each citizen as they approached the platform to empty their buckets of food. Quite a pile had accumulated already, mostly fish, with several rabbits and the haunch of a deer. Someone had left an enormous pig that must have been slaughtered that morning.

What a waste, Lucy thought to herself. She watched as each person in front of her said their prayer, left their offering and turned away to walk home. When it was her turn, she dumped the fish on the platform right by the hem of the robe that covered the body of the monument, looking with regret on the two large fish her father had planned on cooking for dinner that night. She looked up at the light from the eye that was shining down on her. She stuck her tongue out at it. She heard a gasp from the woman behind her, and a noise from the monument that sounded like a sharp intake of breath. She turned away. She was a scared and thrilled by her act of defiance.

Her thoughts were racing as she walked towards home. *What was that sound I heard coming from the monument?* She wanted to see what would happen next but the law was clear, you must leave your offering before midnight and return home. No one was allowed to return to the square until dawn under penalty of death, and by then the entire offering would be gone, taken by the spirits, according to Brother Michael.

When Lucy was nearly home, she paused and looked around. The street was empty and dark, all of her neighbors must have already returned home and put out their lights for the night. She stopped and turned back towards the monument. She could see a small figure on the platform dumping a bucket, the last offering of the night. The figure left the square and disappeared down another street that stretched off into the darkness.

Lucy hesitated. What she was considering was dangerous. If Brother Michael caught her, she would be in deep trouble. Or if the spirits were indeed real and knew as much he said they did, she might not ever see her home again. But she was tired of giving so much away, and she wanted to know the truth. What harm would it do just to see what happened here during the Earth Rites. She had a right to know.

She started walking back towards the square as quietly as she could. As she neared the clearing, she moved into the darkness under the trees that lined the street to stay out of site. She walked around the edge of the square until she was behind the monument. The trees here were just a few yards from it and she had a good view of the platform and the offering. She was looking at the fish she had left, thinking about how good they would have tasted, when it happened. An arm reached out from under the robe and grabbed one of her fish and disappeared back inside. She was frozen in astonishment. The arm shot out again, and this time she could see the wrist band that all the young men in the village had started wearing as a new fashion. She bolted from the trees without thinking and ran towards the back of the monument. She grabbed the back of the black velvet robe and yanked on it as hard as she could. On the second try it came free and fell to the platform, exposing a young man with blonde hair and bright blue eyes who was staring at Lucy in surprise. In his right hand he held Lucy's fish.

"Aldous! I knew it! I knew that was you in there!" Lucy was angry. "Give me my fish back!"

"That is no longer your fish." A low voice came from behind her. "It belongs to the spirits now."

Lucy's heart sank and a shiver of fear ran down her spine as she recognized the voice of Brother Michael behind her.

Aldous smiled at her and chuckled.

She turned and looked up at the priest. His eyes were ablaze with anger, his fists were clenched.

"Do you know the penalty for what you have done?"

Lucy couldn't speak. She nodded slowly and looked down at the ground.

"Brother Michael, please forebear a moment," spoke a gentle voice from the trees. "She does not understand the import of what she has done."

Lucy looked towards the source of the voice. A figure emerged from the trees and walked slowly towards them.

"But, your majesty..." Brother Michael sputtered.

"Be at peace, Brother." The voice said with a hint of anger.

The figure came into view and Lucy gasped. She recognized King Harold's face from her history books and a thousand portraits hung on walls all over the village.

He walked up to her and kneeled down to bring his eyes in line with hers. He looked at her closely for several seconds and smiled warmly. "She'll do nicely." Brother Michael nodded and stepped aside. The King took her hand. "Come with me child."

Lucy obeyed and let herself be led towards the forest. Brother Michael flashed her a wicked smile as she went past and she felt fear grip her heart. "Your Majesty...how is it possible..." Lucy tried to pull her hand free, but his grip was too tight.

"It's the children," he smiled at her again. "They give me all the energy I need to keep going." He pulled her firmly deeper into the forest.