

A Small Angel Made of Jade
by James M. (age 18)

Mr. Cornelius Bramstone had decided that he did not like the desert. It was smothering and evisceratingly hot. The dust and sand seemed to infiltrate every cranny and nook in his body. The sun seemed brighter even in the limited shade here than in his beautiful homeland of England. However, the desert did offer some advantages that even England could not. There were bones here.

Bones of creatures surely, but more importantly to Mr. Bramstone, bones of civilizations. Those were what his trade dealt in: stories of ancient folk, told by their echoes left behind, in the heat and sterility of the desert. Mr. Bramstone had organized the expedition that had brought him to the desert, funded it nearly single-handedly, and was the principle leader and scientist of it. There were two others who formed the triangular leadership of the expedition, though Mr. Bramstone was clearly the head of it. After those three, about a dozen or two workers had been contracted for their time and told to be extremely careful. Mr. Bramstone was not entirely in support of these workers, but he had been outvoted and he couldn't afford to argue, as he couldn't find enough truly qualified archaeologists.

The first mate of this landbound ship was a man named Otto von Trampen. He was a miserly chap and older than Mr. Bramstone by a handful of decades, and for all of those decades been a renowned professor of archaeology, which was how Mr. Bramstone had first met him. He had a white beard, which had once been neatly trimmed but had now grown into something of a mess during the weeks of this expedition. There were now only three days left before they would return to their normal lives. Mr. Bramstone only wished he would be able to bring something important back with him; the expedition had not yet yielded anything he felt was exceptional.

The second mate was something of an anomaly and something of a burr in the britches of both Mr. Bramstone and Dr. von Trampen. Her — and that was the issue — name was Violet MacGuffin. Violet's father, Mr. MacGuffin, had been the other primary sponsor of the expedition, and his donation had come with the single condition that Mr. Bramstone take his daughter along and convince her that archaeology was no place for a woman. Violet often tried to contribute ideas to meetings that the two real archaeologists had, but neither man acknowledged them with anything more than 'interesting suggestion.' She was a petulant girl, playing at men's business. Eventually, she had quietly decided to stop attending the meetings entirely. Neither Mr. Bramstone nor Dr. von Trampen felt that this was an issue.

Mr. Bramstone opened the flap of his tent and stepped out into the light of the rising sun. Despite this being the desert, a biome widely known for its warm climate, it was cool at night, and the day was only beginning to warm up. Small bugs chattered and flew about him, but he paid them no mind. He was only concerned with the archaeology. He was ostensibly an archaeologist, but after completing his graduate degree, he had mostly been relegated to the managerial and analytical roles of archaeology.

He missed the dirt. He missed being the first one to see an artifact, the first to be able to reveal the secrets of the past and tell the stories of the ancients. He wanted to see the bones again. So he walked to the dig site itself, and knelt on the new, antiquated soil. What was old had become new again. Mr. Bramstone retrieved a set of tools from a bag sitting on the edge of the pit. He needed to speak with the workers about organization; that was the primary tool of archaeology. With the edge of a trowel, he began to scrape dirt away in thin layers, searching for anything of interest. Then came a wide, soft-bristled brush that appropriately brushed the dry, dark earth away. This was the basic flow of excavation work: scrape, brush, search, repeat. When

anything stuck out or refused to come off, he scraped around it, and brushed it off and used a thin wooden stick to dig more precisely around it. Often, they were just rocks, but occasionally, it revealed something wonderful.

Mr. Bramstone had a good, almost giddy, feeling about the specific protrusion he was now working around. It was small and through the dirt he had been able to remove, he was able to see a dark green color that reminded him of jade, but that wouldn't make any sense, because the site of the excavation was literally half a world away from the nearest sites of jade production. Slowly, Mr. Bramstone worked his way down. There were other things of interest than appeared, but he ignored them in favor of the mysterious object possibly made of jade.

It came loose and Mr. Cornelius Bramstone held it in his hand. The sun was farther above the horizon now and he knew the workers and other archaeologists would be waking soon. They would see him. He needed to hide, and especially he needed to hide this small discovery. The other two would surely try to take it for themselves. But first, he needed to clean it up and see what he had really discovered. They had a small tank of water used for this very purpose, as well as for running dirt through a sieve to uncover any small artifacts that had been missed in the initial dig. Mr. Bramstone knew he should record and store this object of his in the proper way, but he decided to press on. He remembered where he had found it; he could add it to the record later. He brushed and rubbed as much dirt off as he could, so as to use as little water as possible; it was important that he maintain strict water rationing protocols. Almost all the dirt was gone, but some remained in the finer line work of the piece. Mr. Bramstone could see what it was now, but tried to reserve his recognition until after it was fully clean.

With just a splash of water, he cleaned the object, a small angel made of jade. It fit snugly on one of his palms and sat with its legs crossed, wearing a cloak with the hood up, long hair

obscuring its face. Six wings extended from the angel's back. A circlet haloed the angel's head, though it was broken. Mr. Bramstone could tell the break was part of the design. The figurine looked like a real person had been shrunk down, such was the level of fine detail. Anyone would want this angel; it was imperative that it remain hidden until he returned to England with it. Mr. Bramstone returned to his tent.

Dr. Otto Elias von Trampen V was the great-great-grandson of legendary archaeologist Baron Otto Elias von Trampen I, who had invented and pioneered a new method for sorting and tracking excavated objects. It was a rudimentary and simplistic method, obvious in hindsight, but it was near the birth of archaeology and someone had to invent even the wheel, didn't they?

Dr. Otto Elias von Trampen V was the great-grandson of renowned banker Baron Otto Elias von Trampen II. Through a series of shrewd financial decisions, the Baron was able to transform the somewhat strained resources of the family estates and the revenue of the sorting method into a full-fledged fortune. Officially, he was only slightly less wealthy than the King himself, though family legends indicated that the Baron far outstripped the King, but kept it secret so as to keep the king's wrath away.

Dr. Otto Elias von Trampen V was the grandson of famous painter Baron Otto Elias von Trampen III. In many ways, he was as clever as his father, but less financially inclined. He was able to maintain the fortune, and he especially used it well. He learned to paint and spared no expense on his family. He lived a good life.

Dr. Otto Elias von Trampen V was the son of Otto Elias von Trampen IV. Raised in luxury and with no regard for costs, he gambled away what generations had worked for. Through his own social blindness, he became a political pariah, was stripped of his lands and titles, and

left to wander the streets.

Dr. Otto Elias von Trampen V was entirely broke through no fault of his own. Now, Otto was in a desert, spending the very last of his money in the hopes of finding enough material and information to complete his manuscript, a comprehensive work on archaeology, specifically in this region. His university was currently debating whether or not to release his employment, and this book would either convince them to keep him on or allow him to find another place as a professor elsewhere. This was his last resort.

Otto ducked out of his tent, the brown khaki flap falling behind him. It was still the early morning and he was surprised to see Cornelius quickly stand in the excavation area. He didn't normally participate in that activity, no matter how much he wanted to. He was holding a small object, brushing dirt off of it. The young archaeologist had clearly just taken it out of the dirt. Cornelius walked to the washing area and rinsed the object. The next item in the routine should be to record the depth, location, and a small description of the discovery, according to the system that the first Baron had devised.

However, Cornelius didn't do that. This fresh young man, usually so persnickety about records, put the object in his pocket and, with a quick glance around, ducked into his tent. What could have motivated Cornelius to so clearly break his habits and the rules of the excavation? What was that object? It seemed clear to Otto that it must have been something of great value, great enough to drive Cornelius to his usually unfamiliar greed. A strange thought occurred to him. If he was able to take the object from Cornelius and record it properly, that would credit the discovery to him, and certainly that would be worthwhile to record in his book. If not, selling the artifact, though an unsavory option, would also allow him to cut his financial troubles neatly into nonexistent pieces. It could set him free, one way or another. Surely he

needed it more than Cornelius wanted it.

Otto adjusted his wide-brimmed hat and walked to Cornelius's tent.

Miss Violet MacGuffin felt that the expedition had thus far been a stunning success. Even though the only reason she had been allowed to go was because of her father's intervention, she had proven to the others what she had already known: she was an archaeologist. They completely ignored all of her suggestions, but the changes she implemented without consenting them were grudgingly accepted. An organization system for the workers' timesheets and the implementation of a redundant record were only two of the necessary changes that had been obvious to her but had slipped the mind of her two associates.

She left her tent and walked to observe the dig site. The workers were just beginning to start their work and Violet liked to watch them to make sure they were taking proper care. The other two archaeologists were not as concerned with such matters as she was. They spent more time talking about archaeology than doing it. She sighed, disappointed in their stubborn refusal to accept her, but their equal refusal to do their work.

She looked over the dig site. She had examined it the night before, as she usually did, and this morning, something had changed. One of the sectors had fresher marks than those around it and something appeared to be missing. She would have remembered that from her inspection, but she did not.

Returning to her tent, Violet checked the master logbook. Nothing new had been recorded; no new work had been done in that segment. Very strange. Someone was not following procedures.

A loud crash sounded outside, followed by some jabbering and yelling.

Violet exited her tent and saw Mr. Bramstone and Dr. von Trampen wrestling in the dirt. How quaint.

Mr. Bramstone ducked into the relatively but not entirely cool interior of his tent. Though it was still early, temperatures rose fast in the desert. It was darker in the tent as well, to prevent excess heat from seeping in, though he did not believe it worked as well as the designer had hoped. The archaeologist — he was an archaeologist, despite his departure from proper rigor — looked at the small angel in his hand.

It was beautiful. It was perhaps the most beautiful sight he had ever beheld. Even the countenance of his wife on his wedding day did not compare to this angel. It was his, all his and it would make him the greatest archaeologist the world had ever seen.

Mr. Bramstone wanted to laugh.

Mr. von Trampen tramped into the tent.

“Hello, Cornelius. May I see what you’ve just discovered?”

Without noticing, Mr. Bramstone had hidden the angel in a clenched fist behind his back. The delicate points of the wings were jutting into his hand. With an effort, he released it and displayed it to Mr. von Trampen.

After a cursory inspection, the doctor nodded. “I see. And did you record this properly?”

“I have not yet,” Mr. Bramstone said carefully, itching to close his hand again. “I’ll do it for you.” Mr. von Trampen snatched the angel.

With a snarl, Mr. Bramstone launched himself at the doctor, both of them tumbling out of the tent.

Otto calmly stepped into Cornelius's tent. The younger man was quietly, but not silently, looking at the small something in his hands. Otto only saw this for a moment, as Cornelius snapped his hand closed and hid it behind his back while pivoting to look at Otto. That was odd; Cornelius wasn't usually a jumpy man.

"Hello, Cornelius. May I see what you've just discovered?"

Cornelius slowly and what appeared to be painfully opened his hand and revealed the object. Yes, he could see now why the young man had hidden it. It was magnificent and unlike anything he had ever seen in his long career. It attracted him like a moth to a flame. "I see." Now, to launch an attack.

"And did you record this properly?" Otto knew he had not. If he lied, Cornelius would be trapped and if he told the truth, he would be equally as trapped. Otto would win this battle. "I have not yet," the offender said slowly and deliberately.

That was a clever response. It was factually correct but not entirely forthcoming. The yet implied an intent that could be overturned. However, Otto still had a plan. "I'll do it for you," he said, picking the statuette up. As his fingers touched the cool jade, he felt a shiver of excitement akin to a first kiss or a particularly good debate. Cornelius rammed into Otto, the angel flying out of his hands. His first concern was for damage to the angel, not the fact that his sworn pacifist coworker had just attacked him. The pair hit the ground with a thud. Otto's rush of excitement faded and was replaced with anger. It was *his* angel! He deserved it; this upstart didn't need it like he did. He needed it to save his career! Cornelius would have other opportunities, but this was perhaps Otto's last and most important!

Otto pushed Cornelius off him, rolling over and pinning the young man's shoulders to the ground.

“You can’t do this to me,” they snarled to each other.

Cornelius seemed as shocked as Otto did. In this moment of pause and confusion, Violet appeared, pulling Otto off the would-be thief.

“Get in the tent!” she commanded, gesturing to the tent the pair had just vacated. The sharp tone, and the seeming subtle fading of a mental fog, made Otto, and he assumed Cornelius, obey.

Violet followed Mr. Bramstone and Dr. von Trampen into the tent.

“Which one of you would like to tell me what this is about?” she asked, folding her arms. The men exchanged a glance and remained silent. How petulant; they were more like toddlers than men.

Something small and green caught Violet’s eyes. It was a small statue of a cross-legged angel with six wings. It stood upright as if it had been set carefully down. It jumped out at her and seemed to grow larger. It was, clearly, the answer.

“It’s about that angel.”

They shifted uncomfortably; she was right.

Violet reached out and plucked it up. Her fingers shook with inexplicable excitement as she did so.

It’s wonderful, she thought.

“Don’t touch her!” Dr. von Trampen hissed and reached for it. Violet stepped back, out of his reach.

“I am being careful, sir, but your exuberance makes me think you would not be. Now, where did this come from?”

“I found it early this morning,” Mr. Bramstone whispered. “And neither of you have a right to take it from me!”

She cocked her head. “And did you record it properly?” She suspected he did not; that would explain the strangeness she had discovered just before.

Dr. von Trampen interjected. “He didn’t. I was taking it to record when he attacked me. He clearly can’t be trusted; I must be given custody of it. Give it to me.” He held out his hand. Violet did not move to hand it to him, but rather took another small step back.

“He tried to steal it from me!” Cornelius spoke loudly and quickly, nearly screaming but not quite. “If I cannot be trusted, then neither can he.”

Violet chose to ignore their barbs. “And why did you not record it yourself, Mr. Bramstone?”

“You’ve seen the angel; you know how tempting it is. If I left it where anyone could get it, someone would steal it!” he said, face reddening.

“So you stole it?”

“I did nothing of the sort!” he objected. “I was *protecting it!*”

She shook her head. “You stole it from the museums. You stole it from humanity. You stole it from all of us.”

He threw up his hands and turned to Dr. von Trampen. “We are the *real* archaeologists here, we do not need to listen to this insolent girl’s lectures.”

Dr. von Trampen slowly turned away from the angel, his eyes lingering. “I’m not so sure. She’s made some good points. It ought to be placed with the rest. However, she and I can both clearly see that you can’t be trusted with it in the normal space. Therefore, I suggest that it be left in my care.” He extended his hand again, and Violet stepped back.

“No!” Violet said. “Leaving it with either of you is dangerous. In the artifacts tent, it will be publicly accessible. If it disappears, we know who to blame. It’s a standoff — tense but stable. It is terribly unwise to leave something so valuable in private hands.”

That left only Violet as the trustworthy party. She would record it and store it with the other artifacts; that was the proper way to do things.

“As an impartial arbiter, *I* am going to make a dutiful record of this.”

Violet left the tent, walking briskly, leaving the feuding men behind. As she did, she thought about the statuette. It was clearly a work of great art, but she could not fathom why those two had not acted as they normally would. It was apparently too great of a temptation for them. She, of course, was more level-headed and reasonable. They could not be trusted any longer, with any of the artifacts, but she could.

She fiddled with her pen for a moment before writing a record of the find. During her thinking, she had arrived at the master logbook again today.

A small angel made of jade, she wrote in the description.

Violet MacGuffin, she wrote in the discoverer column. She wrote the record; she would get the credit. The others would challenge her, but it was obviously written in her hand. She wrote down the proper location data as she had deduced it earlier. There, the record was complete and whole. Later, she would transcribe all of the day’s discoveries into the backup logbook.

Violet left her tent and walked to the storage tent, then ducked into it. There was no lock on the tent; it had never been necessary before. But now... perhaps now was time to find a lock. However, there was a veritable drought of locksmiths in this remote desert. The tent was full of shelves, with all manner of artifacts upon them. Here was an ancient axe, or perhaps it was an

object of ritual significance. There was a large bowl, perhaps for making food or medicines. Further back was a large hunting knife, or at least the blade and tang of one, the grip having disintegrated long ago.

Where to put the angel? It needed to be near the front so that the other two could check on it whenever they wanted and make sure the other had not stolen it. It would be unwise to place it so close to the entrance that any of the workers walking by would be able to steal it. She also only had one chance to place it, any movement would certainly spook the men into anger. Slowly, she realized there was no safe place to put it.

Clearly, reasonably, rationally, Violet *needed* to keep the small jade angel with her. There was no other way to ensure its safety. The men would make a fuss about it but it was really for the best. She could not trust any of the workers too far, nor the men to stay civil if the object was in clear view of temptation. Now that it was on record, if they asked, she could point to that and tell them someone else must have stolen it. It was a wonderful plan.

With a small jolt in her step and a small secret in her pocket, Miss Violet MacGuffin returned to her work as a true archaeologist.

The End