

Blood and Bloom  
By Sofia Ou

“Tradition was safety; change was danger.”

Those very words echoed endlessly across my mind. My fingers gripped the sword, the rubies encrusted on the hilt the color of blood, the steel as silver as tears.

Every spring in the village of Florrain, one of the village chief’s grandsons was chosen to slaughter the Wisperling before dusk. I, Thornos Cinis, the second eldest grandson was chosen that year. “Thornos,” a cold but silky voice called out to me. “Do not fret, I was once in the same position as you. But it is rather simple, just one swing and it is finished...” The voice belonged to my Grandfather, a chief, but more mighty than the king himself, with hair like a spiderweb that ran down his shoulders. He continued, “Now follow...” I nodded and trailed after him, sinking into his shadow that towered over me. As I continued following him down the obsidian tunnel, I whispered to myself, “I will drink the sweet glory I will receive. It is to fulfill a tradition, to stop a cursed prophecy from happening. If I didn’t kill the Wisperling before sunset, it would turn into a beast and kill everybody I know. Or even people I don’t know.”

The Wisperling always came back, reborn, during the end of winter, just before spring. Even when it got killed the year before. *Eternal suffering for that thing*, I thought. *Alive, dead, and then alive again.*

Then Grandfather halted at a tall golden door shrouded by stormy gray silk. He looked back at me. Then he sighed, turned away, and with a *click* opened the door.

The first thing my eyes saw was a sea of eyes staring back at me. The only source of light that illuminated the room was the soon-to-be-set sun beaming from the round window. Under the window, there was a creature with a shimmering mane with tree branches with flowers on its head like antlers.

The Wisperling. In chains. It kicked and buckled its hooves when it saw me, the flowers from its antlers were slowly shriveling and falling to the ground.

I stepped towards the Wisperling, the eyes of villagers resting on me...waiting.

My Grandfather spread his arms wide to the spectators. “The people of Florrain, I am honored that my second eldest grandson, Thornos, is here today for our centuries-old tradition to slaughter this creature before it kills us all...” he boomed, causing the stadium to shake.

“However, that wretched Wisperling always comes back ready to turn into its final form, the devil itself. Even before I was born. Even when I killed it when I was Thorno’s age, or my brothers, or my sons, or so on...” he pointed at a large mural on the walls depicting each generation, in the same poise, same sword, slaughtering the same Wisperling. “It comes to haunt us all...however, I shall not speak no more. Thornos has to kill the Wisperling before sunset...before it is too late.” The villagers clapped simultaneously, stomped rhythmically, and said my name in a series of choruses.

“Thornos! Thornos!”

My Grandfather shoved me closer to the beast. “Come on Thornos, time is running out...”

He hissed to me. “Tradition is safety. Change is danger. Continue this tradition and the villagers of Florrain will praise you! If you don’t, nobody would because we would all be dead!”

Beads of pearly sweat ran down my forehead like a morning dew clinging onto a leaf. The Wisperling looked at me with its eyes burning through me. It did not move. It just simply closed its eyes...after all, it knew it could never die...it would just come back to suffer again...

“NOW!” Roared my Grandfather.

I took my sword out.

“NOW!” chanted the villagers.

I positioned the sword.

“NOW!” both my Grandfather and the villagers bellowed.

I swung it, raising the sword high...but I stopped. So did the voices. I couldn’t, something stopped me. But it wasn’t magic. It was my heart that did it. *No. No. No.* The words said as it thumped.

“You coward!” howled my Grandfather as he reached for my sword. My hands still held on it, and my Grandfather and I were struggling. “Don’t kill it!” I cried. I swung my sword around, the blade scratching through my Grandfather’s arm, who yowled in pain. “You would hurt me...but not the Wisperling? You fool...you *fool!*” I looked at the window...and the sun was gone from the window’s view. It had already begun setting.

And it also began the Wisperling’s transformation. Dark thorns curled around it.

“We’re all going to die!” the crowd screamed, rushing to escape from their possible fates. Then all my mortal eyes could see was light. Could this be death? It would be hell, as I broke a powerful tradition... There it was, was a floating entity that looked like it could be carved from glowing sea glass.

The voice was like a harmonious series of chimes, “500 years I have suffered from this tradition. But you broke the cycle of eternal agony.”

Bright wisps circled around the sword in my hand,...as the glowing died down the sword had transformed to a vase.

“Do not take away lives, grow lives. Grow the Wisperia flowers each year to remind you that instead of blood, bloom.”

The Wisperling left...leaving a trail of glowing flowers.

Everyone knelt down to the ground their faces full of shock, tinged with regret.

I looked at my Grandfather. “Is it really true that tradition was safety, and change was danger? Even if the tradition includes murder?”

Grandfather’s tears slowly dripped down and so did some blood from his scratched arm, all falling onto the dainty petals. I sat down next to him. He looked at me, his fingers shook as he weaved a flower crown and rested it on my head.

“Mightier than I, the chief...mightier than a king...the heart should always be more golden than a real crown.”