

# **LAST POET OF WYRLD'S END**

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Tom. Always Tom.

Hi, Mom!

## FIRST LINES

**W**e begin our story here: it is morning at the Tavern of Wyrld's End. The sun casts tawny strips of warmth across the central room's ringed floor. The room has been carved from the heart of a redwood tree planted by planetfall settlers and felled in the wars of a hundred years ago. It was a sad event that could have driven a soul to drink. And it did, but that is not this story.

In this center room, we meet the person who begins and ends our tale. His name is Zhou Liu Yang. Some call him Liu the Fish, others, Poet. He calls himself Liu Yang. First, because it is his given name, and also because in an old Earth tongue it meant "Ocean" and he thinks that is a good name for a poet. He stands, a man of perhaps sixty-five standard years touched by poetry and drink, behind two sailors down on their luck. All he would like in this world is a morning tea; a simple desire, but the windings and workings of desire are rarely simple in any world.

## EMPTY POCKETS AT THE TAVERN

The poet Liu Yang came to the crux of his problem when he felt through his ragged pockets: they were empty. Empty of his ink bottle, of his tobacco pouch, and of the fine brass pen his daughter gifted him long ago before she set off to sail to the moon. Empty of his single lanthium coin—all that was left of a poetry commission by the city council last year—and, to his dismay, his most precious possession: a large blue marble. He slipped his index finger through the hole of the deep pocket and wagged it on the other side.

Seeing Liu Yang's wiggling finger, the barkeep, Lucas, said: "I think you have a problem with your pocket, Poet."

"*Alliteration.*" Liu Yang sighed. "Alas, I cannot pay." Liu Yang eyed the cup in Lucas' hand.

"A poem for us then?" asked Lucas, finding a way to resolve the present problem of the hot drink in his hand. The sailors left their discourse and turned weathered faces to Liu Yang, whose heart still fretted over the loss of his marble.

"Too early for poems," said the dark-skinned sailor.

"Give us a sea poem," said his (more literary) companion. "We're long gone from it, the waves being what they are. Our pockets are feeling the kick."

The dark-skinned sailor grunted in agreement at that. "Give us a good one, then. Maybe there'll be drinks for us, too."

"A three-drink poem?" asked Liu Yang. "A lot to ask from a morning. Too much perhaps."

"Then give us a poem about good fortune," said the dark-skinned sailor. "Give us luck."

Lucas slid the tea to Liu Yang with a meaningful nod. Liu Yang closed his eyes and saw the

roaring, violent seas of Wyrl'd's End. He saw black darts of fragile boats venture like prodigal children over blacker waves. The poet raised his cup and said:

*The sea hides a treasure  
Our hearts don't deserve,  
A thing we want without loving,  
Until we remember what is beautiful  
Lying far behind.*

It said what he meant, but it fell short of those lines that had been dancing in his head since he woke. What were those lines? Something about the mists—no—the clouds on the mountain, tumbling like sheep from pasture, and lanthium beating in the heart of the mountain. No, that wasn't quite it. And who wrote that anyway? Either way, Liu Yang raised his cup a little higher to signal that the poem was done.

"Very nice. Reflective," said Lucas.

The fair-skinned sailor said, "You ever spend a day on those waters? The sea here has nothing worth loving, and it loves no one."

"It's just a sea," said Liu Yang. "It doesn't have an agenda, it has mystery."

The dark sailor snorted, "Say that when a tentacle has you, when a mute beast crunches your bones. We'll see what fills your poetry."

"I have it on good authority that crudgeons are excellent poets," said Liu Yang.

"Oh yeah? Whose authority?" said the dark sailor. Even Lucas look puzzled.

"Poetry itself," said Liu Yang. The sailors shared another look.

"Couldn't monsters be treasures? Is that the message?" asked Lucas.

Liu Yang felt the mystery was the treasure, but the fair-skinned sailor said. "A monster that's a treasure? Plenty. One in these very seas. Everyone's after it or says they've been after it. Us, too. But you'll only ever catch it just after the storms. Have to get your boats in the water, fast. If you could run that through, its skull would command the ransom of a High Counselor." He banged the bar with a chapped fist and checked his empty cup.

"Enough to set you for life," explained the other in case they weren't each familiar with the going rates of hostages.

"Could you run it through, though? It seems to me if it were going to be killed, it should have

been long ago.” Lucas leaned on the bar.

“We wouldn’t tell you, would we? You could give away our secrets.” The fair sailor said this.

Lucas grinned. “Like that Old Earth story with the whale. Dek-ka has a copy somewhere, may even actually be legit. No shortage of White Crudgeon stories in Wyrld’s End. I believe it holds up half our economy. When the White Crudgeon is killed, what will happen to Wyrld’s End? What say you, Poet?”

Liu Yang was wiggling his finger through his pocket, missing a treasure he had always kept close to him and wondering if this were portentous. “I’ve lost my marble,” Liu Yang said and cast a glance around the redwood room as though its blue glass might wink at him from some crevice. “I’ve lost my marble, and I must retrieve it.”

## THE POET SEARCHES FOR HIS MARBLE

**L**iu Yang did not leave the Tavern empty-handed; what a wealth friends are!

“It’s a cold day and it’ll be a colder afternoon with the rains,” Lucas said, loaning Liu Yang his personal flask.

This delighted Liu Yang. He promised himself that he would make its contents last the day, if not stretch them until he could find a coin for his supper. Then, Liu Yang opened the flask and—aha—what there? The warm citrus was unmistakable; Lucas had filled the bottle with none other than luxuriant celvet.

Liu Yang took one sip; sweet orange hues rushed his tongue, heated his throat, and gushed into his belly. He ventured a second sip, and why not? Oh! Life was at its heart a kind thing, only a fool could miss it. Confident in life’s kindness, Liu Yang followed one swig with another until the flask was more than half empty, the road unstarted, and he, thoroughly drunk.

That had been more than he intended. Best put the flask away where he would not so readily put it to his lips. He slid the container into the pocket on his right hip, then remembered what problem had driven him from the doors of the Tavern, and moved it to his left. A set of beautiful dark eyes filled his mind and sobered him. The most beautiful eyes on any world, truly. If he could not find his marble, these eyes might be lost forever. He clasped his old hand over his heart, how had he forgotten? His marble was missing.

“Liu Yang, you old fool,” he said. “How could you have been waylaid? You must remember, you must retrace your steps.”

Liu Yang recalled, his mind sloshing with celvet, that he had passed by the guard station on



Tavern Row at dawn and bid good morning to the Captain of the Guard herself, Captain Ydumel Anuora. Perhaps she had seen his marble. Yes, he must start with her.

Heartened, the poet stuttered down the dirt and cobble road, and those lines returned to his head. Clouds tumbling like sheep from a pasture. Sheep shuffled the narrow corridors of life and then the sudden, flung-open fields of epiphany. What was the sudden opening from path to field called? Ah, yes, a *debouchment*. Who had that poet been? He never forgot a poet's name.

Liu Yang struggled to the station's colonnade, dizzy and winded. This morning was too much for him. Too much noise, too unsteady a street, too many crisscrossing legs in the narrow row, and him swimming against the current.

Better that he sit inside the station door, down here on the floor, out of the way, yes, and think on just who this poet might have been with the sheep and the clouds and the celvet.

## THE CAPTAIN AND A POT TO PISS IN

When the poet opened his eyes, he learned he had been asleep. It was an awakening rich with discoveries that deserved to be explored one at a time.

Liu Yang discovered that not only had he been asleep, but that he also did not know the surroundings he had slept in. He also did not recognize the voices murmuring on the other side of what must be...a door! Yes, a door. A door with a thin, wavering glow of lamplight that slid between it and the flagstones.

Booted feet crept through the outside passage; shadows migrated across the strip of light and coalesced at the corner of the door that happened to be positioned above his head. The door was above his head, not because it was a trap door, but because Liu Yang was learning that he was lying down.

The poet raised his cheek and wiped the grit from his ears. He did not know where he was, but even the most unimaginative of poets could sense that waking up in a stone room as small as a cell—yes, a cell, that's what it was—might lend a restrictive theme to the rest of one's day.

He groped about the walls, Lucas' flask bumping in his left pocket. Oh, his marble! His marble was still missing! His heart gave a small, sharp pang. How was he to find his marble now that he was in this little cell? Would events twist so cruelly for him? Must he distrust the strange turns of life?

No. The possibility occurred to the poet that maybe his marble was here, in the cell, and that it had drawn him here because this place was in need of poetry. This had never happened before, but just because a thing hadn't happened *before* didn't mean that it wasn't happening *now*. Perhaps

heartbreak and loss had not been foreshadowed, perhaps the underlying metaphor of the moment was that there was good, even here, in this damp, small cell.

Ah, there was another good thing: the cell was tight. Liu Yang's body was old and protested his decisions often. The cell was so narrow a space that he could place a hand on each wall and draw himself up, securing (wobbly) legs beneath him.

Now the poet was at height with the clutch of whispers. Too hard to hear! He mourned the absence of his marble, for it had a trick: if he turned it this way and touched its top, he could put it to his ear and pick up a conversation a kilometer in any direction. (The poet had long been without a formal bed or house of his own and often had to "borrow" one, so this function of the marble was in frequent use.)

Liu Yang pressed his ear to the door, catching the voices in a pause, as footsteps passed above. Liu Yang squinted through a crack in the planks. Red cloaks. The city guard! No longer was his location a mystery; he knew precisely where he was. This must be the guard station and, if that were so, his friend, Captain Ydumel, would not be far—if not in space, then in time.

"How am I the one to pull this off?" said one nervous voice.

"Just do as you've been told."

"And if something goes wrong? I'll be the one to hang."

"The Consul has guaranteed your protection."

"He's a hell of a distance away to offer protection though, isn't he? Ydumel is right here. How's he to protect me from her?"

"You're not thinking clearly—"

"But I am, aren't I? How many moons do you think I see? I'm not daft. So convenient for you to play this off; you're not the one to take the fall—"

"Lower your voice," the second voice hissed. Boots crunched the gritty floor as one stepped closer to the other. "If you think the Captain is dead, just think of the Consul if he knew you endangered his plans."

Here is where Liu Yang said, "Excuse me." Both voices stopped. Swaying shadows froze. "Excuse me. It's only that your conversation reminds me of a poem by that famed poet of ancient Alpha Colony, Tomas the Timely. Would you care to hear it?"

"It's the drunk they found on the doorstep this morning. Ignore him."

"He's heard everything."

"I did!" said Liu Yang. "I did hear everything, or at least quite a bit, and it reminds me of a

poem. Would you like me to recite for you? I am a poet, it will be no trouble.”

The men responded with an abrupt and stony silence. This was a robust foundation to set a poem on, the poet thought, so he began.

*How far is the distance to hell?  
You can measure its length  
By standing end to end  
A friend you cannot trust.*

On the floor above, the second-hand of a clock ticked.

“You’ve heard it before then?” asked the poet. “I can’t tell because I can’t see your faces, you see. And you can’t see mine, although that should take nothing from the reading. Poetry is a thing of the ears, first of all.”

Just then, Liu Yang felt an impressive urge to pee. His bladder had become more temperamental over the years. Perhaps it felt taken for granted, but these days it made its demands in a short-tempered way: only a slight warning, just enough notice for him to scout some dark place to loosen his trousers before it threatened to carry on without him.

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen,” he said. “I—ah—have something I must attend to.” Liu Yang did one or two circles in his cell. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness, but there wasn’t much to fill his pupils.

A small cell with no pot to piss in. The poet couldn’t know how long he’d be here and thought that if he were to relieve himself in any direction willy-nilly, no doubt he’d be lying in his own piss at some point. So he made a mental note to sleep with his feet to the door. Liu Yang dropped his trousers, and aimed his urine stream for the sliver of light in the center of the door and heard that satisfying sizzle of it smacking home, the hot tang of it filling the small space.

The following events happened quickly:

A burst of light flooded his eyes. Liu Yang pissed, blinking his eyes at the brightness when he realized it was only the door that had been flung open. Two red-cloaked, wedge-shaped young men inserted themselves in the doorway, blocking the light. *How young they are!* thought Liu Yang, *no older than twenty-four or twenty-five standard years, a little younger than my daughter. So young!* The older of the two shouted a stream of curses and suddenly backed away, shaking off his hands, and flapping his jaw with profanity.

“Mother of Tarkus, he’s pissed on me,” that one shouted. “Shit on a tit. *Mader chad*.”

“You *rhymed*!” shouted Liu Yang. “Simple for my taste, but I encourage this direction—” The younger took a step over the shimmering puddle, seized Liu Yang’s coat in his fists and drove Liu Yang back, back, back, tripping over his heels until—wham—the aging poet met the back wall of the cell, all his bones disagreeing with each other.

The young man closed. Liu Yang recognized the slick, fast hiss of something sharp drawn from a belt and sensed his fortunes slipping. Is this truly how the lines unraveled at the end of his poem? The Poet thought now of his daughter’s face. The bright blue eye of his marble winked in his mind, a delicate, gleaming twist of lanthium beating in its core. Who would find it, if not him? To whom did it seek to go?

But there were other things to consider. If he crossed the door of death this morning, it saddened him that his friend, Captain Ydumel, might also soon cross, what with all that was happening in her ranks. Liu Yang saw her dark face clearly in his mind: a woman whose flirtatious beauty had morphed fluidly over the years into reserved command, stern eyes that revealed nothing, and her once black, woolly mane, with its locks that stuck from her head in tight zigzags, now pewter in color, but caught up in that same, no-nonsense ponytail she wore since their youth. How clearly he could see her! Filling the doorframe, sliding a forearm around the throat of the young man and, with a graceful move, depositing the man as a crumpled heap on the floor. Unfortunately for the young man, his head fell near the puddle. The stream trickled around his cranium.

Captain Ydumel straightened. “Zhou Liu Yang,” she said in her most intolerant voice. “What in blue hell are you doing here, and why are your pants still down?”

“Your men,” Liu Yang gestured to the one on the floor and the one sitting in the hall with his arms flung over his head, trembling beneath two of Captain Ydumel’s looming lieutenants. “Your men suffer from little knowledge of Tomas the Timely’s poetry.”

Captain Ydumel’s eyes went dead. She let out a flat sigh. Without a word she turned on her heel and took a wide step over the unconscious guard and the puddle, out into the hall. Liu Yang jiggled after her, tightening his trousers.

“Ydumel,” Liu Yang called. “Old friend, before you go, there’s an urgent matter I must speak with you about. I appear to have lost my marble. Have you seen it?”