

## Children Of The Forest

Our house lay on the fringe of the mountains. Dozens of paddy fields surrounded the small village. Harvests were bountiful this year. There were sweet plums, delicious barley, plump potatoes and my favourite, watermelons. There was something about the smooth roundness of the chest, which contained the jewels of sweet amaranth flesh. The seeds, diamonds. Each stock of harvest was set up lavishly on a long table in an abandoned shrine further up in the forest. The ends of the roof curled upwards in a snarl, its bricks deprived of its previous carmine shine. Forty-four years ago, a girl was murdered there. She was sixteen years old. *Same age as me*. Her juvenile soul was bound to the ancient temple, her spirit tainted with hatred and misfortune. And so now every year, we had to offer a luxurious feast to satisfy her insatiable appetite, or who knows what other nonsense about disaster the elders would spew. A supernatural being with scalding scarlett eyes and a vantablack body? The elders only told that story so we don't cause trouble. But later that night, when all the adults retired early after a day of endless preparation and prostrating, did we strike.

More than half of the best harvest was in the shrine, just squatting on a table, rotting away. There were only four young people in the entire village, and we all agreed to meet under the large weeping willow close to the temple. My younger sister trotted joyfully beside me, fully aware of her earlier threats of exposing our heist to the adults. "I want watermelon!"

"SHUSH if you want to come, stay quiet or I'm sending you back" I snapped. She zipped her lips and continued skipping, her silky dark hair floated in the soft wind.

The other two were already waiting.

"Hey, I thought she wasn't gonna come" a mellow voice resounded.

"She wasn't! but she was gonna snitch" I explained. He scoffed and handed me a light.

"Fine, here's the plan..."

A few nods were exchanged as we trudged our way up the grassy terrain. We held out our dim wax lanterns like anglerfish wading in the depths. When we finally arrived, the shrine's structure was even more terrifying. Its shadow loomed over us like a predator cornering its prey...

"Well come on, let's do it" and with a subtle click, the entrance door opened. Thick air welcomed us, along with an unknown sour stench that suffocated the lanterns.

Darkness. Rain lingered heavily on the tongue of the dark sky, strewn with streaks of pale moonlight. The crickets still chirped loudly.

"... I don't understand, whe-where's the food?". I looked over to my left to barely make out a round face, her hands covered her mouth. My stomach churned uncomfortably. A small whine followed by a pair of paws clutched my tunic.

"I wanna go home" she whimpered. I kneeled, unfastening her grip and clasped my hands over hers and nodded. I could tell that everyone wanted to leave too. Just as we turned back to scurry away, my blood dropped. In the corner of my eye, a sudden flash. A buddha statue sat wide-eyed at the back of the room. It's mouth curled into a sinister smile.

*Ba dum.*

*Ba dum.*

*Ba dum.*

I hadn't imagined it. Four ghostly faces reflected off the buddha's now glowing red eyes. A body of decay ripped itself off the figure and swam threateningly towards us. Its back arched and spat at our feet. Three more distinct bodies followed out of the vessel. *There's more?* Suddenly, a small body fell to the ground with a deafening thud. The warm hand that gripped so tightly... loosened. A sharp siren of ringing flooded all my senses. My vision blurred. I opened my mouth to scream, only for it to be drowned out by the tsunami of cricket screeches. A downpour of relentless rain rattled the Earth. Louder. Louder. LOUDER.

*We are one but four, one for each of us, and we will become one once more.*

The demon was so close I could feel its airless breath. The same pungent stench as before swiftly clawed at my neck. It opened its jaw and inched closer from above. *It's going to swallow me.* Paralyzed, my eyes rolled back and a blanket of sleep took over. I dreamt of eating the largest, juiciest, sweetest watermelon. The vermillion meat was fresh.

The crickets' cries ceased, as did the rain.

The last of the incense sticks died out.