

Aesma and the Beetle

Once, a great gathering took place in YISUN's speaking house. Ten thousand lords assembled with twenty thousand reasons carrying their feet and wings and fins and wheels into the russet halls with feathered arches. It was a great commotion, as was custom, and the servants brought out dish after dish to fill the plates and bowls and pots full of wine and liquor to fill their cups. It is said that the bronze walls shimmered red in the reflection of wine, both poured and spilt, and that the air shook with words, both said and unsaid. It is also said that the gilded doors still vibrated for days after the gathering had ended with the din of ten thousand voices spoken with twenty thousand tongues.

Hansa too was part of the assembly of the divines. He sat cross-legged on the floor close to YISUN's throne, as was custom, for he was one of his most ardent disciples. Hansa was known to be one of her oldest and wisest disciples. This was generally agreed upon. He was an avid smoker and always carried his smoking pipe on him, for he knew that it would lead to his death. He was royalty, he didn't mind. He was also an incessant questioner of YISUN. So, lighting his pipe, he asked: "Lord, what is the essence of living?"

YISUN gave it some thought, knowing well that all with ears were listening, when it just so happened that a beetle in flight landed on her bare knee. It was tiny compared to her and its shell shimmered green and purple and octarine like an oil slick of diamonds. He took the beetle in his hand with great care and showed it to Hansa.

"Behold this beetle," spoke YISUN, "a beautiful thing. It lives underground for most of its life. It builds elaborate tunnels to host a colony. With age, it flies away to great lengths to find a mate. The male then digs the first tunnels in the soil. The female lays her hundreds of eggs, upon which she kills and eats the male, for otherwise

he would kill and eat their offspring. She then broods the eggs and defends the colony from predators until the offspring hatches, upon which the offspring kills and consumes their mother's corpse. That is the beetle's way, and that is the essence of living."

The present gods, having listened attentively, nodded thoughtfully and made sounds of wordless agreement. This infuriated Aesma, who had understood nothing. She had skin as black as ash and the deep unlit corners of the universe. But Aesma carried a terrible fire of ambition in her breast and was thus prone to outbursts of anger and rage. She emptied her seven thousand and thirteenth cup of wine, her thirst yet unquenched, and smacked her bright red tongue.

"You're all full of shit!" she yelled.

"It is custom to eat and drink well in my house," said YISUN.

"None of them have understood anything!" Aesma screeched.

"Shut up, you stupid thing!" the gods yelled at her. "We have well learned from this lesson, do not insult us for thy lack of comprehension!"

Aesma was stupid. She knew she was stupid, and it didn't bother her much, for she was stupid, but being called stupid vexed her nonetheless. She clenched her fists and stomped her feet on the floor.

"Prove it then, oh ye wise wiseards!" she bellowed. "Reveal to everyone what you learned here and now so we may partake in thy comprehension! Our father and mother YISUN shall be the judge!"

The gods looked at YISUN, who smiled in the twenty-third way and nodded.

"It is to create," suggested Koss, who was keen to hammer iron and fire and ash at his hearth. "The essence of living is to create, as the beetle creates its tunnels, its offspring, its relationships, its meals, and its deaths."

"That makes them no different from the dead!" spat Aesma. "They incessantly create just as well. From the mounds on the graveyards to the problems their absence raises, they create just as well!"

“The essence of life is to kill and to eat!” spoke UN-Kiham, a minor justice god. “To kill is the living’s right. To eat is the living’s privilege. The beetle kills to eat, it kills to mate, and it kills to survive. The beetle eats to kill, it eats to mate, and it eats to survive. And that is just.”

“Pah!” screeched Aesma. “Even I can tell that is stupid. Does death not find mortals on their own? Does a river not eat the shores it grinds against? Your wisdom is lacking even compared to my own, and you called me stupid!”

“Pree Aesma is right,” said YIS-Calla, a goddess of war. “Preem Kiham, you have seen, but you have not seen far enough. For both eating and killing are part of the same whole. It is violence. The essence of living is violence.”

“Violence is inescapable,” YISUN nodded.

“But is it the essence of living?!” Aesma exclaimed insecurely.

“It isn’t,” said YISUN and shook her head solemnly.

“And it cannot be!” Aesma laughed loudly, emboldened by YISUN’s assurance. “For the unliving imparts violence onto the universe just as well,” she rambled, not halting to consider whether his words had been a lie. “Does a star not violently bend spacetime around its fat belly? Do the winds and tides not violently break trees and nests? Even a stupid like me knows that much!”

And YISUN’s other children had to agree that she was right.

Thus began a long list of gods putting forward suggestions of their understanding, all of which Aesma ridiculed and taunted and disproved hastily, which entertained her well. “To increase entropy,” suggested one. “Beauty,” suggested another. “Royalty,” suggested a third. “The divine,” suggested a fourth, and so forth, and so forth. And Aesma laughed and laughed and drank and laughed, enraging every single one of her siblings present in YISUN’s speaking hall.

“Enough!” they finally yelled. “If you think you are so wise, then tell us what you think!”

“It is to want!” Aesma kept laughing.

“Wonderful,” said YISUN. Her words pulled a silence through the speaking hall behind them as they passed, leaving everybody stunned and watching attentively.

“Was that correct?” Aesma said incredulously, herself stumped just as much as the other gods.

“No,” said YISUN, “but it was wonderful.”

Aesma threw her cup of wine against the nearest wall.

“I think,” Hansa said finally and drew smoke from his pipe, “to live is to spite.” The beetle spites the ground, so it digs tunnels in it. The beetle spites aesthetics, so its shell is beautiful and it lives underground for no eyes to see it. The beetle spites creation, so it destroys. The beetle spites destruction and nothingness, so it creates. The beetle spites its death by living. The beetle spites life by killing and dying. The beetle’s children spite their parents by consuming their life. The parents spite their children by bringing them to life. And the beetle spites us by instinctively understanding what none of us do. So the essence of its life is to spite, I say. It spites itself and others, and it spites life and death equally. Therefore, to live is to spite, as is to die.”

“Hansa is observant,” said YISUN.

“What? That was it?” Aesma whined.

“A part of it, maybe,” lied YISUN.

“But that’s easy!” Aesma stomped her feet on the floor.

“Good,” said YISUN. “To be Aesma is to spite me.”

“What? I don’t want that!” Aesma tantrumed and threw another wine cup against the wall.

“Perfect,” said YISUN.