

The Grey People

by Greg Stolze

Listen, Ulha, and I will tell you of the Grey People. You heard what I told the others, and that story is true. But this is more true, for you. When I die, you shall be the Eldest daughter in Our Village, and 'tis best you know of the Grey People, things the others know not.

It started with my son Aelbart. He began with Holhoke my husband, may all heaven delight his soul, but only after all devils torment him a thousand years. Holhoke was as handsome a man and as loud a singer as the village ever raised, until our son Aelbart got a beard, and could shake the trees' leaves with his chanting.

Aelbart wed the daughter of Old Fatgut, still the Eldest and largest man of Our Village, who plowed the land and got his mate with one girl child upon the other. Old Fatgut says he is man enough to leave no room for another in his home. Perhaps fools even believe him.

I'm sure you're impatient to hear about the Grey People and Toak and my journey, but you must wait. Time makes one an elder but patience makes one Eldest. So quit squirming, scratch what itches, and listen.

Fatgut's oldest had grown thick about the thighs on her father's grain and her mind was no quick starling. Her father, though, was crafty enough to grow large and live long, and Aelbart gave him a grandson, Toak.

Aelbart and the farmer's daughter fought no less than any other couple and more than many, and Aelbart had no taste for the slow toil of farming. He insisted that hunting was a better fit for his courage. Charming other trackers and sharing their take for a song was the *best* fit for it. He's my son, I can speak to his weaknesses. If I didn't see them as often as his plump wife, I had the wit to consider all I saw, not only what suited me.

By the time Toak started to show beard, when Old Fabblehead died and left me Eldest, Aelbart went hunting and never returned. Aelbart's hunting-mates said he pursued a stag and they never found him, that it was a forest mystery, that spirits take some men that way. I grieved, and suspected, but said naught to Old Fatgut nor even Toak, whom I could not love more were he my son or husband.

But Old Fatgut was unquiet, and made this known to those forest companions, and Toak, and me. He called me to his home and I said an old woman should not be summoned from her fireside, so he came and partook of my hospitality.

"Your son is not dead," he told me, with no subtlety.

"You think I know it not?" I said, for it is often clever to disdain a gift of knowledge once you have it unasked. "I know the wind demons who whiten hair, and I have beaten the unseen devils who kick women until they bleed, unless they please

heaven with progeny. I walk the tall hills and know which mushrooms show truth and which toadstools lie. You think I would not know if his blood, *my* blood, had fallen still?"

Old Fatgut shook his chin-wattles, making them jostle like piglets seeking a teat. "Where, then, has your wayward son gone?"

"Whose concern is that?"

"My daughter, whom he abandoned!"

"Say instead, your daughter who could not keep him."

The look he gave could freeze water in a man's loins, but one does not get to be Eldest by quailing at gazes.

"What leads *you* to think him living and fled?" I asked.

"Not hill-wind and toadstools," he snorted. "His friends partook in my harvest libations, and one drank until he reached the fatal cup of truth. Under its spell, he made hints to my daughter that Aelbart had not simply vanished. Toak had no joy in the news and blustered at the hunter, who took the boy outside with a thought to give him a knock to the head. But Toak was spirited and the hunter too far drunk, so Toak straddled him in the fallen leaves, and struck him like a young bride washing clothes. Had the man not drunk enough, I think the beating might have killed him."

"What wisdom did this drunkard display, after having his head pummeled?"

"That Aelbart had complained of his wife, as men do on such travels, but that one night he sang loud and long, and drew to their camp a Grey Man."

"Why would a Grey Man be so far north, and distant from the coast?" I asked.

"I know not their ways, but this one told your son there was a place for a loud singer in his village, a place with brides and honors and gold."

For a time, we sat and did not speak.

"You did not love him as a son," I said to Old Fatgut.

"What father loves his daughter's husband so?"

"Some."

"Some are fools. You loved not my child as your daughter. Not that you know of it, having no girls."

"Aye, as ignorant as you of a father's love for sons."

That led to more quiet, and frowns.

"Your daughter," I said at last, "Has lost none of the... charm and quality that joined her to my son. She could find another."

"Would that she could," he said, and all in a moment his words became heavy. He did not speak his grief, but his words sang it. "She babbles of her love, thinks of nothing and no one else. As for Toak... he is a good lad, but his father's absence has put a disquiet in him. I would not have my grandson so deviled."

"Toak is a good lad," I agreed.

"He has sworn to travel to the Grey Villages and bring his father back."

"Foolishness," I said. "They will kill him."

"Yet he insists, and if I bid him stay on my approval, or yours, he will not wait for it."

"Nor should he, knowing it would never come," I said. "Unless he's a fool who lets sense wait on hope."

"'Tis early to tell if the boy is a fool. But you? You are no fool."

"What say you? That I ought go to the Grey People? I would need uncommon stupidity to leave my hearth with leaves falling and the weather turning cruel."

"I cannot go," Old Fatgut said. "My traveling days are over and the farm needs me." He did not say that if his farm did not harvest, how many would hunger in the village. It was not needful to say.

"Toak is set upon travel?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then we shall see if an old fool and a young one can be wise together."

As Eldest daughter it was my place to walk the tall hills on the equinox, and speak truce with the world. But my love of my grandson and my wayward child, and his wife's love of him, and her father's love of her, set me out on a cold morning with Toak, risking my duty.

Unlike Aelbart, Toak had no fear of work. He fashioned a sledge, on which he pulled our stores and blankets. When the ground was mud and my bones were sore, he pulled me. That was how I found a heavy bronze shield under the blankets, and a heavy bronze sword beneath the bread and bacon, and a heavy bronze helmet under my bags of herbs and medicines.

"Toak," I said. "What foolishness is this? Would you make war with the whole of the Grey People?"

"They enchanted my father and took him away," he said, trudging and pulling.

"There's no enchantment to laziness and promises."

That stilled his steps.

"I'll not have my father dishonored!" he cried, and his voice was a child-sound, but would one day howl like his grandfather.

"What recourse would you take, then? An honor-duel with his withered old dam?"

"No son," he said, "Should hear ill spoken of his father. He didn't leave, they *took* him."

"No son should have a father who merits ill speech, nor should any mother have to speak it of her child. And yet," I said, climbing down to walk, "Here we are."

After a half mile I judged it right to speak again.

"What *would* you do with these weighty tools of war?"

"Whatever is needful."

"Even if it be wise?" I asked

"Especially then," he said, which pleased me.

"Even if 'tis not glorious?" I asked.

He slowed his tread. "There is honor in feats of arms," he said.

"You'll have no fair fight from the Grey People," I warned him. "They're foul and lie their daughters with sea serpents to ensure plentiful fish. One against many is neither wisdom nor honor nor courage just... a failure of thought."

"Then to recover him, we must have wise thoughts?"

"Only so."

"How fortunate I brought you along," he said, and smiled.

Could any grandmother's heart not warm to that?

Still, he did not abandon shield and sword, despite their weight. He said they were his burden to haul.

That night, I dreamed danger. The sea rose, not in waves, but seeping like stagnant water that cannot drain, as if it was pushed by a growth beneath it. The ocean spread, with a stink, smothering the land even to Our Village in the hills. Then I was no longer sleeping, but awake.

I pinched Toak's lips shut, gently, until his eyes opened.

"Quiet," I whispered. "They're here."

I knew because all night sounds had stopped, as my true dream told. No hum of flies or bird-chirp or rustle of furry beast fed my ear.

"Lie still and listen," I told him. Then I rose and stirred the fire. It was grey-light, when the stars look away but the sun is not yet rising. With groan and grunt, I rummaged in our food stores, pulling out packages and piling more fuel on the flames. When I looked up, three Grey Men had stepped from the woods.

One barked at me, their language like the gurgle of a smothering man. I put my hands to my heart and said, "Oh!"

"You travel far by night, old mother," the biggest one said.

"I have a long journey."

"Where bound?"

"The bright lands to the south. I had a vision, leading me there."

"You're unlike to arrive," he said, shaking his head.

"Not to return, but I will get there, spirits willing."

"Who's this?" one asked, poking Toak with the butt of a hunting spear.

"Keep that stick to yourself," Toak said, sitting up and glaring, and in response the Grey Man struck him across the side of the head.

"No, don't!" I cried, but I was not unready. I know how men behave in the woods, where the eyes and laws of a village are absent. Especially men who outnumber strangers, and Grey Men more especially still.

I had unmixed flour, which burns bright and quick. More, I had a compound for wet wood and cold days, made of the oils of tree frills and coal dust and hot-burning resin. I had fetched these things as I built up the campfire.

"Here, take this, it's valuable, just don't hurt him!" I called, shoving the fuel at the leader, spilling it on him as I did. I enacted foolish hysteria and stumbled about. As the other came to grab me, I upended the flour bag over the flames and shut my eyes.

I heard the bark of sudden fire, I smelled burned hair and stepped back. The leader screamed. I opened one eye and he was alight, clumps of fire-starter clinging to his legs and jerkin.

Toak kept his wits. As his spearman turned to the commotion, my grandson wrapped his arms around the man's legs, and lunged. The two tumbled, wrestling for the spear.

The burning Grey Man shrieked and slapped himself. The other blinked, his night-sight stolen by the flash. I picked up the bronze helm as he bent down for a water skin to douse his leader. I'd get no better chance to hit him, and I did, but his swearing sounded more angry than hurt. Fortunately, it did stagger him, and he staggered into my fire.

I circled to where my grandson struggled with the third. Hitting *his* head was easier, as he was bound up, trying to strangle Toak with one hand and draw a dagger with the other. Toak, too, grabbed at the blade, wriggling like a fresh-caught fish. One blow from the helmet, and the grey hands loosened. Toak got the knife as I raised the helm again—painfully slow, it was heavier than my good iron skillet. The Grey Man blocked as I swung, checking me as if that damned bronze hat weighed no more than a kitten's whisker. But lifting his arms made his belly tight, his hide tunic rode up to show stomach, hairless as an egg. Toak cut left to right. Out plopped the Grey Man's guts, like the egg's yolk.

Toak put on the helmet and got his feet beneath him. The leader was sitting, he'd taken our water and was dousing his legs. The other, who trod in the flames, was on his rump too. He just finished wrenching off his burning boot as Toak crashed the helmet onto his scalp. It was a fine peck, like a robin taking a worm. The intruder clutched his crown, howling and curling up like a hurt child.

But the leader stood, spear in hand, grim faced, as my grandson faced him with only a knife in his hand and a pot on his head.

"Let us put down our weapons and talk!" I cried, but he thrust his spear at me. I tripped backwards as Toak charged, heedless. The pair howled as they struggled over the spear. The big Grey Man cut Toak's shoulder, flung him back, and was preparing for a finishing lunge. But I'd found the sword and flanked him. Too weak to raise it higher than my waist, I felt my ankle crack as I swung, but I cut the back of his knee and there was blood as I tottered back.

My heel has ached every day after 'til now, my punishment for trying to fight like a bushy-beard. But they struck my grandchild and it made my thoughts all fly like birds, like a flock when a cat pounces amidst them.

Toak seized the gutted one's spear. The leader tried to stand, but his cut knee would not hold. He sank into a crouch, threatening me and then the boy.

"I can kill you both," he said.

"No," Toak replied. "You fight well, but not on one leg."

For a moment, all three of us were silent. Then Toak dug his spear into the fire and flung an arc of coals on the big one. His flinch toppled him and Toak sprang, pinned his foe's weapon with his foot, and struck.

My husband said there are men of two types, when killing times come. Some say killing a man is nothing like killing a wolf or deer, that taking life from a thing with a face is a different matter. Others say killing a man is the same, that meat is meat and blood, blood.

I saw Toak's face and knew he was the second type. I looked to the final Grey Man as he struggled to get to his feet, and he knew as well.

I tried to talk with him, after Toak bound his hands. As Toak dragged the dead away and sought a place to bathe himself, I asked the survivor, the one who had trod in the fire, where he came from. He spoke only in the sick-sound words of Grey People. But he recognized the word "Aelbart."

The prisoner's name, close as I can pronounce, was "Duthler." He was strong, but unwell after the blow to his head. He limped on his burned foot, though I treated his hurts as well as I could. Touching his flesh, cold and too smooth, made my skin crawl.

He coughed and gabbled and whined as we traveled, and his keening tones made me glad I could not take his meaning. At the forest's end, I told Toak to stay and guard Duthler while I got his father in exchange. Toak disliked this and suggested that I stay and he talk, but I asked if, were he prisoner, he'd quicker obey a young, fierce guard or an old woman. He made no reply, which shows I was fitter for talking.

Light snow had fallen, and numbness stole some pain from my ankle, and from the cut in my shoulder—on my oath, I didn't feel the spear's iron edge touch me—at the price of putting it in every joint from shoulder to shin. I stumbled to the Grey settlement and saw a bloated toad of a woman, with eyes like a dog's asshole, hauling water up from their well. Compared with her, Old Fatgut's daughter was a girlish wisp with skin like the blush of dawn.

"Good greetings!" I shouted. "Know you Aelbart? Aelbart son of Holhoke?"

"Man of north." She spoke the way a sick man shits, all spatters and plops.

"Can you take me to him?"

She waddled into town, its broad streets lined by massive homes, all great black slabs tilted together, cemented with grey wattle. Piles of shells and fish-bones reeked

beside each house, drying out until they were kicked into the pathways and trod into dust. There was nowhere a flower or garden to give an eye green rest from the colors of coal, old bone and rain-driven sky. No dog barked, no chick clucked. There wasn't even the reek of pigs to cut the pervasive smell of rot, and fish, and more rot.

It was then three moons since I saw my son, and the time had changed him. His handsome face had paled, and slackened, as if his skin was outgrowing his head. His belly, too, had swelled, bulging over the mouth of his pants like a dog's tongue-tip on a hot day.

"Mother? By all the devils, how came you?" He embraced me, and despite his smell of sleeplessness, cold sweat, and seashells, I welcomed it.

"By heaven you're like ice, get inside!" He hurried me in and sat me beside a fire that blazed bright, though it seemed less warming than the hearth of home. But soon I felt my feet again, the deep pain that comes first after numbness. Old Fablehead called it the Frost King's punishment for trespass, but I've seen fingers and ears blacken from cold and think the pain is a friendly warning.

"You are missed," I said.

He looked away, and did not turn back to ask "Indeed? Who craves me so much?"

"That wife of yours," I said, "And look at me when I speak. It's not that wall walked many miles to call out your foolishness!"

"My wife," he said, glancing over his shoulder, "Never greeted me with aught but complaint, and I never left but to abuse. If she pines when I'm gone, I know it not: When I was there, I was nothing but a spitting-place for her ire."

"And what of your boy?"

He sighed. "Toak is a man, with no further need of me."

"He might disagree."

"In disagreement, he would be an apt pupil of his mother and Old Fatgut." He laughed, with no mirth. "Do you know what they call me here? Young Fatgut."

"Your suggestion?"

"What if it is? It suits my fancy." He leaned towards me. "Know you what they wish of me? To sing loudly, that their devil-gods under the waves might better hear. For that, for a skill that earned me mild friends in the village? Look." He took his feet with a grunt and pawed through a chest at the foot of a pallet of straw and furs. "Gold, mother. Songs, into gold."

The thing he held was golden, no doubt. It was like a spindle in size, an oval of wound lines, but its curves were not taut thread, but wavy layers of knobbed flesh, the boneless arms of a cuttlefish, twisted and braided. It felt cold and too smooth in my hands, as if a fine layer of oil kept it wiggling. It had an odd, evil greenishness, somewhat like copper verdigris, but more like pus from infected flesh. Its weight

seemed matched by a waiting stillness, and the weak warmth of the flames could not equal its chill.

"I wouldn't pay you for that trinket." I handed it back. "I would pay you to carry it away."

"Bah! If gold doesn't fit your tastes, what of food? In Our Village, I'm another mouth at Old Fatgut's board. Do not think I take one sip of broth without a reminder. Here? Mother, there is no want. There are *none poor* in Grey Village! To be fed, one only puts out a hand, casts a net, flings a line! Stockfish, herring, great juicy eels! All you could desire. When has Our Village lacked a rumbling belly?"

"Plenty is scant recompense for dishonor," I said, though my own gut gave voice in betrayal. With a laugh, he went for the larder and soon had a pot on the fire, oil bubbling as he split crayfish and threw their flesh inside.

"Honor? What honor did I have of Old Fatgut, or anyone else? Singing, they liked, but I was always the frivolous man."

"Honor isn't given, but can be given away," I tried, as he scraped fish onto a wooden plate. It was delicious.

"Here they respect me, pay me, feed me. If that's not honor enough for you, it is for me."

"But they're strangers! How many of them can even speak your language?" I demanded.

"I fret less on what comes from their mouths than what goes in mine," he said. "I'm not going back. Tell Toak I'm sorry but..."

I never did hear what leaven he was going to give that apology, for an angry babble outside turned both our heads. Prying open the door, I saw a crowd of Grey People, flabby arms swaying, pressing together like chewing teeth. Then, seeing a flash of blond hair, I knew they had Toak.

"Leave him be!" I shrieked. Clammy hands, work-leathered, clamped my upper arms. They pulled me forward, stumbling, until Aelbart fought his way to me.

They deferred to him. His shoving did not rock them on their heels or make them stumble: They stepped aside when he pushed. They let me go without him wrenching their hands.

"Mother, did they hurt you?"

"Consider your son instead!" I hissed. Then a voice asked, "What has happened? Man of the north, know you of this?"

The woman speaking our tongue was taller than Aelbart, broader than Old Fatgut, and her eyes were bubbles of black in the cold dough of her face. Sharp teeth flickered in grey gums with each word. Gold dangled from stretched earlobes that looked like they might bloodlessly part any moment. A black wolf-skin swaddled her vastness, save for hands like blobs of suet, the skin pinched around more gold,

bracelets, rings, buried in the flesh as if she'd donned them as a child and grown vast around them.

All her gold bangles had the same unwholesome green tone, the same mocking angles, the same sense of artfully depicting forms unspeakably foul.

"Thucha," my son said, her name an abomination in his throat, "Please, these are... people from my old village. There is no hurt in them. Please."

That hand, with its sheen like bacon grease, reached out to stroke his beard. He did not recoil, though I did.

"Aelbart, that is not what Duthler says. By his tale, two of our people lie dead, their bodies rotting on the earth and not consigned back to Mother Sea."

"Two of your people who assaulted a frail woman and a child!" I said.

She exchanged throat-grunts with our prisoner, who came forward and cringed. He gestured at his head and foot. Thucha's face was unreadable as a fish, but whatever she said made Duthler whine. Thucha mused for a moment, then her hand dropped onto Duthler's face with crushing force. Before the blow, his nose was a mere blot of a thing, and she smashed it flat, staining the white path with red. His knees buckled, and she gestured for two others to take him away.

"Thucha, please, these two... they are my kin, blood of my blood, mercy on them..." I'm ashamed to think my house had coaxed that wheedling voice out of Aelbart. It raised my gorge to hear him speak to this Grey priestess so, but it was not unfamiliar. It was a tone to which I had, now and again, said yes.

"We shall discuss matters on the singing stone," she said. At her gesture, Toak was brought forward, hobbling and hurt. The slope-shouldered brutes around him half-held him up even as he struggled feebly to reject their grasp. When they released him, he collapsed.

"Toak, stop fighting!" I said.

"Do as she says!" his father said. I know not if he meant me, or Thucha.

Hesitant, Aelbart knelt by his child, and gently looped Toak's arm around his shoulder. "Come with me, son. I will help you."

Thucha did not look back as she strode to the waterline, so neither did I. I heard Aelbart grunt from unaccustomed labor, and Toak's muffled sounds of pain.

The tongue of stone onto which the priestess led us was flat and black, rising from the waves. It was slightly upthrust so that, though the icy water lapped our ankles for our first steps, by its end we were a man's height above the water's ebb.

Only at its farthest point did Thucha turn to address us. "Duthler says men from the north came upon his party by night, who bravely fought but were overcome. I told him to take us to where the bodies of his comrades lay, and those of the men he had killed."

"They will find the first," I said, "Not the last."

She shook her head. "We do not permit our blood to be shed lightly, child of dust."

"I am a child of the tall hills!" I said.

"Your masters are distant, until the equinox," she replied.

"Thucha," my son said again, "These people have done wrong, but show mercy. Please. For my sake. If you would have back the gold I have gotten..."

"The baubles that buy your affection cannot pervert my justice," she replied. "But there is a higher authority, warm-skin. Open your fair mouth, give voice and call the matriarch."

Aelbart paled. "We... Thucha please, I would not disturb the goddess..."

"Then this northern trash can feed the fish," she said. "Shall I have their guards stab them where it bleeds best, to call the sharks with merciful speed?"

"No! He is..." A darting glance between Toak and the priestess. "He is my son."

I do not know if Toak felt, as I did, that his father hesitated for fear that it might do more harm than good.

Thucha laughed. "I am curious, then, to see how far your father's love extends. His life, or the matriarch's embrace. Choose."

What happened next... I dislike to relate it, Ulha. My son sang, loud and strong, with words more human than our language, more alien than Thucha's gurgling. The thing that came from the waves will dwell in my nightmares forever, and seeing my child submit to its boneless embrace... death nor age nor a three day childbirth hold no terrors to match that. I wish I could have looked away, but he stared at me while it writhed and crushed him, tears streamed down as his handsome face changed, sank, became a visage to never show joy again. If I gave him any solace as that horrible bulk from the ocean used him as a dog mounts a bitch, took his seed with a violence that left him bleeding... then I had to look. There was no choice.

After, the Grey People put Toak and me on a boat, rowed us north, and put us ashore to walk home. By then snow had flown, and I barely made the equinox rites. My cough and weakness started then, on a trek where I left three blackened toes behind for the Frost King. The sickness has settled in my lungs and neck, an itch like a knitting wound, but it is flesh coming apart, not growing together. I will die with the cough, and soon. This story is among the last things I can speak.

So what I told the others is true—that my son chose to stay with the Grey People, never to return. I have said that Aelbart has a new bride of high station, and that to attack the Grey People is foolish.

As I start to feel my blood cool, I feel as well its two streams. Bright and hot in Toak, may he marry well and raise children. But I feel, too, another branch, cold and strange, begotten so shamefully by my weak son.

I pray you never meet them.