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Sally Prue

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The Truth Sayer

SALLY PRUE

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Nian

1

They came for Nian on the day of the hay feast.

He saw the men as they toiled up to the farm, but he was working in the high fields and he thought nothing of it.

Nian's feast clothes were laid out on his sleeping mat. He shrugged himself into his tunic and tied his sash carefully. It was edged in scarlet to show he was the eldest son, and he was proud of it.

His mother caught him as he was slipping down the stairs and inflicted a severe hair-combing on him.

'We've visitors,' Mother told him, between his yelps of anguish. 'So you've got to look respectable.'

'But they're only our own people,' objected Nian, wincing against the tug of the comb. 'They won't recognize me if I look respectable.'

Mother gave Nian's hair one last tug and then stood back to view him; and her face was shadowed with something more serious than the worry of preparing the feast.

'It's not just our people,' she said. 'I only wish it were. Nian, some Tarhun have come.'

And at that all the joy of the harvest and the feast shrivelled away inside him.

Tarhun had come.

'Have they come looking for boys?' he asked.

Mother nodded slowly.

'Nian,' she said, 'Nian, you won't—'

'What?' he asked fiercely.

But Mother only shook her head.

'Go to your grandmother,' she said. 'She needs help with setting out the feast. And be careful of your clothes, Nian, they took me an age to iron. Be *careful*.'

But Nian didn't go down to the kitchen: instead he slipped out and across the yard to the suntrap warmth of the privy. He needed to think.

Tarhun had come. That was a disaster—or would be, unless he was very careful: because they had come for him.

That was the Tarhun's job: they came searching for boys who had second sight, or could read minds. Nian had known this since he was quite small. One day his grandmother had overheard him telling his sister Miri when the rain would stop. Grandy had swooped on him and carried him, kicking, to her small room. Then she'd stood him in front of her and told him what happened to little boys who told the future. They were taken away to the top of the Holy Mountain, which was even higher and colder than the shining green mountains that surrounded the valley, and they were never seen again.

Grandy was fierce that day, like a cloud-lynx; and she'd sent him to his sleeping mat without his supper so he'd remember what she'd said.

Nian was careful not to tell the future after that. Glimpses of it would come sometimes, fleetingly, as he was waking up, but mostly he kept a sort of screen down inside his head so that visions of the future didn't come into the everyday part of his mind. No one ever spoke of his gift, and Nian might have thought that Grandy had kept it a secret—except that sometimes, perhaps when someone was going on a journey, his father would wonder aloud what the weather was going to be. And then Nian would look into the future to check for the violent storms that sometimes rolled in from the south.

Lords' Storms, they were called: for the men on the Holy Mountain, the Lords of Truth, had the power to deflect any bad weather that threatened them.

Father would pretend that what Nian saw was a guess.

But there was no need to worry about the Tarhun. No one here would betray him. And the Tarhun had no powers to find him out, for the men with powers, the Lords, never left the Holy Mountain. There was nothing to be afraid of, as long as he was careful.

And his mother had told him to be careful.

Grandy was bringing out the new puffed ovals of bread from the oven when Nian entered the kitchen. Grandy's face was pink with heat from the fire, but her eyes were cold with fear.

‘And where have you been?’ she demanded, sounding somehow not quite like herself. ‘Skulking out in the yard instead of lending a hand. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!’

She was angry because she was afraid, but still it wasn’t fair to take it out on Nian.

‘I *have* come to lend a hand,’ he said stiffly.

But Grandy only snorted.

‘Yes—when you are too late to be of any use!’ she snapped. ‘Here,’ she went on, pushing the hot loaves onto a platter with quick flicks of her fingers. ‘Take this into the Hall. And you may as well stay there, for you’re too late to do any good here!’

Nian took the platter resentfully and shouldered his way through the swing door. The farm people were milling about in the yard waiting for the welcoming bell. In the Hall, everything was nearly ready. Mother was fussing about with one of the jugs of flowers, and Miri was going round straightening plates with one hand and re-pinning her headcloth with the other.

And sitting in the corner were three strangers.

Nian’s heart thumped warningly. The strangers wore tunics of red skin, and they had cunning little eyes that seemed already to know his secrets. *Tarhun*.

Mother seized the platter of bread and put it exactly in the middle of the High Table.

‘Nian,’ said Father, from the other end of the Hall. ‘You are to sit at my right hand today, beside our guests the Tarhun. It is time you learned to entertain visitors.’

I hate the Tarhun, thought Nian, though he felt a spark of pride.

'And now we must ring the welcoming bell,' went on Father. 'And that,' he said, smiling at Tan, 'is the job of the *youngest* child.'

'Just *seven* times, Tan,' Mother reminded him, hastily, as Tan, who had been waiting for this moment all day, raised the mallet to give the bell the biggest bashing it had ever had.

Miri put her hands to her ears, Mother set her teeth, and Father raised his own hands in the sign of greeting that a host makes when his doors are opened at a feast.

Tang! Tang! Tang! Tang! Tang! Tang! Tang!

The sound made Nian's ears buzz. The doors were being pushed open by the cheerful jostling crowd of farm-people, but Nian found himself remembering those other bells, the death-bells, that had rung over his uncle's grave.

But no one else was remembering them.

'Welcome, my friends,' said Father, to his people. 'For now is the season to be merry.'

And the Tarhun rose as one and advanced upon the food-laden table.

II

The Tarhun ate like men who had been hunting. They ate so solidly that there was no point in talking to them. All Nian had to do was pass them dish after dish and pretend not to be disgusted at their table manners. When he looked into the Tarhun's little eyes, that lay embedded within rolls of greasy fat, he understood why his father had placed him next to them. These were sly, suspicious men. They might be too busy snuffling after secrets hidden in corners to see what was under their noses.

The Tarhun hung their faces over their plates and ate and ate, but in the end even the fattest of them had to lean back to allow his belches to rise. It was then that Nian realized he could sense his parents' fear. It was fizzing into the air around him and making his nose itch.

That was so interesting that the attack of the Tarhun took him by surprise.

'So, Master,' said the very fattest of them, 'which of your sons has the gifts?'

Nian wanted very much to tell the Tarhun that his brother Tan wasn't gifted at anything. But he kept his mouth shut.

Father cut a hay-apple neatly into halves.

'Neither, that I know of,' he said calmly. 'Not gifted in Wisdom, anyway. Nian here is a fine active boy, though. He's been helping cut the hay.'

That annoyed the Tarhun—and it was a good thing to annoy them, because anger would cloud their minds.

'We aren't looking for farmhands!' the fattest one snapped. 'We're looking for Lords of Truth!'

'The world is desperately in need of boys to enter the holy House,' put in the tallest of the Tarhun, who had a nasty little moustache. 'The Lords of Truth are dying one by one. Who will keep the world safe from invasion if there are no boys to follow them? Who will keep the Lords' Wisdom alive until the Truth Sayer comes?'

Father nodded sympathetically.

'Who indeed,' he said. 'But I'm afraid we can't help you here. Have you tried—'

'Do you take us for fools?' demanded the fattest of the Tarhun, scowling. 'Do you think we don't know that every year for the last five years you have had the best harvests in the whole valley? That you gathered your frostberries the day before the snows came, even though you had to ripen most of them indoors? How can you account for that, except by the fact that one of your children has second sight?'

A chill ran through Nian. Someone had given the Tarhun information, then, but not on purpose, probably, for the people of the valleys were simple, trusting folk, and the Tarhun were cunning.