

From The Clay of His Heart

by John Brown

(originally published in *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show* vol. 8)

The golem was a thief. Nothing in the village, nothing in the whole vale for that matter, was safe. It was forever stealing and bringing its thefts to Braslava's door, laying them on her step like a cat lays down dead birds and mice.

One day it was the Butcher's blue and white Turkish stockings, the next it was cranky Petar's new pitchfork.

And then the golem would stand there, looking down upon her, and all she could say was, "You think you're doing me favors? Take your inscrutable face and go sit." And the golem would go and sit in the shade of her spruce, the sap sometimes falling to speckle the red clay of its bald head and shoulders.

Braslava did not know, was this God's curse? Was it his blessing?

The golem was anatomically correct in every way, except for the missing belly button. But if God was going to go to all that trouble, why not just send a man instead?

Sometimes the thefts were not such a bad thing. For instance, the golem once brought her a shoe that months ago Zvonka the Carpenter's wife had lost. It is a terrible thing to lose a favorite shoe, but the golem found it.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Find **more of the author's works** at www.johndbrown.com

The golem once brought Braslava a quiver of quality hunting arrows. Each had a black shaft with three yellow grooves running from the fine steel head. The grooves, the blood lines to speed the bleeding of the animal, had been painted to look like tiny, spotted snakes. Nobody in the vale had even heard of anyone--Croat or Hungarian--who used such markings, so Braslava was able to claim and sell them for a good price.

These were the good things. But most of the time the golem brought things that it should not.

And it did not matter how strongly the inhabitants of the vale locked their possessions up. It didn't not matter if they hid their treasures with great cunning. The golem would find them, and it would take them. It was an excellent thief. Quiet as stone. Quiet as the red mud and clay from which it was formed. The only way a victim might know he'd been burgled was by looking for the tell-tale crumbs of red dust that it sometimes left behind.

This is how holy things steal.

Of course, in the first weeks some had questioned the golem's holiness. They'd come one afternoon with a thick-toothed tree saw and a mighty axe. They'd commanded the golem to put its neck on the chopping block. It had done so willingly.

Braslava scolded them. "A man, holy enough that God trusts him, creates this thing, and you're so wise to kill it?"

"You don't know who made it," said Eben, who was always one for dredging up the facts.

It was true, of course, that she didn't know exactly who'd made it. She'd found the golem down at the river in the late summer. She'd gone to gather an apron-full of the spotted mint that flourished on the exposed sand and gravel bars there. Truly, anyone could have found it, but it

was Braslava who had been standing in just the right spot as the orange light from the setting sun brightened the shorn bank, illuminating the undressed tree roots, the rocks, and the upper side of the golem.

At first she'd thought the river had dug into the stained bones of an ancient graveyard. But a person could not get close to the golem, a person could not liberate its shoulder and face from the dirt, and think it was mere bones. It had looked like someone caught far too long in the womb, struggling for birth.

Who fashioned it and buried it under a forgotten twelve feet of dirt, Braslava did not know. But did she need to know such things when God was involved?

She folded her arms and looked at the array of bearded men before her.

"You forget," said Boric, "wizards in Pharaoh's courts had power to turn staves into snakes."

"And even if it was made by a holy man," added Eben, "what does that mean? Men always spoil God's gifts. Just look at Adam."

"You all think like rutabagas," she said. "A golem is an angel of sorts. And you do not kill angels. It's just not done, even if they do make off with your prized cooking pot."

The men did not listen. Braslava stood back. If they wanted to call down fire from heaven, she was not going to stand so close the flames would engulf her.

They put the two-man saw to its neck and pulled. The teeth bit in, but when they'd sawn only part of the way through, the saw stuck fast.

Radovan, the massive woodcarver, attempted to free the saw. He spit on his hands, heaved his mighty axe above his head, and brought the blade down. The axe sunk into the golem's neck, but if Radovan hadn't immediately wrenched his blade out, the neck would have

also claimed the axe.

The men stood there, looking down. The golem knelt at the chopping block with the saw stuck in its red neck.

Braslava herself was surprised, but then she saw the meaning. “All things created by God are good,” she said. “This one is to show: nothing that is ours cannot be taken in a moment’s notice.”

And so it was. But this did not mean that sometimes, the Lord be blessed, the divine message was not annoying.

Now and again the golem disappeared. The first time this happened was after All Saints day. Braslava expressed her gratitude for the Lord’s favor in both the sending and the taking. But it was apparently not enough, for the golem returned one week later carrying a long-haired goat.

The nanny desperately needed milking, but Braslava knew the brand in its hide. If she milked it, the goat’s mingy Magyar owner would probably claim she’d stolen a sip and demand payment. So she took the nanny from the golem, tied the animal up on her cart, hooked old Ephraim, her bull, to the yoke, and then proceeded down the trail to the river to deliver the goat, un-milked, to its owner.

She admired the sun and the red and orange leaves blazing in the trees and littering the path. She savored great quantities of air thick with the smell of leaf mold. At all this beauty she heaved many sighs. But when she approached Mislav’s farm, the sighing stopped.

She decided she would wave to Mislav as she passed by. Even now she always had to decide. Mislav wasn’t a rich priest, wasn’t one of those Romans, but an Orthodox, a Byzantine who believed in marriage and in the propriety of full beards. He was diligent and laughed too loud and was the only man who’d ever even thought of her as someone worthy of being a wife.

Mislav stood in front of his house, chopping wood. He saw her and put his axe down. He wiped the sweat from his brow and motioned at the goat with his chin. "So, God is not though with you then?"

"He's never through with any of us, is he?"

"Perhaps help is on the way. I have heard that our Croatian Ban knows of your little problem. He is sending men to collect the blessing."

"What does he want with a golem?"

"Think," said Mislav. "It will not be long before the Bosnian dukes fall. And then the Turks will be here at our very doors. What if the Ban can direct its stealing? The Turks will wake up one morning and stand in shock: where are their mountains of arrows, where the multitude of horse? And what if golem is sly enough to obtain a sultan or two? It could become a mighty weapon."

Braslava shook her head. "This golem is not so reliable. I know this thing because I have tried to direct its stealing myself."

Mislav cocked an eyebrow.

"Bah," she said and dismissed him. "Even you would not be able to resist. Think about it- can you say you would not be sorely tempted to kife the Roman's silly hat?"

"I would resist temptation," he said.

"Not for long," she said. "But the Lord would save you because it seems all requests and commands are answered with the same thing. I'm telling you, the Ban will be disappointed. He will get nothing but tiny speckled eggs." Eggs, even when all she'd asked for was one purple Turkman's tulip.

"Perhaps the golem will listen to a Christian. Perhaps it will listen to a Ban."

Braslava rolled her eyes. “Even Christian Bans need to learn that God is not our slave to be running to and fro.”

Nina, Mislav’s wife, opened the door. She held a baby boy with dark curly hair like his father in her arm. She smiled her genuine smile. “Brasa,” she said. “Come in for tea and tell us about this goat.”

Such an admirable woman. It could have been Braslava there at the door. She felt an emptiness lurch inside her. She waved her hand in dismissal. “What is there to tell? I open the door to turn my pigs out into the oaks and there’s the golem, silent as stone with the goat.”

“Where does it sleep?”

Braslava did not want to answer that question. Of late it had been laying itself down on the floor next to her bed. She did not know what to make of that. She thought that perhaps the golem was like a cat, but when she’d looked down into its clay eyes that never blinked, never closed for rest, she knew it was not a cat. The proximity of that clay body at night was a bit unnerving.

“Since when does dirt sleep?” Braslava asked.

“She’s got a point,” said Mislav.

“Faw,” said Nina. “Come in and have tea.”

Braslava motioned at the nanny. “Look at these teats. If I were to milk them you know I’d never hear the end of it. I’ve got to be going.”

“What about the bear?” asked Nina.

An old sow bear had been seen prowling the river bottoms, breaking up the fishing weirs. Everyone told Braslava that this is precisely why she needed a dog. But dogs only made her eyes burn and her nose weep. She patted Ephraim on his flank. “One old bull will have to be enough,”

she said.

Nina accepted this and blew her a kiss. Mislav gave her that look, the one he'd been giving her ever since she'd told him in tears that, yes, she wanted with all her heart to be his wife, yes, she wanted with all her heart to be Christian, but God had made her Jewish. And how could she honor the dead and at the same time abandon them?

Braslava kissed her hand and waved good-bye. With each step she told herself to forget Mislav and Nina. She told herself to forget that beautiful baby. There were immediate problems to consider. And, indeed, thoughts of the bear took her mind from Mislav. She crossed over the river bottoms, the Lord be blessed, without incident and made her way to the village.

The village men and children were busy in the apple orchards. The wives stood in the yards, maintaining the fires to boil and pickle the fruit. Most of the women ignored her. But there were some who waved, albeit with a grave smile.

When she stopped at the well to draw a drink, Anja, the widowed basket-weaver, came marching up. She took Braslava by the hand. "Sweetling, you leave that goat and you come with me."

"The Magyar--"

"Forget him," said Anja. "This cannot wait."

Anja, always organizing someone's life. Of course, she was also often the first to arrive and the last to leave when there was work, and such a person had to be listened to.

Anja told her to tie her bull at the post by the barn. Braslava did.

In the garden next to the barn there was a small boy collecting ripened gourds. He looked up and stared at Braslava.

Anja stood in the doorway to her stone hut. "Come," she commanded. "Quick, quick."

Braslava entered the house. From the ceiling beams hung dozens of drying bundles of lavender and rose. The smell enveloped her like a blanket. Some of the petals had fallen to the floor.

Anja pointed at an oak chair positioned next to a small table. "Sit," she said.

Braslava sat. Anja dragged a chair woven from willow withies from the hearth and set it close. She sat, smoothed her dress. "I was just about to hike up to your house."

"And at your advanced age," said Braslava.

Anja did not respond to the joke. She put a hand on Braslava's knee. She took a deep breath through her nose. Obviously this was important.

"This thing you found at the river," said Anja, "it should not be naked."

This was the great urgency?

"We have been talking, and this is what we have decided."

"Who decided?"

"People. Now surely you can make it a pair of pants."

"Who am I to tell God how he should dress his servants?" she asked. She was not so rich to have extra cloth lying about.

"Even God made a coat of skins for those in his keeping," said Anja. "We gathered a few old beet sacks." She stood, walked to the dining table, picked up a tidy pile of sacks lying folded there, and returned. "Take them."

It was ridiculous, but Braslava took them.

"Good," Anja said. "It must happen today. That's the first thing." She sat back down.

"Now, the second." She leaned in close.

Braslava waited. Through the window, she could hear the boy working in the garden.

“This thing, it is important to know where it sleeps.”

An urge to tell Anja it was none of her business flashed hot inside her, but Braslava resisted it. It would do no good because Anja would lay siege. She was an indomitable general when it came to such things.

“Tell me you haven’t let it inside,” said Anja.

Braslava sighed. “It’s like a cat. Sometimes it curls up in a corner of the house, sometimes it goes to the barn and makes a nest. What do I care where it sleeps?”

“It is what we suspected.” Anja sat back. “You must move or we must find you a chaperone.”

“Two months this golem has been running around, and now suddenly somebody is worried about how it’s dressed?”

“Sweetling,” said Anja. She took both of Braslava’s hands in hers. She looked her in the eyes. “Sometimes it takes two months for people to finally think. Sometimes it takes that long to remember the Nephilim.”

There was a story written in the first book of Moses about the times before Noah, about the Grigori, the 200 angels who were set to watch over humanity, but fell in love with the daughters of men instead. They abandoned their duties and bore children to the women they took as wives. The children of those unions, the Nephilim, had grown up to be monstrous and hungry. So hungry they began to prey on the very people that raised them.

This was madness. “It’s a golem,” said Braslava.

“And what is this golem, eh? You said so yourself.”

“It’s not that kind of angel.”

“How do you know?”

How did she know?--that was a question.

“For one,” said Braslava, “it did not fall. It was stuck in the dirt.”

“Did the Lord not deprive those fallen angels of their flaming fire garments? Were they not clothed in ordinary dust? Did Noah’s flood not bury and bind them in the valleys of the earth?”

Braslava was speechless.

Anja nodded. “These are things to think about. But even if it is nothing more than a forgotten golem, how do we know it’s not a Jonah? Surely the Lord has greater purposes for it than pilfering goats.” Was this why the creature was sleeping on the floor next to her bed and bringing her gifts? To woo her? Even if it wasn’t one of the ancient angels that fell, the idea of this holy thing desiring her, of it taking her to its bed--she was horrified.

“Do you see?” asked Anja. “We are not thinking of chaperones. We are thinking of the Nephilim. We are thinking of giants.”

Yes, they were thinking. Thinking horrible things. Probably thinking as well that it was all her fault. “I did not make the golem,” said Braslava. “I did not invite it to my door. And we are most certainly not courting!”

Anja patted Braslava’s hand. “Of course, not. Nobody here is accusing you. Not yet. Nevertheless, you must remember: God can do what he likes, but you and I must keep ourselves beyond reproach.”

When Braslava exited Anja’s house, the boy in the garden was waiting, leaning up against his little wooden wheelbarrow. He pointed a crookneck at her. “You’re the one with husband of clay, aren’t you?”

“No,” said Braslava. “I am not married.”

The boy narrowed his dark eyes and shook the gourd at her. “If you get pregnant, you will only give birth to goblins and trolls.”

Anja waved him back to his work. “Oleg, you lazy slug. I am not feeding you to sit or to speak.”

The boy scowled and turned to his gardening.

Anja gave Braslava a look that said: do you see?

“I have done nothing,” said Braslava. “You know that.”

“You and I must be practical, dear. We must start with pants.”

#

Braslava returned the Magyar’s goat and then moved in with Anja. She made the golem pants. Up to this point she had not touched the creature. But it did not know how to pull the pants on. So Anja held the pants while Braslava lifted one of the golem’s legs, and then the other. Braslava felt first-hand the suppleness of the clay skin and the surprising fact that the legs and the spot on the golem’s back where she’d braced herself were warm.

For two days the thing ran about in sackcloth. But it did not improve the situation. The golem ceased its visits to Braslava’s house and now appeared at Anja’s. On the third day it came home from its thieving with nothing but shreds of cloth hanging about its loins.

Braslava made it another pair, and then another. They abandoned sackcloth then and tried leather, which was not inexpensive. They dressed it together and fastened the pants with a sturdy belt. They stepped back to examine their work, the clay dusting their hands. The golem stood before them, handsome in its way, looking like a red barbarian.

A slip of pride flittered through Braslava’s mind: perhaps men did not have eyes for her, but it was possible this holy thing did. She wondered how she might determine the truth of it.

Such a thought, she realized, and immediately squashed it.

The next day the creature returned with a teacup that had tiny red flowers painted on the side. The leather pants and belt were gone.

Anja threw up her hands. "This one is like Adam before he ate the fruit." She sighed and looked up. "You could help," she said, apparently addressing the Lord himself.

This could not continue. Braslava was not made of gold. Anja had even less.

Braslava took the teacup and shooed the golem away. A part of her felt sorry for the creature. But then holy things were probably made to withstand continual rejection.

Anja clapped her hands. "Of course, it is like Adam. And that is precisely what we shall tell them: this thing was created to be naked and unashamed."

"That does not help me," said Braslava. "We must fetch the Rabbi from Zagreb."

"What will he do that the Priest from Draga cannot?"

"Since when has a priest known how to deal with a golem?"

"Who is going to go with the mountains between here and Zagreb full of bears and Turks?" asked Anja.

"We must do something."

"You don't have to do anything," a man said.

Both women turned.

Mislav stood in the yard, his beard tucked into his tunic. "The Ban's men are in the vale; I saw them cross the ridge only minutes ago."

"The Lord be blessed," said Anja.

But Braslava felt a small pang of loss. Of course, it was ridiculous. It was wrong. It was an evil thought. And she would not be an unstable woman.

The Ban's men rode in on horses slick with exertion, their sides lathered in sweat. A four-horse team drew a sturdy wagon with a cage bolted to its bed. The wagon clattered and rumbled down the rutted road and rolled to a stop by the well. A number of the villagers had gathered.

The soldiers wore padded, surcoats of blue and carried shields with the gold fleur-de-lys and blue field of the Croatian Ban. The captain of this crew addressed the villagers, "Where is the Byzantine priest?"

Mislav stepped forward. "I am here, Captain."

"Bring us the golem and the witch."

Mislav bowed. "There is no witch, sir. But I can lead you to the golem."

"My orders, you heretic, are for a golem and a witch."

Mislav bowed even lower. "I cannot deliver what does not exist."

The captain's eyebrows rose in annoyance. He picked up his riding crop and urged his horse forward.

Mislav was going to get whipped by that crop in the face.

Nobody moved.

Braslava wondered, what were they doing? Protecting her? She opened her mouth to speak. But Anja grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her back.

"You want a witch?" Anja asked. "I'll be your witch."

"No," Braslava said.

Anja strode up to the captain boldly. "My family has been Christian since Koloman was king. I pray seven rosaries every day. And every Sabbath I travel over the mountain to go to church in Draga. So this thing comes to my doorstep. If that makes me a witch, then I'm a witch."

The captain turned to another man sitting astride a huge, shining black stallion. He carried no shield, but his arms were stitched on the chest of his purple, sable-trimmed surcoat --a yellow field with a black checkerboard slash. Braslava had not seen them before. She looked at his face. His eyes were like those of a dead fish, flat and lifeless.

The man urged his horse forward until he was close to Anja. He slid his foot out of the stirrup and with the point of his boot, lifted Anja's chin and turned her face. He took a good long look at her.

"A witch never had power to make a golem," said Anja.

The man dropped his boot from her face and turned his attention to the villagers gathered about. He looked at each in turn. When he came Braslava, she forced herself not to look away. His gaze lingered on her, and then he smiled, a dead smile that never reached his eyes. "Just get the golem," he said. He spoke it in Hungarian, which meant he was some sort of noble.

The captain motioned for Mislav to lead. Mislav took them to Anja's barn where the golem was sitting placidly in the dirt, a spade across its lap.

"Come," said Anja to the golem. "Get up. These men are here to take you away."

The golem turned its head to look at Braslava.

The captain motioned for his men. Two of them brought manacles and heavy chains.

"Get up," said Anja.

The golem ignored her.

"Get out of the way," the captain said.

Two soldiers with lances leveled them at the golem. The three with bows drew their strings. The men with chains pushed by Anja. One said, "You shoot me in the back, Rati, and I'll kill you."

They approached the golem like they would a bear, slow, ready to spring away in a moment.

The golem regarded one of them. “We are friends,” the soldier said. “Do you see the pretty chains?” He showed the golem the iron collar. He let it hold a chain. While the golem was fingering the links, he reached out and clasped the collar gently about the golem’s neck.

The second soldier slipped the spade from the golem’s lap.

“Pretty chains,” said the first soldier. “Now we will put them on your ankles and wrists.”

They commanded it to rise and get in the cage. It rose, exited the barn in a hobbled walk, and climbed into the cage. They commanded it to sit. It sat. They locked the cage door, and mounted up.

The man with the dead fish eyes addressed Braslava. “So what does this thing eat?”

His look was unnerving. It was as if something else other than a man lived in that face. She had never seen the golem put anything in its mouth, and so she said, “I suppose it eats dirt.”

#

The very next morning, just before the sun crested the mountains, the golem returned to stand on Anja’s doorstep. The heavens had dumped down a freezing rain that morning, and the creature’s skin was dark, glistening like wet rock. The chains were broken, half the manacles missing.

“Always running home,” said Braslava. “I told you this thing was like a cat.”

“Holy Mother,” said Anja and crossed herself. “Let us pray that this golem had not committed murder.”

Braslava’s joy turned to ash. She looked at the golem’s powerful hands. The soldiers would return with anger. It was possible she and Anja would be taken and hung. It was possible

the Ban would send a hundred men to burn the village to the ground.

“We are guilty of nothing,” said Anja. “We will not run.”

“Lord,” Braslava prayed and then stopped, She was but a little person. Nevertheless, wasn’t David little when he slew the giant?

“What?” asked Anja.

“Nothing,” said Braslava, ashamed at her lack of courage.

It was well into midmorning when Braslava heard the galloping of horse and the rumble of a wagon moving at speed. She and Anja exited the garden where they had been digging onions and walked to stand in front of the house by the lane that led through the village and meet their fate.

The mounted soldiers rounded the bend at the far end of the lane. It was still cold and the horses’ breath looked like smoke. They reined in about the two women, the horses sidling, stomping, snorting in a ragged group.

A cluster of children that should have been digging sugar beets clustered in front of one of the stone huts to watch. The village women looked up from their apple pots. Cranky Petar came as far as the middle of the lane carrying his pitchfork.

The noble with the dead fish-eyes pushed his expensive horse through the soldier’s mounts. He said nothing. He simply looked at Anja.

A silver cross hung on a chain about his neck. But it was no ordinary cross, for at its base coiled a serpent.

Braslava and Anja had discussed the noble at length. That cross confirmed their conclusion--he was a volhov. And only the Lord knew the darkness he weaved.

Anja held up her hands to say she had nothing to do with the golem being here. “It is on

the roof.”

The soldiers all looked to Anja’s slate roof. The golem squatted at one edge, its knees drawn to its chest, so that it seemed to perch there. Two sparrows perched on the peak next to it.

“Call it down,” said the volhov.

“Of course,” said Anja. “But I must tell you that it comes and goes of its own accord. I don’t know that it can be tamed.”

“I did not ask for the opinion of a woman.”

Anja nodded.

She was going to get herself killed if she did not shut up. She walked over to the edge of the roof. “Golem,” Anja said. “You must come down.”

The golem turned its head to look away. Then it changed its perch so that it faced away from them.

“Shoot it,” said the Captain. Two soldiers unwrapped their bows. They retrieved their bow strings from the helmets atop their heads. The golem paid them no mind. Soon both had an arrow nocked and drawn.

“Fire,” said the captain.

The arrows sped forth. The sparrows took flight. The golem scratched its ear.

The arrows struck it high in the back. But only the very tips penetrated its skin. The arrows came to rest at odd angles. Then the golem shivered, and the arrows clattered to the roof.

“Get up there with a rope,” the Captain said. “If it won’t come willingly, we’ll pull it down.”

He commanded Braslava and Anja to bring ladders. He ordered four men up. Before they ascended, Braslava saw two of the assigned soldiers glance at each other, and she could not tell if

they were divvying up work with their glances or looking to each other for courage.

The soldiers clambered up the roof. Three carried spears. The one with the noose straddled the peak. The other end of the rope was tied to the back of the wagon's bed. The soldier cast the noose easily about the golem's neck and yanked it tight. The driver yelled and flicked his reins. The horses surged forward. But the golem simply reached up and, with his thumb and forefinger, snapped the rope.

The soldiers, the villagers, the volhov, they all watched the wagon clatter a number of yards up the lane dragging the rope.

They turned back to the golem.

The soldiers on the roof stood in confusion. One screwed up his face, growled, and charged as best he could on the slate. The butt of his spear struck the golem where a man's ribs would be. But the golem did not even sway. It was as if it were affixed to the roof.

The soldier slipped on the slate, then regained his balance. He set himself and shoved the butt of the spear into the golem's head. By this time the other two soldiers had joined the first, poking and ramming the thing. But a slate roof after a freezing rain is not such a good place to fight. The first soldier lost his footing. His spear flew wide and he tumbled down to fall into Anja's now dead marigolds.

The golem batted the spears out of the other two soldier's hands. Their spears clattered and rolled down the roof to the ground. The larger soldier with a blond beard changed his stance as if he were about to close with a wrestler. But before he took one step, the golem reached down and grasped the edge of the roof. It swung down like a monkey, hand over hand along the edge, and dropped to the ground. Then it crossed the space between Anja's hut and Petar's, grabbed the edge of his roof, and swung up. In moments it had taken a new perch.

This was not going to work. Even Braslava could see that. She folded her arms and glanced at Anja who gave her a look that said: idiot men.

Idiots, maybe. Violent, most certainly. Braslava knew they would start burning the huts down. They would tramp through the gardens. She walked over to Petar's house and looked up at the golem.

"It would please me," she said, "if you went with them." Once she'd said the words, she knew it was not right. But what could she do now? Command it to run away? That wizard would kill her for sure.

The golem looked down at her.

On the other hand, maybe she was right to dupe it so. Who knew what it was? Who knew if it was even holy? And even if it wasn't pitching woo, a most certain abomination, it was only a matter of time before it stole something that would bring danger--a bear cub, someone's child. Hadn't it already done so, drawing a wizard with dead fish eyes?

"Just go with them," she said.

The words hurt in a small way. But even that was cause for alarm because it meant her affections were turning. And when such turnings matured, who was to say what she might desire?

The golem gazed at her for a few moments more with those unblinking red eyes. Then it unfolded itself and walked down the roof.

#

The next morning Braslava woke with a vast emptiness in her belly. She thought of the golem riding away in the wagon's cage, a thicker collar about its neck fastened to a ship's chain. It looked like it had been sold into slavery.

She said nothing to Anja about it, but all day she expected the golem to return. When the sun set and Anja warmed two cups of plum brandy, she reminded herself that it most often returned in the early morning.

It did not return the next morning or the next. It did not return that week. Braslava sometimes caught herself scanning the forest edge for it. Anja traveled over the mountain to visit her priest. She traveled back with a new rye dough starter that she wrapped in waxed linen and kept warm and living at her chest. They harvested the potatoes at Anja's and then moved up to Braslava's to bring in the last fruits. Two weeks passed. A day and a night of strong winds stripped off nearly all the colored leaves, leaving the naked tree bones clutching at the sky.

Mislav came to visit them at Braslava's hut, but they did not talk of the golem. That night after he left, Anja said, "We were practical."

Braslava sipped her hot tea, looking into the fire.

"It had to go," Anja said.

"Perhaps," said Braslava.

"Yes," said Anja. "Perhaps." She stood. "I shall return." She opened the front door of the hut to go to the outhouse and gasped in alarm

Braslava looked up. She turned, spilling the scalding tea onto her legs.

There stood the golem on the porch.

Anja backed away, her hand on her chest.

The wind blew in a dusting of snow.

Braslava put the teacup aside and stood. The golem was blue in the light of the moon, orange in the light from the hearth. Its perfect skin was marred and chipped. It looked like it was missing a piece of its jaw. But the worst was its right eye. It was gone, mangled like someone

had taken a stick and shoved it into the clay of its face.

“Dear Lord,” said Braslava. “Come in, golem. Come in.”

The golem stooped to walk through the door. It strode past Braslava to the hearth and squatted before the fire. Then it reached in and with its bare hand rooted around and plucked out a red hot coal. It turned its head, as if looking up at her, as if she perhaps was not supposed to see.

Braslava turned to give it privacy, but she still caught it out of the corner of her eye, and what she saw was the golem put the glowing, smoking coal in its mouth to chew and swallow.

“Brasi,” said Anja. “Yet another theft.” She stood at the hut’s open door, looking out into the yard.

Braslava regarded the golem for a moment. So it was holy then. She should not have doubted. She crossed the room to join Anja on the cold stone of the porch. Tied to the post of the pig pen was a young ram.

The golem had never before tied its animal thefts like this. It always carried them in its arms. She walked out into the wind and cold, crunching across the thin skiff of snow frozen in places to the ground. The ram turned its head to eye her.

Its back was flat and level with the shoulders. Its stance strong. Both testicles hung free of the body. The curved horns did not come too close to the head. She looked over its ears in the moonlight. There was no marking of ownership.

The ram was still not sure of her and tried to step away. In the morning she’d have to check to see if its eyes were clear, check the nose, listen for the quality of its breath. She would have to check it for foot rot. If all was good, then this would be the golem’s best theft yet.

Braslava untied the ram and put it in another pen. All this time Anja stood watching at the

door. When Braslava came back in, Anja asked, "What are we going to do?"

"We are not going to give the golem to that wizard. That's one thing."

"I think the golem can take care of itself," said Anja.

"Maybe," said Braslava. "Maybe not."

They both went inside Braslava's hut and shut the door. The golem still squatted before the fire.

"Maybe it is time to risk both bears and Turks," said Braslava, "and fetch the Rabbi of Zagreb."

Anja nodded. "I will go. I was the one who kept you from going earlier."

"We'll go together."

"We will be eaten or flayed," said Anja.

"We won't be flayed."

"Ask Mislav. You do not know the Turks."

Braslava walked over to the hearth and reached past the golem for the hanging kettle. She poured herself another cup of tea, straining the mixture at the spout with a scrap of cheesecloth.

"I will ask Mislav. I will ask him for his horse." She opened a small crock of honey on the table and added some to her cup. "We can ride doubled up."

Anja nodded. "Nina's a good one. She will take care of the animals."

They decided to be practical and go to sleep, but neither could. Instead, they began packing for the trip. Depending on the roads, it might take most of a day to get to Zagreb. They would certainly have to stay overnight.

"The volhov will come," said Braslava.

"Then we will leave even sooner," said Anja. "And the golem will follow."

“And stir up the hornets in Zagreb. I don’t know if this idea will work.”

In all this time the golem had not moved from the fire. But now it jerked its head as if it had just heard something. It stood.

Anja and Braslava stopped their packing.

The golem ran for the door, threw it open, and rushed outside.

Braslava and Anja looked at each other.

“Does it always do that?” asked Anja.

Braslava shrugged. She’d never seen it do that before. She crossed to the doorway, careful lest the creature should return in haste and knock her over. She looked out. The moon had set. The night was dark. The golem could neither be heard nor seen.

She began to close the door and stopped. There were lights coming up the trail to her hut. From the way they swayed she guessed they were lanterns held by men on horse.

Braslava turned. “The volhov. Get the packs.” Both women already wore shoes fit for travel. Braslava picked up her sheepskin cloak, her mittens, and hat.

They would have to use the trail that led to the springs and then down to Mislav’s. Anja was ready. Braslava threw water on the fire so the light would not give them away when they opened the door. The smoke bellowed up the chimney and into the room. They rushed to the door. Opened it.

Braslava ran around the corner of the hut, away from the lanterns coming up the trail, and ran straight into the arms of a man wearing a leather breastplate. He caught her hard by the arm, grasped her tight around the waist.

Anja turned to escape, but the man simply lifted Braslava and yanked Anja back by the cloak.

“Two witches in the night,” said the man. His breath stunk. His clothes smelled of wet dogs.

Braslava tried to struggle free, but the man pushed both her and Anja up against the hut’s stone wall and held their faces to the rock with his vicious hands on their necks.

He yelled to the other men. It wasn’t long before the soldiers came with their horses and lanterns. The volhov slipped off his mount.

“Where is it?” he asked.

Braslava didn’t answer.

“We know it’s here,” he said.

“It fled,” she said.

The volhov nodded. He motioned for his man to release her and Anja. The freezing rock had bit into her face. Braslava reached up to cover the skin, but the volhov threw off her hat, grabbed a fistful of her hair, and yanked her head back. He marched her outside the circle of men and faced the dark woods and hillside. “I’ve got her!” He yelled at the trees. “She’s a witch and deserves a witch’s death. But you can save her. Do you hear me! You can save her!”

The volhov turned Braslava and marched her into the hut. He ordered his men to start a fire. Then he ordered them to stand watch. Anja was shoved into a corner. Two soldiers brought in a medium-sized barrel and stood it on its end.

“I should have seen it sooner,” said the volhov. “I should have known it would come for a Jewess. And it will come. What I need now is a scream.” He crossed over to Braslava. He ordered the soldier guarding her to remove her cloak. “Tie her to the chair and bring me two stones. Make one of them flat.” He turned to Braslava. “I’m going to crush your finger. Then I’m going to pull its nail.”

Whatever this man said, Braslava knew she would not deliver the golem to him. She would remain silent.

“If you do not give me what I want with the first, then I will continue with another finger, and then another. Sooner or later you will call him in.”

The soldier shoved her into a chair and tied her fast. He went outside and returned moments later with two stones. He tied her left hand open on the flat stone and then held her fast. The volhov picked up the jagged piece of granite. He looked at it. Looked at her hand. Juggled his grip to get the right surface pointing down. Then he slammed it down on her pointing finger with a sharp crack.

Braslava saw white. Pain shot through her hand. She wanted to groan, but bit it back, took a short breath. Panted. The finger was already swelling. He'd broken the knuckle, she was sure. Her eyes began to well with tears.

The volhov held a pair of pincers in his hand. Where he'd gotten them she did not know. He grabbed her finger. She could not help but squirm when he touched the broken finger. He fitted the teeth of the pincers over her fingernail and clamped them down. He wiggled them to make sure he had a good grip. “If we had time I would take this more slowly. But I have already wasted weeks. Now we will see how a witch screams.”

“Dear Lord!” said Anja. “No!”

He yanked the pincers.

The pain consumed Braslava's hand.

But the nail wasn't completely out. He yanked again.

She could not help herself. She cried out, moaned. She whimpered. She tried to stop. Tried to breathe.

The volhov held the bloody fingernail up in the pincers and examined it. Then he set it on the table and waited, watching Braslava. The pain burned horribly. Blood rose from her torn fingertip and ran onto the flat stone.

“You’re stupid,” he said. “But nobody is strong enough to resist. We will wait for the pain to double back. Just a few moments more.” He put the pincers down and picked up his stone.

There was a shout outside. The door flew open and slammed into the wall.

The volhov turned.

The golem rushed in and before the volhov could do anything, the golem swatted the hand holding the rock. The rock flew from his hand and crashed into a closed shutter.

The volhov stepped back. The golem swung his red arm in a backward arc and slammed it into the volhov’s chest. The blow lifted the volhov off his feet and threw him across the floor and into the wall.

The golem followed. The volhov tried to stand, but the golem bent to him and began with two hands to crush his throat.

The soldier in the room charged the golem with a large hammer, but the golem reached up and caught the hammer haft in one hand before the man could land the blow. It wrenched the hammer out of the soldier’s hand and threw it in the man’s face.

The volhov was spluttering. His face flushing red. He fumbled in a black purse that hung about his neck.

The golem turned back to the volhov with both hands, but the volhov retrieved something from the purse and shoved it into the golem’s open mouth.

The golem shook its head. Its grip on the volhov loosened. It shook its head again more

violently. It stepped back, clutched at its throat, its features contorted in a painful rictus. The golem took another step back only to stumble and crash into the table and onto the floor. It tried to stand, but could only get to one knee.

The volhov stood, gingerly holding his own throat, and step over to look down upon the golem. He smiled.

“At last,” he said. “Perfect.”

#

The golem lay on the floor like a dead man. Braslava sat tied in her chair. The volhov had let her finger bleed until the blood coagulated into a gobbed mess on its own. Anja, under the watch of a new soldier, bent to serve the volhov a cup of tea. The wounded soldier had been dragged out of the house.

“Who in the vale has recently had a baby?” asked the volhov.

Anja looked him square in the face, righteous anger burning in her eyes.

“You need to think about next month, next year. I am only doing what must be done.”

“What could you possibly need from a woman who has just given birth?” asked Anja.

“I do not want the mother,” said the volhov. “I want the child.”

Anja’s grip on the tea kettle changed and Braslava thought she was going to throw it in the volhov’s face.

“Would you rather sacrifice one child to me or a dozen to the Turks, who will hold their feet and dash their brains out against a rock? They will rape you and your jewess here. And if they do not kill you, they will sell you as slaves.”

Braslava knew this already. The Turks were excellent at burning fields and killing villages. They were excellent at cutting off the heads of men to collect their sultan’s bounty.

Anja did not answer.

“I will beat them back,” said the volhov.

Braslava laughed. Giddiness washed over her like an unexpected wind. She should not have felt such mirth, she should not have laughed.

The volhov turned.

She nodded at the golem with her chin, suppressed a lunatic giggle. “You’ll beat back the Turks with that?” He was a fool.

“No,” he said. He narrowed his dead fish eyes. “No. I will first make this golem into a molech. I will make it into a god. And then, when they are lined up in their beds at night, when they are clustered about their fires, I will send it in to steal their lives. I shall send it in to take the breath breathed into Adam’s nostrils.”

A molech. What was this wizard that he could even consider such a thing?

“I knew all along,” said Anja. Her hand was in a pocket of her tunic. She yanked her hand out and shoved a string of garlies at his face. “Vampir!”

The volhov did not flinch. He reached up and loosened a clove from one of the heads, slipped the meat from its skin, and popped it in his mouth. He began to chew. Around the garlic, he said, “I am not a vampir. I am a man who wishes to protect his family, his king. Nothing more. Can’t you see that this golem is a gift from God?”

“You shall have no other gods before me,” quoted Braslava.

The volhov heaved a sigh. “This is what I get from talking to women. I am not going to serve this god. It is going to serve me.”

He paused.

“I need a child to feed to the golem,” he said. “Just one.”

But Braslava knew that wasn't true. A molech had an appetite. It would require many children. A multitude of roasted babies.

Anja set her jaw in stubborn defiance and stepped back.

The golem stirred.

"Ah," said the volhov. "I was wondering how long it would take the shem to fully digest. Rise, golem. Stand before me."

The golem stood. Something about the lines of its face had changed. This was not the pleasant and calm golem from before. This was something else--ferocious, wise, angry? She could not tell.

The volhov pointed at the golem's loins. "This holy thing was created to multiply and replenish the earth. Of course, it could not mate before, but my shem has now removed all such bindings. I shall have not only a molech, but I shall also have its progeny. A dozen children could route an army. Do you see? You will help me one way or the other."

Anger flooded her. Men! Eve may have been duped to make a mistake, to take a little bite, but men, men could swallow great quantities of evil.

The volhov stood. "I am going outside to fetch some water. You think."

Braslava's face went slack with horror.

Who could have predicted this? Who could have guessed that the golem, which she had fancied like a stupid girl, would turn into abomination?

Even if she did not tell them who had recently given birth, the volhov would find them. He would go door to door like Pharaoh's men and demand his sacrifice. And the very first door he would thrust open would be Mislav's. That lovely baby boy would be his first sacrifice.

She could not let it happen. But who could resist the power of this wizard?

Would to God, she thought, we had an Elijah's fire, a Gideon's horn, an Abraham's ram.

The thought rebounded back at her. It possessed her. An Abraham's ram. They needed an Abraham's ram. She looked up at the golem. Was it possible?

Outside, one of the soldiers said, "This ram ought to make a fine dinner."

The ram bleated.

The golem's ram that had appeared in the moonlight to be whole, without blemish or spot.

She pitched her voice low. "Anja," she said.

Anja glanced at the soldier and stepped closer. The golem stood like a statue.

Braslava whispered, "Take the mint gathered at the river. Take the ram. Get them to Mislav. Tell him we must have blood for the lintel and posts of this golem."

Anja shook her head. "Mislav is not a Jew. He is not even a proper Christian."

"He is a holy man," said Braslava. "Confused or heretic, he is all we have."

Anja nodded. She stood taller, set her jaw, adjusted her tunic. The old general was back. She turned and walked out the door. Outside, a soldier commanded her to halt.

"If we are going to sacrifice," she said in a loud voice. "We are going to do it right. You tell your master I shall bring the sacrifice within the hour."

Braslava heard the door of the pen where the ram was kept open. She heard it shut. A man commanded two soldiers to go with her and Braslava feared--would Anja be able to make the sacrifice?

Shortly thereafter the volhov returned. "Golem," he said. "You may untie her."

The golem moved behind Braslava. It undid the ropes that bound her.

The volhov said, "You are wise to cooperate." He held a cooper's hammer in his hand.

He pried off the lid. The shutters were still closed and the hut fairly dark, otherwise she didn't know if she would have seen that the contents of the barrel shone with a sickly green light.

Braslava held her damaged hand to her chest. She rose from the chair, glanced up into the golem's face, and stepped over to look inside the barrel.

The volhov ignored her, unrolling a leather bundle of odd iron tools on the table.

Four eels, each as long as one of her legs, swam in the water, twisting their thick mud-colored bodies about each other. They had tiny, pig eyes. Their mouths hung open, showing their needle teeth. She could not tell if it was the pale belly of the eels or the water itself that glowed. The water stank of old brine. One of the eels rolled to the surface and gulped in air.

Something red lay at the bottom of the barrel. Was it a rock? She peered closer.

"It's his eye," said the volhov. "An eye so that I may see. A shem in his stomach to break his bindings and govern his will."

"What are these eels?"

The volhov did not answer. She wondered. Did they carry his life? Were they his familiars or talisman? Were they his masters?

He pushed the table to the side to make space on the floor. He ordered his soldiers to bring the wooden bath. He turned to the golem and commanded it to fetch the barrels from the wagon.

The golem turned and exited the hut.

"Very soon, I will take his heart to keep his life safe in my hands."

A few minutes later two soldiers brought in an empty wooden box the size and shape of a coffin into the room. The inside was the light color of maple. Outside, it had been shellacked in red. There was no lid.

Braslava knew this was not a box to be put in the earth.

They placed the box in the center of the floor.

The golem returned, carrying a barrel a normal man would be forced to roll.

The volhov walked over to the golem and removed the bung. He pointed to the box.

“Dump it inside.”

The golem did. It brought in three more barrels, all filled with what smelled like seawater brine, and emptied their contents into the box as well.

Braslava wondered where Anja was. She'd had more than enough time to reach Mislav's. More than enough time to slaughter the ram.

The volhov motioned one of his men over to help him. Together they lifted the barrel of eels and dumped them into the box.

“Come, golem,” said the volhov. “Stand in the waters.”

The golem turned its gaze to look at Braslava with its one eye.

“Golem,” commanded the volhov.

The golem held her gaze a few moments more then stepped into the box.

One of the eels gently wrapped itself about his leg.

Where was Anja?

“Lie down,” said the volhov. “Lie down and cover yourself in brine.”

Braslava did not know the magic of this wizard. But she knew this bath of stinking water was a grave, a death from which her golem would not return.

“No,” she whispered.

The golem sat, like a man in a bath. The glistening back of an eel broke the surface of the water and moved past the golem's waist. Then the golem laid itself back and, with barely a

disturbance, slipped beneath the brine.

She looked down upon it under the water. The eels swam over the golem, caressing its body with their fat lengths, nuzzling its crevices with their broad and bearded heads.

A commotion rose outside. "Where is the volhov?" It was Mislav.

The volhov looked up, a smile of triumph on his face. He crossed the hut to the door and exited. Braslava followed him.

Mislav stood in the yard, his baby, wailing and red-faced, in his arms. Nina was held back by two soldiers.

Anja lagged behind, but there was no bottle, no jug, not even a covered bowl of sacrificial blood.

Braslava's heart fell.

"We are honored," said Mislav.

Something suddenly locked in place in her mind. It was Mislav who had alerted the Ban. Mislav who had called this wizard.

She would not believe Mislav was involved with this great evil. And yet, there he was, one knee to the ground.

Anja walked through the yard, skirting Mislav and the volhov. She walked up to the door, panting.

"What happened?" asked Braslava.

"Inside," she said.

When they stood in the house, Anja turned to the soldier there. "Your Captain says he has your payment. If you don't get it quick, he'll give it to another."

The soldier turned and walked out the door.

Braslava turned to Anja. “What--“

Anja cut her off. “Quickly,” she said. She withdrew a small pot from her tunic and a small bundle of fresh mint. She put them on the chair.

Braslava’s heart soared. She should have never doubted Anja. They had to get the golem out of the water. “You take the feet,” said Braslava. “I’ll take the shoulders.”

“The golem’s too heavy,” said Anja. “We’ll both take the shoulders.”

Braslava considered the eels for only a moment and then she bent over and plunged her hands in. The brine burned her damaged finger. But she ignored the pain and looped her arm under the golem’s armpit to pull it out. Anja knelt on the other side.

One of the eels thrashed, turned sharply, and bit into Braslava’s arm.

Braslava yanked her arm back and grasped.

“Quickly,” hissed Anja.

Braslava clenched her teeth and reached in. She bent low trying to get a good hook on the golem.

The water roiled with the eels’ thick bodies. Another bite. Another. There was venom in those fangs. Braslava could feel the burn creeping up her arm.

Anja growled. “Lift,” she said.

Braslava heaved with all her might. The two women dragged the golem part way out of the box.

An eel clung to the back of Anja’s arm, hanging out of the coffin. They heaved again, and the golem slipped wetly onto the floor. The eel dropped from Anja’s arm and writhed next to the golem, gulping air.

Anja retrieved the pot and unstopped it. She dabbed the mint leaves in.

“But we’re women,” said Braslava. “Shouldn’t Mislav--“

“Sometimes,” said Anja, “the Lord uses a Deborah and Jael.” She withdrew the cluster of mint leaves, red with blood, and wiped them across the golem’s forehead. “Sometimes he uses a harlot.” The smell of the blood and mint mixed with the brine. She dipped the leaves again, and wiped the golem’s arm.

“You,” the soldier Anja had sent out pointed at them. “Stop!” He charged.

Anja dipped again, but the soldier had crossed the space between them and delivered a kick to her head that sent her reeling. The crock of blood and mint leaves flew from her hands. Anja tried to roll to her knees, but the soldier shoved her aside.

Braslava picked up the stone the volhov had smashed her fingers with.

The soldier bent to recover the crock.

Braslava struck him in the head. She struck again. He stumbled back, a look of surprise on his face. With all her might she smashed him one last time in the temple.

The soldier fell sideways to the floor.

Braslava dropped to her knees and grabbed for the pot and mint. Her arm was swelling from the venom. Most of the blood had spilled on the floor. She sopped up the blood, turned, anointed the golem’s other arm. She anointed its right leg. Sopped up more blood. The smell of mint and blood filled her. Her arm felt like fire.

The doorway darkened.

Braslava did not look up.

“No!” snarled the volhov.

She anointed its other leg. Smearred blood on its chest.

A soldier yanked her back by her hair. She fought to get her legs underneath her, but he

dragged her along the floor.

“No,” repeated the volhov. “No!” He grabbed one of the empty barrels, scooped up water from the box, and splashed it over the golem.

The blood did not wash off.

“A cloth!” he yelled. He dropped to his knees. Scrubbed at the blood with his tunic.

“Come off!” he commanded, but the blood had soaked into the clay.

The golem sat up. It raised one hand and took the volhov by the throat. It convulsed, then rolled over to its hands and knees, dragging the volhov with it.

It convulsed again, violently, and spat a black and slimy lump onto the floor. The shem.

The golem stood and walked over to the small barrel. It reached in and fetched its eye, the volhov still struggling in its grip.

The soldier released Braslava’s hair and backed up.

The golem stuffed its eye back in its head. Then it turned its attention to the volhov. Its face was terrible.

Fear flashed through her. What bindings had the volhov broken?

Steam rose from the blood stains on the golem’s red clay. But it wasn’t steam. It wasn’t anything she’d ever seen: wisps of light that hovered and flowed like heavy smoke.

Glory.

It was glory. It was God’s divine burnings.

Glory smoked from the golem’s eyes. I flowed from in its mouth.

The volhov fumbled in his coat.

The golem’s hand and forearm burst into flame.

The volhov screamed.

The golem lifted the volhov off the ground by his neck.

The fire spread, curling the volhov's beard, smoking the linen surcoat. Then in a whoosh, he caught flame like a piece of dry grass, blazed into a pillar of fire. Smoke flooded the room, billowed along the ceiling.

Braslava coughed, dropped to her knees. The brightness of that fire hurt. She shielded her eyes.

Anja moaned.

Outside, soldiers shouted. On the roof, the slate shingles clattered and clinked. Dirt blew into the room, followed by a blast of wind that slammed the door and shutters against the wall. Debris flew into Braslava's face. Something struck her in the back. And then the wind turned into a gale.

The room was a furnace. Her hair crackled and curled in the heat. Braslava thought of the burning bush, the smoking mount--they would all be immolated by God's glory.

She heard a huge crack. Felt herself being pulled up by the wind.

It gusted again and she swore in the rush of wind she heard music or singing. Then the whistling moved outside, the wind retreated. She gulped in a breath of air. It stank of burning flesh, but it was not full of smoke.

Something large thumped to the floor.

She took a breath. And another. She was alive. That in itself was a miracle. She brushed sand from her face and eye lashes. When she opened her eyes, the golem was lying on the floor. The volhov was gone.

Braslava rushed to the golem. The red clay shone in places like porcelain. In others it was black.

“Golem?” she said. She touched its shoulder, its arm.

“It’s dead,” said Anja.

Braslava looked up. Anja was holding her jaw in obvious pain. Her hair was almost all burned away. Anja motioned at the golem’s legs. “It’s nothing more than baked clay now.”

Braslava looked back down. The leg was cracked open down the middle like a loaf of bread. The stomach, chest, arms--the whole body was spidered with fissures like poorly fired pottery. She touched its handsome cheek and the head rolled to its side, free of the body.

“Golem,” she said.

#

When Braslava and Anja staggered out of the doorway and into the yard, they found Mislav prostrated in the dirt, arms stretched out, praying into the dust. Nina was standing in shock, her hair wild and filled with debris, holding her babe.

Two of the soldiers lay dead in the yard. Of the rest, Braslava could see none.

She walked over to the spruce next to her hut where the golem used to sit and stood in the bed of needles. She held her throbbing arm. The lintel of the door frame, the tops of the windows--they were all blackened with smoke.

She thought of the prophet Elijah, of the fiery chariot coming for him, and the horses of flame, and him going up in a burning whirlwind of smoke.

Was it not a burning whirlwind that had claimed the golem’s spirit, too?

To have survived such a thing! She should have felt gratitude. She should have been filled with praise. But she looked down at the bed of needles and saw clumps of the tree’s tacky sap. Unbidden, tears came to her eyes, and she felt only a horrible loss.

#

Two days later, when they could all think, Braslava insisted Mislav, who had distracted the volhov so well, must take the relic of the golem's body and keep it hidden and safe. She did not, however, know what to do with her hut, covered as it was in divine smoke. Did it mean the rocks and timbers themselves were now holy? If so, what person could simply wipe that away?

In her mind this was where the golem died vanquishing the volhov. It should be a hero's monument. Besides, hadn't the Lord accepted the ram as an offering? You did not clean away the memories of such things. It was just not done. So Braslava left the hut and moved in with Anja.

However, that did not mean they had to abandon her garden. And so, one day before the snows came in earnest, the two women went to dig in Braslava's garden for turnips to make into a mash. Braslava's eel-bitten arm still ached. Nevertheless, they worked well into the afternoon. It was then, when they came back round to the front of what they now considered the golem's hut, that they found a Turkmen's tulip lying on the doorstep.

A doorstep that had, only hours before, been swept clean.

The tulip was purple with white, ragged stripes. And about it, scattered on the porch stone, lay crumbs of red clay.

Anja looked at Braslava with raised eyebrows. Both women shaded their eyes with a hand and searched the yard and hillside. There was nothing but the sun, the brown autumn grass, and the wind whispering through the spruce.

"You would think," said Anja, "that one golem in a lifetime would be enough."

Braslava stooped and picked up the flower.

God had sent her a man, with clay and fire and beating heart. Had he also sent her a husband? Or was she wrong? Was it she that had been sent to deliver this Jonah from the belly of

the earth and these were gifts of gratitude? The golem's body was dead. Of this she was certain.

But that did not mean it could not leave a message.

The tulip glistened in the sunlight.

“This is to show,” Braslava said, "that even little things are not forgotten."

And so it was. Even if sometimes, the Lord be blessed, the divine message was both wonderful and terrible.

About the Author

John Brown currently lives with his wife & four daughters in the hinterlands of Utah where one encounters much fresh air, many good-hearted ranchers, and an occasional wolf. Please join him at www.JohnDBrown.com

Servant of a Dark God

[Reviews](#) | [Extras](#) | [Read the first chapters PDF](#)

Set in a world where humans are ranched by beings of immense power... for their souls

★★★★★

“Engrossing”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Provocative”

BOOKLIST

Starred Review!

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“*Servant of a Dark God* delivers solid pacing, a great setting, and a smart story that breaks away from genre conventions”

BRANDON SANDERSON

★★★★★

Young Talen lives in a world where the days of a person’s life can be harvested, bought, and stolen. Only the great Divines who rule every land and the human soul-eaters, dark ones who steal from man and beast, know the secrets of this power. In Talen’s land the Divine has gone missing, and soul-eaters are loose among the people.

The Clans muster a massive hunt, and Talen finds himself a target. Although his struggle is against both soul-eaters and their hunters, Talen actually has larger problems. A being of awesome power has arisen, one whose diet consists of the days of men. Her Mothers once ranched human subjects like cattle. She has emerged to take back what is rightfully hers.

Trapped in a web of lies and ancient secrets, Talen must struggle to identify his true enemy before the Mother finds the one whom she will transform into the very lord of the human harvest.

