

Sinbed – the Porter

Sinbed had been darting looks at the Sultan as if trying to catch his eye, so I turned to him and asked him to take the next turn. He seemed reluctant but then looked straight at the great merchant and began:

“Honored Sir, I think as I begin you will recognize me? It was just a couple of years ago that you heard me singing outside your garden and invited me inside.”

The Sultan’s eyes leapt open...he did know this man.

“Yes, it was I who had carried your exquisite table up from the docks. You heard my blues song, you asked me to dine with you and sing it again for the feasters. Then you told me that there were great hardships embedded in every stitch of wealth I saw before me and that my lament about my station in life needed to be tempered by understanding how much effort and suffering it took you to acquire it all. Yes, that was me you had to dinner seven nights in a row while you told your adventures. Each night you gave me gold pieces, each night I ate the finest foods in the land. It was wonderful, truly.

I thought long afterwards about the stories you told. Of course, I don't believe there are valleys full of giant diamonds nor one-eyed giants that eat humans...I knew you were speaking metaphorically or simply enjoying your Imagination. In fact I wrote those stories down each night at home. But other thoughts welled up as I listened. You assumed that one who ‘simply carries things’ must live a drab existence and only be fit to listen, like an empty vessel. I longed to tell you my own experiences...to *trade* stories, in fact, as is the custom of our guild. I felt that you would enjoy it, I could see that you were a decent and perceptive man, but trapped inside a caste where wealth had its duties... one of which was the duty to Prevail. Tonight when you came inside and revealed yourself, I thought, *now we can talk. He sees the imbalance.*

So, all I’ve ever done to put food on my table is to carry things. Here’s how I started. On the wharf there is a warehouse with the Porter’s Guild

office. There they have a row of five plain cabinets, each one bigger and filled with stones. When you join, they ask you to lift the biggest one you can – up to the counter. Very simple, but it decides your destiny. Any young person wants to test their strength, and of course I tried to be mighty. I just managed to wrestle the third-largest box to the counter, qualifying as Porter. Above that were the weights that would make one a Longshoreman, and at the top, a Stevedore. Those boxes were heavier than donkeys, impossible for me. So, the die was cast, I was a Porter, and the furniture assigned to me was in that range of weight, equal to that of a goat.

My first job was a cabinet belonging to Orra-bigaddi, the judge of Bulim. I lashed it to my back and started along the river road in the heat of the day. Sweat loosened the straps, and as fate would have it, the cabinet slipped loose and hit the ground hard enough to jar the doors loose. As I righted it and looked to see if it was damaged, I heard a sound like a banshee from inside. There in a dark corner was a bat the size of a badger, baring its ugly fangs at me and hissing. The sound pierced my brain and made me feel faint. It seemed that trillions of words were concentrated in that high-pitched wail – curses, warnings, gloomy fates and caverns. The bat leapt to my shoulders and its wings wrapped around my eyes so I fell to my knees. Then it shrieked a command and presently I felt hundreds of claws grabbing parts of me and many high-pitched voices. Their smell made me nauseous and I could not control my thoughts. Then I was lifted into the air and felt it rushing at my face as if we were moving at great speed – so great that I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I was deep in a cave and before me was a manbat on a throne. He spoke in our language and warned me that I could not escape until I had done a job for him. His great wings spread out ominously and his fangs glittered in that gloom. When badger-bats came to him he spoke in their way, which he explained to me. He said if one accelerated the speed of syllables in our speech, at the same time raising the pitch until the density and altitude were excruciating to the human ear, one approached and then crossed the borders of space & time. A race of super-bats had perfected this talent to the point of transport and weaponry beyond anything humans can imagine. And now they

were ready to bend the human race to their will. The first link was to be the Judge of Bulim.

The manbat told me to deliver that cabinet to the judge as if nothing had happened, and to make certain it was placed near his bed. No more would be required of me. I was again whisked through the air and found myself peering into the cabinet on the dirt road. Time had stopped...or was it the infrasonic effect? I was just at the moment when I had seen the big bat inside, but this time I simply closed the cabinet, lifted it in the straps and started back to Bulim.

As I trudged up the river road I felt more and more the burden of delivering doom to the people all across Mu'um. Once this transmitter-bat was inside the Judge's domain, there would be no stopping them. As the road lifted high above the river, I saw my chance. The cliffs of Quel! A hundred-foot drop off the road's edge to the rapids. I prepared myself, loosened the straps...and let it go off the cliff. The cabinet hurtled downward and shattered on rocks as it plunged into the torrent. I glimpsed the form of the bat as it was tumbled underwater. No breathing creature could survive that. Now I could simply apologize to the Judge, take his tongue-lashing as a matter of course, and promise to replace the cabinet. Did I say 'simply'? It was not to be.

The judge was furious. I was thrown in a dungeon in his cellar. All along the dungeon walls were hundreds of little bats, hanging upside down. They were normal bats with beautiful wings furled or stretching languidly. A twitter of delicate sounds surrounded me, flicking off my body like mayflies grazing a pond. When I sat down, one of them landed on my shoulder and whispered in our language.

"The Judge is the brain of this conspiracy! He has been breeding our kind for decades to create demons to do his bidding. We are the last of the resistance, we are being starved until we either breed for him or die. You are the last hope!"

I didn't have *any* hope at that point, first nor last. But at least I had interesting companions. I slept with their soft fur against my face, their odor

strangely comforting, like that of a puppy. When I woke I was ready to think. But as soon as I thought *that*, the door ratcheted open and the Judge himself appeared with a troop of the mutant bats. “Tear them all to pieces!” he shouted and they charged into the dungeon. Suddenly the little bats shrieked in unison, an unbearably high piercing sound, and I saw the troop waver and fall to its knees. The Judge was spinning in place, swatting at his head. I didn’t wait to understand, but threw myself at the judge, both of us tumbling out into the corridor and down the steps. When I lifted him up, there was no weight to him at all, his clothes were empty except for a damp dust that flowed out his pants-legs. I rushed back to the dungeon to help my little friends, but the same thing had happened to the badger-bats. Piles of dust. The real bats were fluttering all about and their squeaks had a joyous edge. We went up into the main house and saw that dusk had come. The bats were excited to leave and hunt on the night air, but first the little friend of the night before came to me and explained. They had learned to make a sonic mirror while subjected to all the tortures of the breeding. The harmful infrasonics uttered by the Judge’s bat-minions were reflected back on their creators with awful consequence. This had been the first, desperate test of their discovery, and now they knew they could teach it to all the free bats...and thus rid Mu’um of all the conspirators. We wished each other good fortune and the bats flew out into the night air. I returned empty-handed to the wharfs of Mu’um, having earned some bruises... and a story.

I won’t hold this floor any longer, but, my dear honored Sir, know this: if you were to return to this cafe for a hundred nights, I would just be getting warmed up. Every job is an adventure!