Winding Sheets

Gallam didn't look at the clothes the family provided until he had already prepared the body. "Prepared" was putting it mildly: the man was covered in wounds—blade wounds? Bite wounds? Gouges, rips, punctures, slices. At first, Gallam wasn't sure the corpse would actually hold together for burial. "Burial" had been specified, not cremation, although they hadn't told him the location of the cemetery. Gallam usually insisted on that information; this time he'd asked twice, and the two people who'd brought the body—two women, both dressed as if they crewed a seagoing vessel—had continued their other instructions as if he hadn't spoken.

Those instructions had been specific and difficult. They hadn't said to hide the wounds, they'd told him to "erase" them. The taller one, whose skin was dark and weather-lined, stocky as if she hauled sails or fish, had used that word twice, overpronouncing it as if she had only recently learned it and wanted to make sure she got it right. Her shorter sister—were they sisters? Were they even family?—pale as a ghost and thin, although her hands looked like they could crack walnuts, had repeated it each time the taller one said it, also chewing the consonants and singing the vowels.

Gallam had tried to explain that wounds could be sewn together, they could be covered over with make-up, bandaged, or (ideally) covered by clothing, but he didn't know how to "erase" anything. The body had been naked when they brought it to him, covered only by a sheet, and he'd had a look at the tears, pits, and gashes before they'd given their orders. But again, they'd not responded or reacted, just kept talking, calling him "Washer of the Dead" instead of by his name. It was as if they were actors in a play and Gallam had forgotten his lines, so that the other players had to cover for him by going on as if he had said what he was supposed to say.

They'd told him they'd be back in two days' time, and had specified (again those overpronounced words) that there was to be no embalming. That wasn't so surprising: they might be Muslims or Jews or just believers in an older tradition. They did *feel* old-fashioned to him—no, *ancient* was the better word, but no, that wasn't right either, was it? Embalming went back four thousand years. Maybe *primal*, yes, that's what he was thinking; something rooted in the land and nature. They would put their brother under the earth and tell the worms and fungus, the water and the seasons, to reduce him to soil himself.

But then why the concern about the injuries? If the body was to return to the clay from which it came, then what matter whether anyone could see imperfections or even violence to the human form? Embalming implied that there was an ideal form you wanted to approximate before entombment, whether to make the deceased fit for the gods or simply to simulate, in the flesh, the incorruption of eternity. If this were to be an open-casket funeral, or even one in which the family could lift the lid for a while and gaze upon the face of the dear departed (a face nearly torn in two), then he understood the wish to hide the wounds that were *visible*. But most would be covered by clothing, he assumed, and in any case, Gallam was inexplicably certain that there would be almost no one at the funeral—maybe those two alone.

So he had done his best with the hurts, realigning limbs, stitching up dead flesh, using pancake base to hide the seams. Then he opened the package containing the clothes.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting. A naval uniform, merchant-marine garb like the two women wore, a two-piece blue suit? But what came out of the package was a green garment of a type that Gallam had never seen. It was a single piece of fabric, very long—it still touched the floor when he held it at arm's length over his head—and it did not have obvious holes for arms, legs, or head. It wasn't a sari or toga or anything like them. It was broader in some parts than others, and split into two halves for about a third of its length at either end. He had never seen anything like it. In vain he searched books of costumes and garb that he had for just such emergencies, even resorted to the internet, but found nothing.

Gallam had several mannequins, and he chose the one closest to the dead man's physique. He hung, wrapped, twisted the odd fabric (not cotton, not wool, not linen, not silk, but not artificial, he was sure) two or three dozen times in different orientations on the dummy. Nothing looked remotely right: either it hung off absurdly on one side, or it failed to extend over a shoulder, or the private parts were not decently covered.

The thought of asking the strange women how to clothe their dead friend mortified and even frightened him. And that was odd: yes, this was his profession, and it would be humiliating to admit that he was unable to prepare a body according to the wishes of the bereaved. But he'd faced embarrassments before; they were unpleasant, and sometimes the grieving family could get nasty or abusive, but his was a profession of comfort in moments of anguish. He'd be unfit for it if he couldn't handle moments like that. No, this was more than humiliation, more than shame: it felt like obscenity, sacrilege, mortal sin.

He phoned several other undertakers of his acquaintance and sent them photos of the garment; none of them recognized it. He phoned a costume designer, a fashion critic, an historian of material culture, an archeologist, a social anthropologist, a scholar of the visual arts, the most experienced traveler he knew. None of them could help.

Then, the night before the two sisters were to return for their brother (why, why, did he persist in thinking they were all related?), after he had admitted to himself that he would have to acknowledge defeat and accept whatever discipline he felt sure would follow, he had a long dream.

He was a sailor on a ship that never touched the sea, whose sails caught the wind in order to ride upon it. He and his shipmates hauled and trimmed those sails, steered and protected their ship from storms. In his dream-memory, the ship had never landed, had never touched earth or water; it soared into the stratosphere where the air was colder than icebergs and could not be breathed, but they breathed it anyway. They dived until they were skimming only ten fathoms over a searing desert, the dunes rushing past like waves, their faces burnt equally by the hammering sun and the slicing wind. They rode the currents over granite mountains, hunting dragons and jinn and the devils of the air. They had no harpoons, no nets, no lines with which to capture their prey.

Instead, in the bow of the ship stood a giant, half-again as tall as any of them, long haired and long bearded, barefoot and bareheaded, arms stretched out before him. He sang in a loud, deep voice, a voice that could be heard over the roaring wind, that could be felt in the crew's muscles and the soles of their feet. The words were no tongue Gallam had ever spoken in waking life, but which he understood, not as words, but as intent. The giant was calling a challenge to the dragon, a taunt to the jinn—meet me here, in your own element! Face me and try your strength against me!

And this singer, this hunter, this wizard was clothed in thick green robes that wound about each arm, each leg, and his middle, with no knots or bows, held in place by the force and movements of the man's own body and the cyclone that tore at him. In an instant, dream-Gallam could see and feel exactly each loop, each tug, each spread of the cloth. They were placed not just to cover or protect the giant, but according to a ritual like the winding of the straps of tefillin. This twist was the name of the father of dragons; that pull was the vanity of the sky demons. The entire thing was a message, an incantation, a boast. The robes said: I come for you.

But in this dream, Gallam was sure, as sure as he breathed the unbreathable air, as sure as blood rushed hot through his cold body, that they had never seen either dragon or demon or jinn in their years past years of hunting. Nor had they eaten, nor drunk, nor loved, nor hated. They would go on forever.

He awoke, the fog clearing slowly from his mind as when a breeze comes over a pond in the morning. He knew how to garb the dead man, knew the message to write in the wrapping of the body. It would be difficult, because the singer should be standing, feet apart, arms forward, head high, storm blowing through his hair, when his acolyte prepared him for the hunt. But with care and time, not hurrying, he could follow the meticulous path along the limbs that would shout the warnings to the sky. He could say the ritual words, still clear in his mind even though he began to forget their meaning, that accompanied each flare and narrowing of fabric.

And he knew where the wounds had come from. The hunter had found his prey, and the prey had taken the challenge. Not one sky-going mariner had been touched but the singer himself—the struggle was personal, giant and dragon, wizard and jinn. He had both won and lost.

And Gallam knew why the wounds must be hidden, why the sky-sailing women had not named a cemetery. They were going back to the sky; the hunter would hunt again. The struggle lost and won would be sought and lost and won, over and over.

And Gallam would be with them. After the body, after the winding sheets, after the dream and the song and the sisters who pulled the sails, he had passed through some curtain and was now on the other side. He felt as if his life until this very moment had been but the first tentative theme in a long symphony, and now the music was to begin in earnest. To remain on the dry earth among the dead and the bereft would be a colorless dream.

The singer rose. His acolyte bowed. The sky awaited.