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Fairy Tales
CYAN OF MOGH
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Original cover art by the legendary Virginia Frances Sterrett

Some of the stories in this book are sequels to famous fairy tales that have been made into movies 427 times, whereas others are made up.

Each one is set in a different country and a different time.

One of them features a Botox clinic.

+ WARNING +

these stories go dark at times, with sexual and violent content - probably okay for older teens, but not anyone younger.

List of fairy tales

Let The Servants Do It, Cinderella

The Talking Cloak

Robo-Wolf

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Learn Urdu In Three Seconds, Jinn Guarantee

Urashima Tarō

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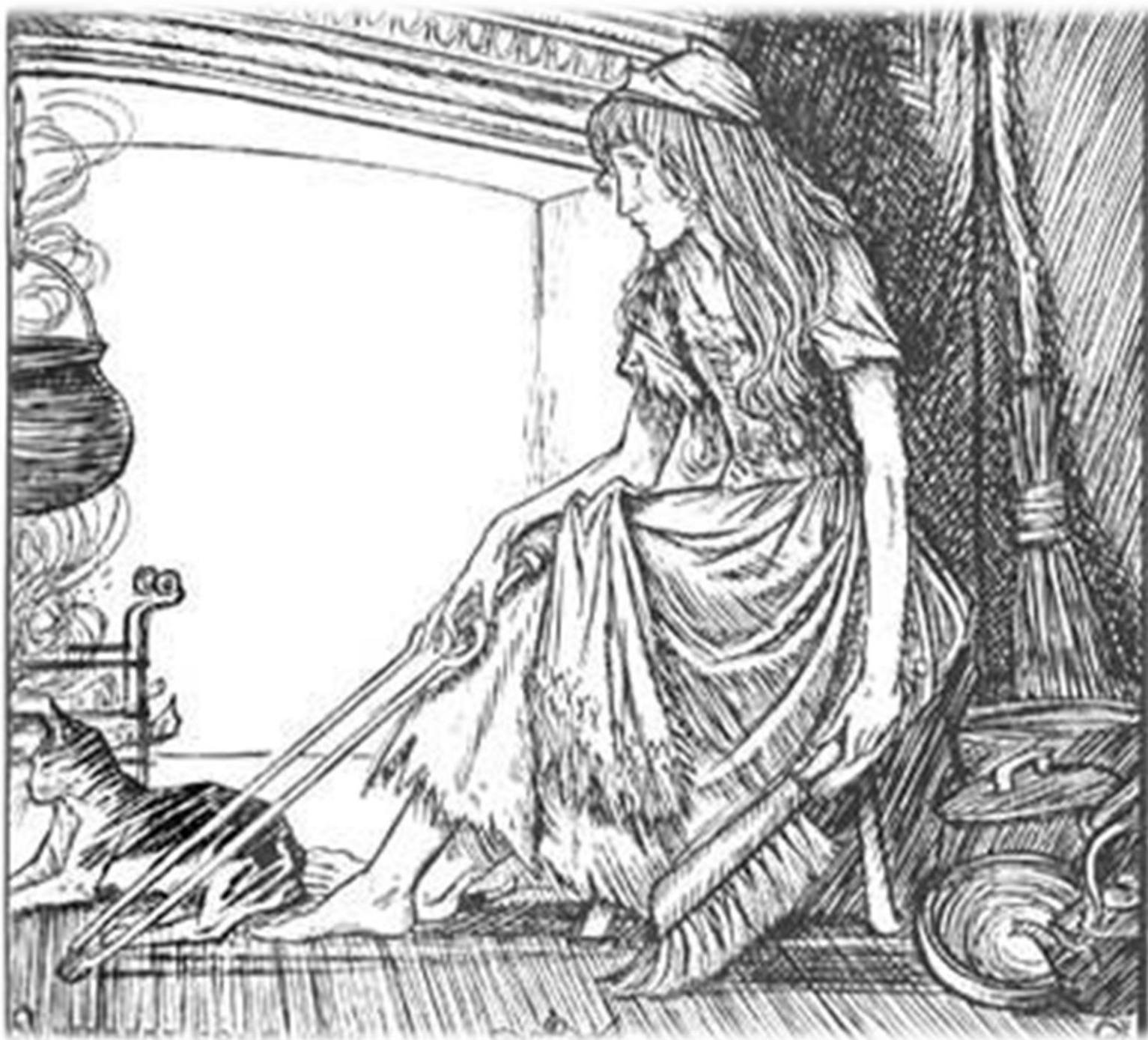
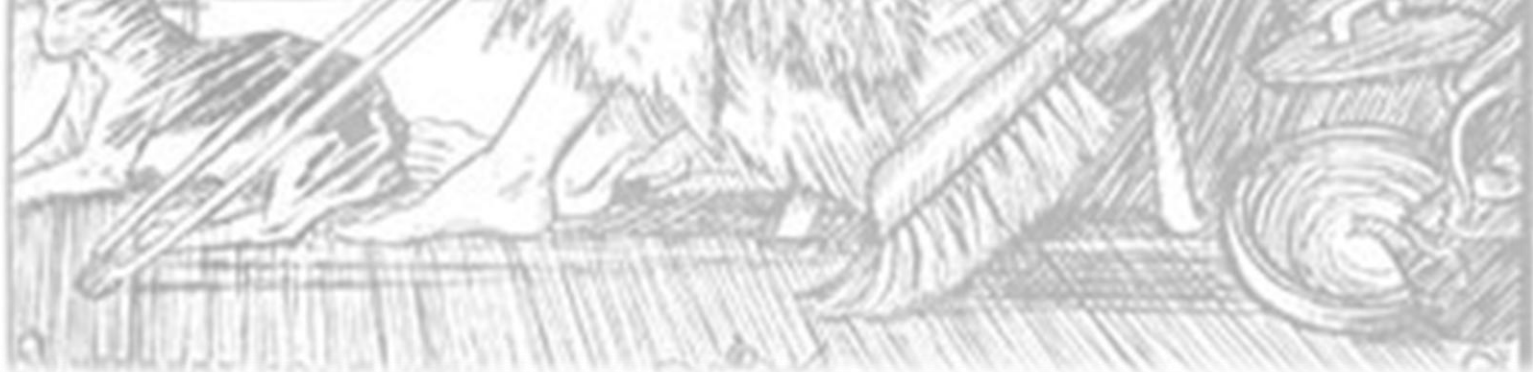
Snow White Hits 40

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Let The Servants Do It, Cinderella

Despite marrying a prince and becoming a princess, despite living in a grand, opulent palace with hundreds of servants, despite feeling miserable about all the unpaid, bone-breaking labour she'd been coerced into doing in the past, Cinderella just couldn't bring herself to stop cleaning things.

The day after her marriage, instead of staying trapped in bed with her new man-toy, she sneaked into the utilities cupboard, grabbed a mop and brush and started wiping the kitchen floor.

In her old house, it would've taken an hour, but in the palace, she calculated it would be closer to nine days.

The servants working in the kitchen at the time tried to stop her, but beyond polite questions beginning with, 'your Majesty, wouldn't you prefer...' there was nothing they could do.

Same for the guards.

Touching a member of the royal family equalled instant execution, even if it were merely an accidental brush of the arm, so the two guards on duty outside the kitchen continued to stand statue still, staring intently at the cracks in the wall as Cinderella went about her task, humming the Soviet national anthem unironically while, at the same time, making a map in her head of all the potential dirty spots in the other parts of the palace.

After one third of the kitchen was done, she heard the prince calling her from the corridor outside.

‘Cinderella, put down that mop, it’s the day after our wedding night, and I’m feeling energetic again.’

‘Give me one hour, dearest.’

‘To do what?’

‘Kitchen activities.’

‘Please, my sweet wife, your cleaning days are over. I rescued you from that nightmare, remember? Besides, this is not a job for a princess. It is beneath you.’

Cinderella stopped mopping and looked at the clean parts of the kitchen floor. Then the unclean parts. To some people there may have been no difference, but to her...it was almost unbearable.

‘Come now, dear, back to bed.’

‘But the floor...’

‘Let the servants do it.’

~~~

Cinderella tried to follow what the prince had said, but the mop would appear in her dreams, along with the brush, and the cloth and the soap and all the other stuff used for cleaning, and the whole bunch of them would start to sing and dance and promote new, more effective detergents [that also sang and danced].

And when that happened, which was several times each day, she would have no choice but to get up and start wiping the nearest thing to her, whether it be table, chair or a tile on the floor.

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The prince tried the best he could to tolerate this fastidious cleanliness until, one morning, he found her piling his hunting clothes into the washing machine as the servants stood nearby doing fuck all.

‘Cinderella, you’re my wife, a princess. You are certainly not a maid, and even more certainly not a servant. This kind of manual labour truly is beneath you, do you hear?’

Not paying the slightest bit of attention, Cinderella read the instructions for the washing machine, her head moving down and up, from column to column.

‘Okay, dearest, I will take your nodding as affirmation. Now stop gazing at that silly book and sit on the sofa with your dear husband instead. No, not that one, the new one that arrived yesterday. It is four

corridors away, in the Greater Relaxation Room. Quite far, yes, but definitely worth it.'

Closing the manual, Cinderella switched to staring at the mantelpiece nearby, particularly the dust resting on top.

'You haven't seen it? Oh, trust me, it's infinitely gratifying. You see, the bottom part of the sofa can be raised, so it's like you're lying down on a bed. And the cushions are similar to pillows, almost the exact same texture. In all honesty, I adore it. My aim is to sit there at least three times a day from this day onwards, two hours at a time. I dare say you should make it your aim too.'

Cinderella surreptitiously wiped some of the dust off the mantelpiece then followed the prince to the Greater Relaxation Room, where the new sofa was waiting.

Unfortunately, the infinitely gratifying sofa was already occupied; two servants taking a quick break, the louder one pressing the button to raise the end of the sofa and laughing maniacally.

'What is the meaning of this outrage?' the prince screamed, pulling out his sword.

'Your Mat-...Majesty,' stammered the louder servant, 'it was an accident, I swear. We slipped and fell into the-...onto the sofa and-...'

'...and were trying to get back up,' finished the other.

'Silence, gutter trolls! You've spoiled it with your dirt and little flakes of dead skin.'

A trio of guards rushed in, swords drawn.

‘Guards, take them out the back door and fire them at once.’

‘It shall be done, Sire.’

‘And by fire I mean execute.’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘By setting them both on fire.’

‘Understood, Sire.’

‘My love, you can’t do that,’ said Cinderella, putting her hand on the prince’s shoulder and picking off a bit of loose fluff. ‘The grass will be burnt and difficult to re-grow.’

‘Fine, then kill them with swords.’

‘Husband,’ said Cinderella, leaning in close to the prince’s ear, ‘there is no need for such harsh punishment. Please, allow me to discipline them.’

‘But what about the sofa? It’s ruined.’

‘Not so. It is merely unclean...like everything else at some point in its existence.’

‘You believe it can be saved?’

‘In a matter of minutes.’

‘Very well. As long as you are not the one to clean it.’

Cinderella closed her eyes and grumbled internally, but kept a smile on her face to placate the prince. ‘The ones who created the mess can clean it up.’

‘Them?’ The prince examined the two servants, who were now in the hands of the guards, sweating buckets. ‘They’ll just drop more dirt on it while they’re cleaning.’

‘Not if we clean them first.’

‘Clean the servants? On a Tuesday?’

‘So they won’t spread any dirt when they perform their duties.’

‘Ah, I suppose that could work.’

Cinderella nodded at the guards and told them to go and scrub the two servants until they were sparkling clean. Then bring them back with cloths and sprayable detergent.

‘Your highness, sorry to object, but it is palace policy that guards not be left alone with female servants who are under 75 years old and moderately good-looking.’

‘That’s a policy?’ asked Cinderella and the prince, both equally surprised.

‘Yes, implemented by your mother, Sire.’

‘Why would she do a silly thing like that?’

‘I believe the official reason was to prevent sexual assault.’

‘Preposterous!’

‘There was sexual assault before?’ asked Cinderella, shivering as she realised she was surrounded by four men, all in relatively good shape [apart from the prince].

‘Semantically, no. It was called ‘due process.’ But in terms of actual conduct...’

‘And now? Has it stopped?’

‘In the palace, yes. Outside, in the stables, it has increased four-fold.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Cinderella.

‘Me neither,’ added the prince. ‘What possible reason would the servants have to go out to the stables?’

‘Various chores, Sire. Horse stroking. Hay re-arrangement. Testing the guards knowledge of stable architecture.’

Cinderella moved towards the fireplace, lifting up a poker. ‘I should pay a visit to the queen. See if we can hire more female guards.’

‘Not a bad idea,’ said the prince.

‘In the meantime, you can take these two servants to the bathing room and give them the tools to scrub themselves. Then bring them back here as we discussed. Understood?’

The guards nodded and exited with the servant women, and were quickly replaced by another, larger guard, who was in fact the Head of the Palace regiment.

‘Sire...’

‘Ah, Daxlar, about time you showed up.’

‘Interrogation duties in the dungeon, Sire. An extraordinarily taciturn prisoner.’

‘Simple, cut out the man’s tongue.’

Daxlar nodded, eyes scanning the room for a distraction and settling on the lunatic princess breathing on the window. Apparently, that was dirty too.

‘Well, is that what you did?’ continued the prince.

‘In this case, no,’ replied Daxlar, returning to the prince. ‘However, I will keep it in mind for future interrogations.’

‘Good, good.’

‘Sire, I couldn’t help but overhear as I came in...’

The prince swatted the air. ‘Yes, the sofa issue, I know. Don’t worry, my dear wife is dealing with it.’

‘And the windows, too, it seems.’

‘What?’

Daxlar gestured with a nod to the far side of the room, where Cinderella was using part of the curtain to wipe a stain off the glass of the main window.

‘Dear wife, stop this instant...you’re demeaning yourself.’

‘It’s almost off,’ she replied, continuing her battle.

The prince looked desperately at Daxlar, who started to remove the sword from his hilt, but they both knew that order would never come.

Not yet, anyway.

And certainly not while the two newlyweds were in the same room.

‘There, all done,’ said Cinderella, turning round and walking back towards the prince. ‘Now, why don’t we go and visit your mother, tell her about this stables situation.’

‘But... the sofa?’

‘Perhaps tidy our room a bit afterwards.’

‘Wife, are you listening to me?’

‘Yes, don’t worry, dear, the sofa will be clean and ready within the hour. Then we can come back and try it out.’

‘A whole hour...’

‘Be patient.’

‘For one hour?’

Daxlar smirked and inside the fort of his own head did a whole lot worse. In fact, some of his thoughts were so alarming, so nihilistic even to himself that he turned on his heel and left the room as fast as possible in case he actually acted upon them.

‘Wah, we didn’t even dismiss him,’ said the prince, on the verge of pouting.

‘He’s a busy man.’

‘Yes, but he’s not supposed to leave rooms until I tell him to. Hmm, perhaps I should have him replaced. This kind of impudence can lead to troubling events if we’re not careful. Remember that Scottish guy? Mac something?’

‘That was centuries ago, dear. Now, stop worrying about all this and go visit your mother.’

‘What about you?’

Cinderella nodded for no particular reason, mainly because her mind was on the oven in the kitchen, specifically the burnt bits of bread crust that had potentially accumulated inside.

‘I’ll meet you there,’ she said, heading for the door. ‘Very soon, I promise.’

‘Very well, as long as you’re not going to the...’

The prince looked over at the door as he spoke, but it was no good, his dear wife was already gone.

‘...kitchen.’

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In spite of the prince’s supreme confidence regarding the luxury of the sofa, Cinderella found it exceedingly difficult to sit on it for more than two minutes.

It wasn’t that it was uncomfortable, it was, luxuriously so, but every time she planted herself on the cushions, the prince was there, too, and all they would do was continue sitting there.

And as she sat there, watching the prince flick through modelling catalogues from other countries, something in her head kept telling her over and over, there's no time for this, Cinderella, there's no time for it, no time for it, no time for it.

Around these words, a circle would form, comprised of ovens and mops and cloths and detergent bottles and all these objects would rotate at a pleasant speed, emphasizing the core message even more.

'There's no time for this, Cinderella.

Not when there's dirt in the palace.

Get up, do something.

Clean something.

And the message would swiftly turn into a migraine and the only way to defeat the pain was to get off the sofa, grab a cloth from the kitchen and start cleaning something.

The prince tried not to notice his wife disappearing out of the room every two minutes, believing her when she told him she needed the toilet or the queen wanted to discuss policy with her, but when Daxlar knocked at his bedroom door one evening and showed surprisingly well-drawn sketches of his wife scrubbing the toilet floor, he could contain himself no longer.

'She just won't stop, no matter what I do.'

'Perhaps, Sire, she cannot be stopped.'

'Unacceptable.'



‘What I mean to say is...if your wife wants to act like a servant then perhaps you should treat her like one.’

‘What are you trying to say?’

‘Well, I haven’t given it much thought, obviously, but...you could wait until she’s asleep, cut her hair, have her carried down to the kitchen and then the next morning pretend that she’s been kidnapped. After that, you could search for her a little, a few days perhaps, just to allay any lingering suspicions from your parents, and then finally declare her dead and start looking for a new bride. Sire.’

‘Are you insane?’

Daxlar coughed, quickly directing his eyes to the floor. ‘Actually, Sire, it’s not my plan, it’s from a play I saw in Vicenza a long time ago. Clearly, I’m not suggesting you do any such thing, especially not to someone as beautiful and delicate as your wife.’

‘If you had suggested that, I would’ve had you executed in this very room. Blood stains be damned!’

‘Naturally, Sire.’

‘Now, go and fetch my wife, tell her I’m feeling amorous.’

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘Because I love her very much, more than the crown itself. Understood?’

‘Of course, Sire.’

Daxlar bowed and left the room, waiting till the door was closed behind him before cursing the prince under his breath.

‘I give it a month,’ he added, looking again at the sketches. ‘Then you’ll beg me to do it.’

~~~

The Head Guard of the Palace had many skills, most of them involving pain distribution and sharp implements, but prophecy was clearly not one of them as five months later the prince and Cinderella were still very much together, despite her persistent cleaning getaways.

Daxlar continued showing the prince sketches of his wife in compromising positions – mopping the floors, scrubbing the curtains, washing the dishes – and, when his artist suddenly fell ill and died one day, he even went as far as to draw the sketches himself.

Yet, it made no difference; the prince would not budge.

In fact, if anything, it made things worse, the drop in quality causing the prince to become sceptical of all the previous sketches, too, asking at one point if it was truly his wife he was looking at or a stretched-out eggplant with hair.

The marriage, it seemed, was invincible.

Emphasis on *seemed*.

~~~

‘You did what?’ cried the prince, banging his head on the underside of the bed as he got back to his feet.

‘They were cluttering up the place,’ replied Cinderella, as softly as she could without sounding like a ghost.

‘My catalogues...’

‘It’s okay, husband, I kept five of them. They’re over there in the drawer.’

The prince ran over, pulling the drawer out of the desk completely and rummaging through the contents dropped on the floor like a wild badger.

‘Five is a good number. And you still have that Swedish one you liked.’

‘Woman...you have gone too far!’

‘Husband, don’t be angry, I’m helping you stay tidy.’

‘If there wasn’t a legal contract, I would-...’ The prince stopped, realising he was scheming out loud. ‘My dearest...I’m sorry. But I am very upset right now. Please leave me alone for a while.’

‘But it’s almost midnight...bedtime.’

‘Fine, then I will leave the room myself.’

‘You misunderstand. I meant for you to come to bed, lie next to me, do that thing with your nose that you like to do.’

‘I’m not in the mood.’

‘It’ll brighten your thoughts, I’m sure of it.’

‘Impossible.’

Cinderella pulled the covers open and flashed a bit of stomach to tempt him in. Miraculously, it worked, the prince dropping the catalogue in his hand, ripping his clothes off and leaping onto the bed.

Forty-seven seconds later, he kissed his wife on the cheek and turned on his side, a sweaty mess.

‘Feel better?’ asked Cinderella, keeping her distance.

‘Much,’ he replied, eyes fixed on the catalogues on the floor, the five survivors of the mad cleaner’s purge.

~~~

After arguing and counter-arguing with himself for three days straight, the prince summoned Daxlar to his private office and informed him in a bureaucrat’s tone that it was time to start afresh with the whole marriage thing.

‘Afresh, Sire?’

‘Don’t make me spell it out. You know what I mean.’

Daxlar nodded, feigning comprehension. What exactly did the prince mean? Divorce? Fake kidnapping? Horse porn?

‘Here’s the plan. You take Cinderella for a picnic on Deadman’s Cliff, tell her I’m on my way soon, that I love her etc. Then, when you’re sure no one’s looking, pick her up and throw her into the sea.’

‘Murder her?’

‘Soften your voice, you fool,’ shouted the prince, adding a growl at the end. ‘The official line is death by misadventure.’

‘And if she knows how to swim?’ replied Daxlar.

‘Hmm, good point. Okay. Just make sure she hits the rocks on the way down, that should do it.’

‘That is not a pretty way to go, Sire.’

‘We’re beyond that kind of abstraction, I’m afraid. Just make sure it’s done.’

Daxlar bowed and left the room. In the corridor outside, his inner nihilist returned, part of it glad that the gutter princess was being disposed of, the other part disgusted with the cowardly brutality authorised by that useless, spoilt prince.

Maybe one day the king will order me to throw him off the cliff too. And hit the rocks on the way down.

Not so abstract then, huh, Sire?

~~~

The next day, Daxlar had the kitchen prepare a decent-sized picnic and, when it was packed, carried the basket himself to Cinderella’s room.

‘The two of us?’ she asked, after hearing the first part of the prince’s plan. ‘Together?’

‘Only until the prince arrives, your highness.’

‘Conversation might be awkward.’



‘We do not have to speak.’

‘Or perhaps not. Perhaps we’ll find common ground. Tell me, Daxlar, what did you do before you joined the Palace Guard?’

‘Watch my village get burned to ashes along with my parents, your highness.’

‘Wah, and the king saved you?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘He wasn’t the one doing the burning, was he?’

‘Perhaps it’s best if we get moving, before the picnic gets cold.’

Cinderella opened her mouth to question the *gets cold* remark, but thought better of it and said instead, ‘okay, give me five minutes to get changed.’

‘I’ll be in the corridor outside,’ replied Daxlar, trying to block the images of burnt corpses suddenly cropping up in his head.

~~~

After taking the rear exit out of the palace and following the royal path along the headland away from the city, the unlikely duo arrived at the notorious picnic spot, Deadman’s Cliff.

According to legend, five kings and two queens had committed suicide at this spot, though half of those legends were written by the succeeding kings so no one put too much stock in them. The only

definite case of regal self-termination was King Adol, who had invited the whole city to watch him jump.

‘Apparently,’ said Daxlar, explaining the story to the princess, who was sitting with her back to the artificial cherry tree, as far from the cliff edge as possible, ‘he believed the rocks were friends of his, and would cushion his fall. It’s unclear how he developed such a belief...some suggest long term poisoning by his wife and son, but no proof was ever found.’

‘Who became the next ruler?’

‘His son, of course.’

‘And who was his queen?’

‘His mother.’

Cinderella did a *there you go* expression and took a biscuit from the picnic basket.

‘It’s possible...’ said Daxlar, looking at the cliff edge then at Cinderella and marking out the distance in between. ‘...though I heard that incestual marriages were more common in that era.’

‘And cliff-based suicides, it seems.’

Daxlar almost laughed, but stopped himself at the last second. This was not working out the way he’d intended. Part of him was beginning to like the girl, her directness...while another part wanted to grab her hand and flee the kingdom, open up a bakery in one of the Italian City

States, leap nude into rivers and make love in those long boats he'd forgotten the name of.

'You're not eating much...'

Daxlar blinked, realising he'd been vacant for at least a minute. 'I'm waiting for the prince, your highness.'

'Is he coming soon?'

'I believe so.'

Cinderella was about to say *when exactly?* but out of the corner of her eye she saw some crumbs on the picnic mat. 'How did you get all the way over there?' she asked, crawling away from the trunk of the tree.

That's the image I need, thought Daxlar, watching the supposed princess tidy up. The cleaning wench. Mocking all of us with her constant wiping of surfaces and picking up of things. Focus on that. Use that. Forget bakeries.

'Ah, that's better,' said Cinderella, leaning back against the tree. 'The mat looks presentable now.'

'It does, your highness.'

'Ready for the prince.'

'But with picnics...you never know what could happen.'

'If he ever turns up.'

'Food can drop anywhere...roll away from you.'

As he spoke, Daxlar picked up an apple and, using his bowling experience from dungeon interrogations [don't ask], rolled it towards the edge of the cliff, knowing full well that the princess could not resist retrieving it for him.

‘When did the prince say he was-...wah, your apple!’

Leaping up like a circus performer, Cinderella dived towards the apple, managing to catch hold of its stem just as it was about to roll over the side.

‘That was close,’ she said, a little out of breath. ‘Perhaps we should move back along the path, away from-...’

‘I’m sorry, your highness. Truly.’

‘Sorry? Wah, Daxlar, what are you doing so close? There’s a chance we might-...’

Before she could finish her sentence, Cinderella was grabbed by the waist and, in one swift motion, thrown from the top of the cliff.

Normally, Daxlar would’ve had no qualms about watching someone fall to their death, but in this case, for some reason he didn’t care to fathom, he kept his eyes closed.

After doing that for thirty seconds, he mentally slapped himself and moved closer to the cliff edge.

‘If there’s any chance she survived, I’m a dead man.’

Fortunately, when he peered down at the waves below, there was no sign of her swimming or holding onto the side of the cliff, so he tidied up the picnic materials and headed back to the castle.

As with all the other murders he'd committed, part of him felt a pang of guilt, but only a small part.

Nothing character-changing.

~~~

The next day, the prince sauntered out onto the castle balcony and announced to the kingdom that his wife was missing.

'She was last seen on Deadman's Cliff, ludicrously close to the edge, yet we suspect she will be back soon.'

A few days after that, the prince appeared on the balcony again, telling the crowd gathered below that, 'despite all our best efforts, the princess is dead. Please leave donations in one of the boxes next to the guards at the front gate. Remembrance plates will be available in a few days.'

In response, the crowd shrugged.

'She was okay, but didn't say much,' most of them agreed.

'Didn't see her waving from the window.'

'Never saw her riding on a horse.'

'What was she doing all day, up in that castle?'



A few weeks later, the prince made another announcement. This time it was to announce his intention to remarry asap. 'With this in mind, I further announce that I have chosen a young model from the kingdom of Rusha to be the new princess, and later, my queen.'

The people shrugged again until the prince held up the catalogue picture of the young Rushan model and then they cheered and whistled and shouted, 'how do you do it, prince? You're a machine.' And, after buying wedding memorabilia and adult *before she was a princess* sketches from the local stalls, everyone returned to their normal lives and forgot all about Cinderella.

Even the prince forgot about her...for a little while.

That is, until his new bride arrived.

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Catalogue pictures weren't the most accurate measurement of discerning beauty, but in the case of the Rushan model, it was as close to reality as you could get.

If anything, she was even more beautiful in person. Her eyes, her hair, the shape of her chin...

No. Attempting to describe such beauty was a waste of time; suffice to say, all men who saw her as she arrived at the palace, and on the day of the wedding, wished they were in the place of the prince, and at least half of them harboured real thoughts of murdering him and stapling on his skin. If they could just make it to the wedding night...

The only exception to this communal adulation was Daxlar.

For him, every time he looked at the new princess, the only thing he could see was a young woman following an apple off the edge of a cliff. And the only way to block out this image was to avoid looking at the Rushan model altogether.

And to spend more time in the dungeon.

~~~

So, the prince and half the kingdom became enamoured with the new princess, while the king and queen continued to stay mysteriously remote from the story, and post-wedding, things started on the path back to normal.

For about an hour.

Then the new bride's personality kicked in.

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'Darling, can you open the doors?' asked the prince, standing outside the royal bed chamber, unbuttoning his shirt.

'No.'

'But it's our wedding night, we're supposed to-...'

'Go away.'

'I can't, it's my bedroom.'

'Find another one.'

'Darling, please...'

‘Stop clawing at the door, it’s pathetic.’

‘But...’

‘And stop saying *but*.’

~~~

After a month of wedded frustration, the prince called Daxlar to his private office and told him it was time for another trip to Deadman’s Cliff.

‘Again, Majesty? What happened?’

‘Nothing and everything. My new wife is pretty, yes, but every time I try to touch her, or even talk to her, she just orders me to go away. I tried to tell her about the sofa, but she wouldn’t even open the door to our room. Then, as I was about to kick down the door, she opened it suddenly and I fell on my ass.’

‘This is what women from the kingdom of Rusha are like, Majesty.’

‘Wah, you knew this was her character? And you didn’t tell me?’

‘I assumed you wanted someone more combative.’

‘Nonsense! I’m a prince, soon to be king, she should have more respect.’

‘Perhaps if you tell her to go away she will give you respect?’

‘Argh, I don’t have time to play these kinds of games. It’s easier just to throw her in the sea.’

‘Easier for whom?’

‘Don’t get caustic with me, peasant, I’ll have your head.’

Daxlar dropped his eyes to the floor, desperately trying to close the door on his thoughts and his hand off the hilt of his sword.

‘Now, tomorrow seems like it will be a fine day...by fine I mean misty...therefore, I suggest a revival of our last plan. A nice, pleasant picnic by the sea.’

‘As you wish, majesty.’

‘Big *M*, please.’

‘Sorry, Majesty.’

~~~

The next day, Daxlar took the Rushan princess to Deadman’s Cliff. After drinking two cups of whisky to stop his hands from shaking, he attempted to do the same thing he’d done a year earlier to Cinderella: roll the apple to the edge then pounce.

However, this woman was a very different target and had no interest in chasing stray apples, or polite conversation either for that matter.

The only thing she did say was, ‘why are you so tiny? In the kingdom of Rusha, our guards are twice your size.’

‘I’m six foot three, your highness.’

‘Three foot six more like...even my twelve year old brother’s taller than you. It’s pathetic.’

Having no witty answer on hand, Daxlar decided to skip the preamble and move straight to the murder.

‘Come, princess, let’s take in the view...’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘...as close to the edge as possible...’

‘Get your paws off me, tiny thug.’

‘...that’s it.’

Grabbing and throwing was a much tougher act this time as the new princess struggled and screamed but, due to superior footing, he eventually managed to get her over the edge.

It was a long fall and, remembering the *why are you so tiny* line, Daxlar watched her drop all the way down onto the rocks.

I’m not sorry, he thought, retching slightly as her head smashed open and her body slid into the sea.

Not sorry at all.

~~~

After he’d returned to the castle and told the prince the news, a party was held in the princess’s honour, the prince telling all the guests that he loved his new wife very much and couldn’t wait to dance with her at the party and, ‘oh, it’s quite late, where is she, she should be here by now, I hope she hasn’t gone anywhere rocky.’



The next day, the prince announced the death of his latest wife, and promised that, after a few hours of mourning, he would begin the search for a new bride.

When he went back to his room, a catalogue of potential new wives was waiting for him, so he lay down on his bed and started examining each face and each body in meticulous detail. Soon, he felt sleepy and closed his eyes to take his usual nap, but it turned into more than a nap and he eventually woke up again sometime past midnight.

Feeling hungry, he went down to the kitchen to look for food, and was surprised to see one of the servant girls still scrubbing the floor.

‘It’s late, peasant, don’t scrub so loud.’

The girl nodded, adjusting the intensity of her scrubbing.

‘Actually, stop scrubbing altogether and make me a sandwich. A big one. With everything in it. But no mayonnaise. I’m on a diet. Kind of. Ah, forget it, just add mayonnaise. The diet can start tomorrow.’

The girl nodded and hurried to fetch the bread, but as she ran, her hood fell down and the prince saw that it was none other than his first wife, Cinderella.

‘It can’t be,’ he shouted, his face turning white[r], ‘you’re dead.’

Cinderella raised her hands. ‘Please, I don’t care about being a princess or being dead. Just let me stay and clean, that’s all I-...’

Before she could finish her sentence, the prince had already reached for a knife, but had misjudged the distance and stumbled backwards.

Normally this wouldn't have been a problem, he would've just fallen on the floor, but this time he happened to be standing next to a very large window.

Due to shock [and narrative justice for his generally malevolent nature], he fell out of that window and landed on a passing crocodile, killing it instantly. The crocodile's wife walking just behind her husband was [understandably] so upset that she leapt at the prince and took off his head in one bite.

The next morning, the prince's torso was found and everyone shrugged.

'Ah, he was quite arrogant,' they said.

'I heard he just sat on a novelty sofa all day.'

'I heard he murdered his wives.'

'I heard he was on a diet.'

To reflect the public mood, only two memorial plates were sold and both of them were later found smashed to pieces near the West Gate.

Under orders from the kingdom's highest ranking general, Daxlar searched the kitchen for Rushan assassins or paid mercenaries and discovered neither. The only thing he did find was a note in strange handwriting that said, 'so sad, miss my wife [both of them], might jump out of this window.'

Despite the obvious cover-up, Daxlar decided to inform his superiors that the prince had genuinely killed himself, mostly because

such a conclusion would absolve him of all his sins, or at least allow him to get away with them.

Yet, there was still the matter of succession.

Without a male heir, there would be chaos, endless wars between second and third cousins, tedious peace summits etc., therefore, he had no choice but to drag the king into the story. Kneeling at the foot of the royal bed, Daxlar told the old regent as softly as he could that he'd have to have another son if he wished his royal lineage to continue.

The king clambered awkwardly out of bed and said, 'fool, I'm too old, too tired, and, besides, my wife looks like a depressed kakapo.'

'Excuse me,' cut in the queen, straightening her hair, 'you look like a plucked owl with liver spots. I don't want to have any more children either.'

'But, Majesty,' protested Daxlar, 'if you do not produce another son, who will become the new king?'

'I don't know. Just get one of my daughters to do it.'

'Daughters?'

'Yes, those three princesses. They're around the palace somewhere.'

'I don't believe I've seen them before.'

'Why would you? They have their own private guard, all eunuchs. Anyway, forget all that, go and tell the eldest she's going to be the new king.'

‘But...she’s female!’

‘So’s your mum. Deal with it.’

‘But the people...’

‘...are about as brave as a Oxbridge bully. They’ll accept my decision, or I’ll put them in the dungeon. Maybe cut off their heads too, if the mood takes me.’

Daxlar nodded and went to the room of the eldest daughter. He told her that when the king died, she would become the new ruler of the kingdom.

‘Me?’

‘Yes, Majesty.’

‘But I’m a reformist.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I believe the poor and the marginalised should be educated and have the same rights as all of us, coupled with the gradual abolition of the monarchy.’

‘That’s insane, you can’t do that.’

‘It means you will get a decent salary, your kids will be educated just like mine and can do any job they dream of.’

‘Wait...*can* you do that?’

‘With a strong, loyal Head Guard at my side, why not?’

‘Long live Queen Ursula!’ shouted Daxlar, picturing a bed made of gold coins. ‘Hang on, how old’s the king again? I feel a picnic to Deadman’s Cliff coming on.’

‘A picnic?’

‘Nothing, your highness. Just a wild thought.’

Daxlar hurried out of the room, almost bumping into Cinderella, who was scrubbing the floor outside. ‘Watch it, servant wretch.’

‘Sorry, guard.’

‘Don’t clean so close to Queen Ursula’s room, it’s dangerous.’

‘Queen Ursula?’

‘Yes, she’ll soon be queen, but don’t tell anyone or I’ll have your head chopped off.’

‘Can you do that?’

‘When everyone else is asleep, sure. Now, off with you, go clean somewhere else.’

Cinderella did as she was told and returned to the kitchen. A short while later, Princess Ursula skipped out of her room, slipped on the glistening wet floor and hit her head on the edge of her late brother’s statue.

She died instantly.

~~~

A year later, the king passed away and his middle daughter was crowned as the prototype queen of the kingdom [exact words used]. Her first act as prototype queen was to arrest everyone who'd ever called her ugly and put them in the dungeon.

Her second act was to torture them with hot irons.

Her third act was to go to each one, say sorry and release them.

Her fourth act was to give everyone in the kingdom free bread for a year.

Her fifth act was to arrest her best friend for saying the country would run out of money if they gave away free bread.

Her sixth act was to marry Daxlar.

Her seventh act was to arrest Daxlar for thinking subversive thoughts.

Her eighth act was to ask all the clever people in the country to give her advice.

Her ninth act was to execute all the clever people in the country for disagreeing with her.

Her tenth act was to dismember Daxlar.

Her eleventh act was to introduce a 50% wealth tax.

Her twelfth and final act was to mysteriously fall off Deadman's Cliff.

After her death, the old king's third and final daughter became queen, and her first act was to say to everyone, 'let's just relax for a while, no more craziness, okay?'

The people of the kingdom who were still alive muttered, 'neoliberal shill,' then nodded for public record and went back to their homes.

As for Cinderella...

She carried on as before, in the way she'd been conditioned to accept, cleaning every table, chair and tiled floor she came across.



The Talking Cloak

A long time ago, during a period when the people of West Africa were being exploited by wealthy locals instead of deranged Europeans, there was a young man called Issa who felt deeply depressed.

Not about any singular thing, but in a general, *every day is the same shit* kind of way.

In fact, after a year of this feeling and no measurable improvement, he decided to grab some imported rice paper and write down a list of all his biggest grievances.

One, the king is a proto-capitalist dog.

Two, the ruling class surrounding him are dogs too.

Three, there's one university and I can't get into it.

Four, my girlfriend wins all our arguments.

Five, any time I complain, people tell me I'm lucky, I could be living in the backward sludge pit called Western Europe.

Of course, there were a lot more than five things he wanted to write down, but if he did that, the whole venture might end up diluted, so he disciplined himself and kept it short.

~~~

Sitting alone one night, in a small forum primarily used by sophists on the west side of Niani, Issa re-read the list and tried to ignore the drunk staring at him from the steps opposite.

Probably a student, he thought, peeling up the corner of the page in his hand. That's the type they let in. Rich kids with Islamic connections. Not working class kids like me.

The more he thought about it, and the more the drunk stared at him, the more enraged he got.

King is born a king. No work.

Ruling class is self-sustained via exploitation. No work.

University Students are rich kids and lottery scholarships. No work.

My girlfriend is probably sleeping with that white-sand consultant at the end of the block, while I'm stuck here like a brown-spotted mango, future-less.

He kicked a pebble by his feet and looked left at the nearby baobab tree, then at the lilac cloak one of those idiot sophists had left on the step next to him.

'Abandoned too, huh?' he asked, slurring his words a little.

*More like escaped*

Issa froze, his eyes on the cloak.

*Though not from any human owner*

It had to be a dream. The cloak was talking to him. Without a mouth or lips or a throat.

*You can move your face now. It's not a dream*

‘What...’

*And you're not mentally ill, either*

‘You're...talking.’

*Okay. Let me help you out. I'm a telepathic cloak. Only you can hear me, no one else. And you don't need to speak out loud. Your thoughts go straight to my core*

Issa looked over at the drunk, who was now passed out on the step, and then around the whole forum area. There was no one standing around, no one lurking behind the baobab trees, no covert scientists holding a weird, beeping device and sniggering.

*There's no one controlling me, I assure you*

‘How...are you doing this?’ asked Issa, returning to the cloak and scrutinising each thread, each little stitch of it.

*I told you, there is no need for you to speak out loud*

‘I...’

*Thinking is enough*

Issa opened his mouth to say *but my mind is chaos, too many thoughts* then quickly stopped himself. Instead, he kicked another pebble.

*Relax. I can differentiate them*

‘What?’

*Your base thoughts and your curated thoughts*

‘Curated?’

*I also offer no judgment. I know you don't really want to strangle your girlfriend and finger her corpse. Or be adopted by the king. Or save a rich person's daughter and then spit at the resulting marriage proposal before finally accepting it and treating her like an elderly camel*

‘No, no...this is madness,’ shouted Issa, instantly regretting the volume of his voice as the drunk woke up and resumed staring at him.

*Please don't shout*

‘A trick.’

*Think what you want to say*

‘Some form of deception.’

*Then transmit*

‘How are you doing this?’

*Otherwise I'm off*

‘Is it witchcraft? Practical effects?’

There was a long silence.

Issa leaned forward and prodded the cloak to try and provoke a response, but nothing happened. The drunk opposite observed him for a few more minutes then got bored, finished off his bottle of brown stuff and went back to sleep [with his face on a mimosa plant].

‘Are you still there?’ asked Issa, finally.

A breeze passed through the forum, making the cloak ripple, but there was no reply.

Leaning back against the step, Issa rubbed the side of his head and told himself it had all been a dream.

Then he glanced down at his list, face up on the step. He grabbed it and tried reading through again.

By the time he got to the fifth one, he changed his mind.

It wasn’t a dream.

Too drawn-out for that. Too detailed.

Folding the rice paper and putting it back within his outer garment, he took a deep breath and thought. Or transmitted, as the cloak called it.

Are you still there?

*Finally*

You are...

*I was about to give up on you*

Give up?

*Not that you're any worse than the others, but...cloak regulations. If the target can't switch to telepathic exchange within the first ten minutes then cut them loose*

I'm your target?

*In a bounteous way, yes*

Issa rubbed his head again and stared up at the moon.

*I know, you are overburdened with questions. Let me make things easier. I am not really a cloak. That is simply my current appearance in this time and space. My ontology is complex, too much so for humans, therefore, you may think of me as a being from the stars. My purpose, in this form, is to help lower life forms who have suffered misfortune. Or those whose position in society is incongruous with their abilities. That means you. Do you understand so far?*

I believe so.

*Good*

You are a kind of Jinn.

*I'm not sure what that is, but...I assume it's not human*

It's a magical creature, from the Islamic territories.

*Ah, those guys*

Probably a lie, if truth be told.

*Yes, imperialists are adept at deception. Most of all to themselves. Did you know the Romans produced the very first Benneton ad?*

Err...

*Scratch that. Back to the issue at hand. I'm not a cloak and I'm here to help*

How?

*Simple. Put me on and we will become enmeshed*

Sounds painful.

*In a figurative sense. My preternatural talents will become your preternatural talents. Your enemies...the injustice you see in your society, the imbalance of wealth, the treatment of the poor...will all be confronted*

Issa repeated the words back to himself, his hand reaching down to caress the hem of the cloak.

*Not only will you be able to enter the university, you will also have the power to remould it. To open it up to others from your class*

I always dreamed of doing that.

*And the ruling classes who hoard all your land resources, who covet free speech for themselves and no one else, who tell you to eat lentils and sell your children when times are tough...they will be eviscerated*

Figuratively?

*As for your girlfriend...her brain will be fogged up with self-doubt and confusion. When you argue, she will become lethargic and make obvious points that you can easily rebut*

Isn't that too much? I don't want her to lose every argument.

*The exact ratio is your choice. Now, pick me up, drape my form around your shoulders, clip it tight and we can get started*

Issa caressed the cloak again, shivering at its soft, silk-like texture, then picked it up and traced its outline. Far as he could see, there were no sewn-on name tags, no claim of ownership.

*Hurry, we don't have much time*

Wah...there's a deadline?

*One more minute, then I will vanish*

Issa frowned, looking around the forum one more time. The drunk was still unconscious. The moon was disappearing behind a cloud. The baobab trees were erect and homogenous. All the buildings surrounding him had their lights out, with the exception of one solitary window that was probably just a bored husband or wife looking at Princess Jasmine bikini pics.

*Twenty seconds, Issa*

I know, I know.

*It's not a hard decision, when you think about it*

You can really do all that you've promised?

*Absolutely*

Without hurting anyone?

*No one who doesn't deserve it*

That's quite vague.

*Five seconds. It's now or never, Issa. Three, two...*



Putting a sackcloth over his brain, Issa grabbed the seemingly divine cloak by the collar and flung it over his shoulders.

*...one, zero*

He clipped the collar tight and took a deep breath.

*Congratulations, you made it*

Wah, that was pretty close. I thought I'd left it too late. What do we do now?

*Stand*

Before Issa could issue the command himself, his legs straightened and his body lifted itself up.

What...

*Walk over to the drunk*

Again, his legs acted under their own orders, striding down the steps, across the forum floor and up to the place where the drunk was sprawled out, seven bottles toppled over on the ground next to him.

What are we doing?

*Pick up a bottle*

Issa bent down, his hand grabbing one of the bottles.

*Smash it against the step*

Wait, we can't do-...

The bottle smashed, waking up the drunk. He rubbed his eyes, slurring general curses when he saw Issa standing over him.

*Stab him in the throat. Any spot*

‘What...no...’

The jagged edge of the bottle shot forward, plunging into the side of the drunk’s neck and then cutting a three-inch trench.

Blood spurted out onto both Issa and the lilac cloak.

‘What have you done?’

*We*

‘You’ve killed him...his throat...’

*Stop talking*

‘We have to do something. Call the guards, the medical students...’

*No time, no incentive*

‘Please...’

*We have a tight schedule*

Issa tried to move his arms so he could rip off the cloak, but they wouldn’t listen to him. Even dropping the bottle appeared to be out of the question.

*Walk down the steps*

‘I don’t want to do this.’

*Walk*

His body turned and his legs took him back down onto the forum.

*Let's see, where next?*

'Please, let me go.'

*The palace is quite far. And protected by a lot of guards. Not impossible to get through, but time-consuming*

Issa strained his neck and managed to look back at the drunk, and then wished he hadn't. The poor man's bloodied hand was raised, and he was trying to speak...but each time he managed to eke out a sound, a mixture of blood and bile would seep out with it.

*The ruling classes are a nice target, albeit a bit nebulous*

'He's dying...'

*Ah. That's it. Your girlfriend's house. She doesn't live far from here, does she?*

'No...'

*We can reduce her brain speed with the edge of the bottle*

'Please...'

*And then win your first argument*

'I won't do it.'

*Shouldn't take more than two minutes*

'I can't.'

*Yes, yes, this is it. Now, stop with the mooney face and walk*

'No.'

*I believe you know the way*

Issa closed his eyes and pictured the jagged bottle in his head...stripped away the background, all the context...then directed it down towards his thigh.

Pain hit.

But not as much as expected.

He opened his eyes and looked down, surprised to see only a small slash wound on his forearm.

*Redirection, comrade*

‘No...’

*I can do this all night. With all kinds of different implements*

‘You monster.’

*To you and your girlfriend*

‘Demon.’

*Now walk*



## Robo Wolf

Previously on 'Little Red Riding Hood':

*Due to questionable parenting, a naïve, young girl was sent into a dark forest with no discernible signage, alone, to visit her sick grandmother. Before departing, the girl's mother warned her not to stray from the path as there might be dangers lurking nearby, yet gave the girl no weapon to protect herself. Was the mother secretly plotting with the wolf to get rid of her daughter? Perhaps. However, there is no evidence in the original text to prove it so let's continue.*

*Obeying her mum, Little Red Riding Hood journeyed blindly into the forest, met the wolf and, with minimal coercion, gave away her grandmother's address. The salivating beast ran ahead, ate the grandmother, costumed itself in her clothes and waited for Little Red Riding Hood to catch up. When she did finally arrive, the wolf ate her too [after pretending to be her grandmother for no reason at all; it could've just waited behind the door and jumped on her when she came in].*

*Fortunately, a hunter happened to pass by, headbutted the wolf, cut open its stomach, released both Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother, finished off the wolf and left for home with its skin as a jacket. By the end of the tale, everyone [except the wolf] was deeply ~~traumatised~~ happy.*

~~~

Well, not long after this story had ended...the consequences began. Little Red Riding Hood learnt absolutely no lessons at all and returned home, alone, via the dark forest, while her grandmother was left with the gruesome task of cleaning up a murder scene.

‘What a mess,’ she muttered, taking in the sight before her.

And she was right.

From every observable angle, her living room resembled a Goya painting, more blood than floor, guts on the fireside rug, chunks of wolf on the furniture. It would take hours to clean. However, before she could whip out the mop and get started, the big lump of dead animal meat slumped near the door would have to be dealt with. Rolling up her sleeves [and giving up around the elbow – they were very tight sleeves], she picked up the wolf’s body, walked about half a mile westwards from her cottage and dumped the murderous pest in a shallow hole that someone had already, fortuitously, dug. After throwing three hand-scoops of dirt over the corpse and spitting on it, she stood back up and wondered what to do next.

‘I can’t just leave without saying anything, even if the wretched thing did eat me and my granddaughter. Can I?’

Deciding that they were all creatures under the crotch of God, she hurriedly made the sign of the cross and requested specifically that the wolf should burn in the bluest fires of Hell for a minimum of five years with no chance of parole. [She hated parole]. No, wait, the pest had broken into her house too. And spoiled her bedsheets. Okay, the wolf blah blah blah bluest fires of Hell for seventeen years with no chance of parole.

‘Yup, that should do it,’ she said, rubbing the dirt from her hands.

~~~

Returning to her cottage in high spirits, the grandmother pushed open the door that was half-open anyway and looked again at the horror canvas that was her living room.

According to preliminary calculations, it would take at least four and half hours to make the place look presentable again, and that was assuming no coffee breaks.

‘Bloody wolves,’ she muttered, attempting to roll up her sleeves once more. ‘And bloody scientists too.’

The last remark may have seemed arbitrary to a layman, but there was history behind it. A while back, the grandmother had read in a periodical that local scientists were on the cusp of perfecting a total, all-in-one cleaning robot at the local university, and that it’d be ready for mass-production within four months. Well, two years on and there was still no sign of the damn thing. Not even a commercial. Why did she



even bother paying taxes if they were wasted on laziness like that? [Note: she didn't pay taxes].

Cursing bureaucratic red tape *and* the local university, she got down on her knees, scrubbed the floor, washed her bedsheets, picked up loose chunks of wolf meat, prayed once again to her reprobate God, cleaned her hands, wiped her face, prayed to the forest gods too just in case, and then, on the verge of complete exhaustion, crawled over to the couch and collapsed in front of *Peasant Cop* [a long running TV-serial about an orphaned peasant strongarmed by the local Lord into spying on other peasants, procuring hot teenage minge/dick, breaking up worker strikes etc.].

Later that same night, as the grandmother slipped slowly into a dream world of surly peasants with great abs, a scientist happened to be walking through the forest, kicking random twigs on the ground and screaming at tree trunks as if they were his fiercest enemies. If it wasn't clear enough from his actions, he was in an extremely dark mood. The university in the town nearby had just fired him for trying to turn a rabbit into a robot, and now he had no income and no job.

'How will I ever make robots now?' he cried. 'In my mind alone? At the YMCA? How?!'

Fortunately, he was so busy feeling sorry for himself that he hadn't been looking where he was going, and tripped on the shallow hole which contained the barely-covered corpse of the wolf.

Curious, the scientist gazed at the wolf's mangled remains and thought deeply for a moment. Thinking turned to suspicion. An animal carcass, just laying here, in a shallow grave? He picked up a stick and prodded the wolf's legs to see if it was really dead. Luckily, it was. Unless it was a professionally trained actor? He prodded it again, harder. Nope, still dead. Wait...unless it was a prop? Another prod, this one more of a stabbing motion, and yet another corpse-like lack of response. No, it was truly dead. And mangled horribly. Poor beast.

'Wolves have the most terribly bad fortune sometimes,' he whispered, picking up the body and slinging it over his shoulder, 'whereas science is constantly coming up roses.'

~~~

Nine months later, after inserting yards and yards of coiled-up wire inside the wolf, sewing on new skin and replacing its limbs with the latest models of robot technology stolen from the university, the scientist was ready.

He waited for a storm and, when it came, used a very long, very thick cable to shoot 1401 kilowatts of electricity directly into the wolf's body.

At first, nothing happened, the wolf's new skin merely became a little bit blacker, and smoky too, but then, on the third attempt, the creature's eyes opened and it spoke: 'I feel heavy.'

'You can speak?' asked the scientist, astonished.

The wolf staggered up onto its feet and stared at the scientist. 'Who are you? Why is your hair so wild?'

The scientist instinctively reached up to his head and patted down the fluffy mess that lay on top...but it was no good. No human hand could suppress something that hadn't been combed in seventeen years. Giving up on the hair, he focused instead on his jacket, straightening his back and puffing out his chest so the wolf could see his old academy badge. 'I'm a scientist from the university...currently on leave. With my genius IQ, I have brought you back to life.'

'Back to life?'

'Yes, and with numerous improvements.'

'Improvements?'

The scientist pointed at all the robot parts of the wolf's body and listed the new features: super strength, super eyesight, super-fast legs, smoother fur, super durability, a pinhole light on the left nipple to see in the dark.

'...the only flaw is that, if it rains, and the rain touches your metal parts, you'll stop moving. But that's not a huge problem as you can just wear a jacket.'

The wolf looked at its arms and legs, confused. 'I was...dead?'

'Yes, but now you're not.'

'A man...killed me. With an axe. Without blinking.'

'I don't know about that, but it's over now, you're alive.'

‘No. Not over. I must have revenge.’

The scientist shook his head. ‘Don’t be a fool, revenge is for Venetians. We must go to the university and show them your abilities. Then I will become famous and wealthy and those socialite whores will finally return my calls. Or at the very least not mistake me for static.’

The wolf glared at the scientist. ‘I’m hungry.’

‘Yes, sustenance, good idea. You’ve had an incredibly tiring experience, you need to restore your energy. What would you like? Toast? Cereal? Chicken curry?’

‘No.’

‘None of them?’

‘No.’

‘Well, that’s all I’ve got in the house.’

‘Not all.’

The scientist looked around the room then back at the wolf. Finally, he understood what the beast wanted. ‘Hang on...’

Before the scientist could reach for a weapon, the wolf had already picked him up and chomped into his neck. Blood spurted all over the creature’s face, soaking everything. It smiled and bit him again. And again and again until all that was left of the scientist was a pair of shoes. And bones, obviously.

Sitting down on a nearby chair to digest its impromptu buffet, the wolf took the chance to properly examine its [blood-drenched] arms and legs. Metal patches; hard as stone, as sleek as an otter's back. The scientist may have made for a bland meal, but his design work was excellent, and just what the wolf needed if it was going to get its revenge.

'I'll rest a while first,' it decided, licking blood off its metal arm, 'then find the axe man who killed me. And those other two as well, the grandmother and the red hood girl. They may only have been bystanders, but they stood by and did nothing while that brute murdered me, so they too must die.'

There was a buzzing noise in the wolf's temple, followed by a small burst of sparks. If the scientist had still been in one piece, he could've told the wolf that the noise indicated a malfunction in its logic circuits, but he wasn't in one piece, he was in several, so the wolf had little choice but to grab a screwdriver and hit itself with the handle until the circuits stopped exploding.

Somehow, it worked.

~~~

At dawn the next day, the wolf opened one eye, told its mum it wasn't going to school today then rolled over and went back to sleep.

Five hours later, reality broke in again, this time successfully.

The wolf yawned, put on a hood and jacket, and quickly left the lab, which turned out to be the attic of the local chess club. On its way down to the ground floor, the enhanced predator passed several games in

progress, butting in to some of them and moving the pieces at random, saying 'checkmate' when they complained and generally containing its urge to eat everything in the building.

Outside, the sky was bleak and the faces of the townspeople even bleaker, as if someone had kidnapped them from Hawaii and brought them here, to live out their days feeling cold, going to the market and shitting out of first floor windows.

The wolf moved swiftly through the spaces between the human ghouls, keeping its hood tight against its face. Oddly cold day for early spring, it thought, looking at all the shawls around people's necks. Must be some kind of human interference, just like those factories they keep making.

Feeling slightly peckish, it followed a young man in a ponytail and over-sized shirt into an alley, crept silently up behind him and was about to bite the back of his neck when five other men appeared and proclaimed it to be, 'dance time.'

Confused, the wolf backed away, as the odd group of men dropped to the ground and started rotating their bodies slowly in an awkward circle. Some even tried to leap back to their feet without the use of their arms, the last of them cracking a bone mid-leap, and then cracking it a second time as he dropped back down onto the cobbled stone.

'This is why we don't live in towns,' the wolf said to itself, retreating fully from the alley and finding the quickest road out of there. 'Well, this and all the insurance agents.'

~~~

Two miles and thirty minutes later, the wolf came to the outlying trees of the forest. The leaves were almost entirely absent, which meant it wasn't merely an oddly cold day, it was in fact winter. But if that were the case then...

The wolf's breath quickened as it did the math.

Wolfian Gods! Nine months! That's how long it must have been dead...nine whole months! An eternity in wolf time. To be away from its home for that long, without leaving a message. Wah! Its girlfriend, its boyfriend, its ancillary boyfriends and girlfriends, all of them would have moved on by now, possibly to a different forest. A different country even. His entire life, it was...

'...gone.'

The wolf leaned against the trunk of a tree, running its claw along one of the low-lying, leaf-less branches. The axe man, the grandmother, the girl, they were responsible for this, all of them. And they would all pay. Pay in the most violent way it could think of.

The wolf snapped the branch and threw it onto the ground.

'All of you,' it muttered, adding a growl on the end in case there were cameras around.

Utilising its superior eyesight to scan through the trunks and branches, the wolf soon located the hunter, who was sitting on a tree

stump two hundred metres deeper into the forest, eating a sandwich with his t-shirt off.

His size is certainly formidable, thought the wolf, but he's no match for my robot arms.

Speeding noiselessly between the trees, avoiding easily snappable twigs, controlling the rate of its breath and, finally, sneaking up to the tree stump which seated its prey, the wolf waited while the hunter finished his sandwich. It was odd, the man didn't seem to be doing anything except eating and staring at the forest floor, as if it were a mannequin that had been adjusted to perform two simple tasks. Killing him would be child's play. Far too easy. Far too quick, too.

The wolf let its breathing wander a bit, part of it hoping the hunter would hear it and respond.

But he didn't.

He just sat there, finishing his sandwich, looking at the ground.

Ah well, thought the wolf, I can debilitate him first and then take my time. A slash at the arms and legs perhaps, from the vantage point of his own back...

Crouching low on its hind legs, the wolf revived old memories of the hunter's axe swinging towards its stomach, let them settle for a while then, with hatred at optimal levels, extended its claws and sprang forward...

~~~



For most humans this would've been the end, but not for the hunter as he was a professional, and three times more alert than a normal man. The moment the wolf landed on his back, he spun, grabbed the wolf by the neck and threw it with great force towards the nearest tree.

'Waaa...' squealed the wolf, hitting the side of the trunk and falling onto an improbably placed nettle patch, 'that wasn't fair at all.'

'A cowardly ambush,' shouted the hunter, rubbing his back.

'What? You ambushed me! Pretending to look at the ground all that time.'

'A wolf that speaks...interesting.'

'Don't patronise me, dumbbell, I'm fluent in three languages...'

'I've never killed one of your kind before.'

'...four if you include mime.'

'At least not that I know of. Such is my skill, it is not often you pests get the chance to say anything before I slay you.'

'Key point: I'm smarter than you.'

'But then, what is the point of speech if you are nothing more than a pest?'

The wolf slowly climbed back onto its feet, trying not to rub at the rashes from the nettles. 'This is pointless, we're just talking past each other.'

‘None that I can see.’

‘And your nipples are distracting.’

The hunter picked up his axe and started walking towards the wolf.  
‘Come here, pest, let me introduce you to my good friend.’

‘Not if I introduce you to my teeth first.’

The wolf strode forward confidently and, as the hunter swung the axe at its waist, put out the metal part of its arm to stop it.

The blade hit the wolf’s forearm hard but failed to cut it. It did hurt a lot though, making the wolf rub it furiously. ‘Wah...the pain!’

‘It’s an axe, you fool,’ replied the hunter, snorting.

‘You don’t understand...my forearm is metal.’

‘*Was* metal.’

‘No, *is* metal. *Is*. Wait, what?’

Just as the wolf finished saying *what*, the hunter swung his axe again and chopped the poor animal’s right arm clean off at the shoulder.

The wolf cried out in pain and fell backwards. ‘Why am I not winning?’ it moaned, landing on a rock.

‘You’re a lazy, do-nothing pest and I’m a man,’ replied the hunter. ‘I chop wood all day, every day. At night, I go to the open-air gym. What do you do? Eat? Lurk? Slob around in your lair?’

‘But my robot strength...’

‘Robot what?’

‘...it’s not working.’

‘What are you jabbering about, pest?’

‘Must be some kind of malfunction. Or warm-up period.’

‘Ha, well...no malfunctions with this beauty,’ boasted the hunter, holding up his axe. ‘Just nice, clean cuts.’

The wolf looked up at the edge of the hunter’s blade and realised this was a fight it wasn’t going to win, not without a better plan, so it jumped up onto its feet, grabbed the hunter’s t-shirt and used its super-fast robot legs to run deeper into the forest. It kept running and running until it had the grandmother’s house in sight, then checked to see if the hunter was following.

‘Ah, that lump may have muscles the size of Bohemia, but he’s not very fast,’ said the wolf, wrapping the t-shirt around the stump of its arm. ‘And besides, I can just kill him when he’s asleep. That way he won’t be able to trick me by staring at the ground.’

Pleased with itself for escaping the hunter, the wolf turned to the grandmother’s house, eyes ballooning when it saw a silhouette move across the window. ‘Yes, good...an easier target.’

There was a slightly off-key melody coming from inside the house, so the wolf crept up to the window and listened.

‘Me and you, forever...oo oo oo, forever...we will stay together.’

It was a terrible song, but it meant that the old woman was at home and, judging by the freedom with which she sang, not expecting anyone

to pop by. Perfect, thought the wolf. I'll just knock on the door, do one of my fake accents, then jump on the snotty crone and start biting. Again. I should hurry though, that hunter could turn up any minute now.

The wolf followed its off-the-cuff plan and ran up to the front door, knocking twice in a very gentle manner.

'Who is it?' asked the grandmother from inside.

'It is me, red hood riding girl,' replied the wolf, putting on a relatively convincing, naïve, little girl accent.

'Oh, you've come back.'

'Of course. I love visiting my favourite grandmother.'

'Two visits in one year, how lucky I am.'

The wolf squinted, unsure if the old wretch was using sarcasm or not. To be safe, it waited for her to speak again.

'I will say,' continued the grandmother, along with the sound of approaching footsteps, 'it's a good job you didn't turn up an hour later as that's when *Peasant Cop* is starting, and I can't miss tonight's episode.'

'Can you open the door, grandmother? It's chilly outside.'

'You see, *3 Job Larry* will be killed off this week and some people are saying it's *Education Jess* who does it.'

'Grandmother, please...my hands are starting to turn blue.'

'What's that, dear? Blue hands?'

‘Yes, very blue.’

‘Hold on, I’m just putting on my slippers...’ There was some laboured breathing on the other side of the door, followed by a clicking sound. ‘Grandma’s here, don’t you worry.’

The wolf smiled and balled its robot fists, ready to pounce. ‘You’re my hero, grandmother. I can’t wait to-...’

The door swung open, and before the wolf could see inside the house, a shotgun blast had sent it flying backwards into the nearest tree. This time it hit the trunk square on, letting out a pained squeal then landing on a pile of broken acorns and squealing all over again.

Striding out of the house like a sheriff in a town populated solely by blow-up dolls, the grandmother aimed at what she believed to be the lifeless body of the wolf. When she heard its squeals, she frowned slightly, but quickly recovered herself and started reloading her gun.

‘Wait,’ cried the wolf, holding up its one remaining arm. ‘When did you get a shotgun?’

‘About five hours after the last time one of you pests ate me. You think I’d just sit here and let that happen again?’

‘Hey, I’m not like that other wolf.’

‘Sure looks like it to me.’

‘No, really, I just wanted to ask you for directions.’

‘To where?’

The wolf looked around, realising it was deep in the middle of a secluded forest. 'The beach?'

'You want to go and terrorize people at the beach now? Ah, you're a brazen creature, I must not let you draw another breath.'

The wolf stretched its remaining robot arm a tiny bit higher. 'Wait...'

'Wait for what?'

'For me to escape.'

'Never!'

The grandmother raised her shotgun and aimed at the wolf's forehead. However, when she pulled the trigger, the shell didn't come out. 'It's jammed,' she said, more as query than fact.

'Aha,' said the wolf, using its one good arm to pull itself up against the trunk of the tree, 'now it's my turn to-'

The wolf's sentence was again cut short, this time by the handle of the shotgun whacking it on the temple, sending it back onto the broken acorns.

'I hate this story,' it mumbled, picking a particularly sharp piece of pine out of its thigh.

'Tough,' said the grandmother, fixing her shotgun and re-aiming at the wolf's head.

'Wait...'

‘No can do.’

The wolf pointed behind the grandmother. ‘Look, it’s Susan Sarandon.’

‘Who?’

‘An actress from Bologna, very talented.’

‘Susan Random?’

‘You don’t know her? Okay. Look, over there by the squirrel...it’s Jane Fonda.’

‘Jane what?’

The wolf looked left, searching the implanted memory core the scientist had...err...implanted, then, finding gold, pointed behind the grandmother again. ‘Look, it’s Gary Sinise.’

‘Gabby Sneezy?’

‘No? Okay. Look, it’s Patch Adams.’

‘Patch atoms?’

‘Look, it’s Heidi of the Alps.’

‘No, it isn’t.’

‘Look, it’s Greg Rusedski.’

‘Are you mad?’

‘Look, it’s Li Bing Bing.’

‘Ah, one of the Bing Bings, where?’

As the grandmother turned, the wolf jumped up and lunged forward, ready to dig its teeth into the old crone's neck...but its balance was off...one arm and two legs and a sudden increase in forward motion all spelled out a quick return to the forest floor. Remaining somewhat conscious, it tried to edge forward and bite the old woman's ankles, but they were too distant, and she was already beginning to turn back round...

'This isn't over, crone,' the wolf yelled as it leapt over the broken acorns and continued as fast as it could through the forest. It ran for five miles straight before stopping and taking a rest. Ah, it thought, so far my revenge is going quite badly, but that's only because I didn't do enough research before attacking them. Now I know that the hunter is devious and the grandmother has a shotgun, I can come up with a better plan to kill them. No, not just kill...slaughter, humiliate, torture, all three one after the other. Wah, that's right, I must get true vengeance and true vengeance is to make them keenly aware that it is I, the original wolf, who is their tormentor. But first things first, I need an easier target, something I can kill without the need for a detailed plan of attack. A warm-up before the main act.

But who?

Ah, of course, the little red girl, it's not even close. There's no way she's stronger than me, and she's too young to purchase a shotgun, even with the highest standard of fake ID. Unless she bought it in the kingdom of Alabama? No, that was far too distant a land...and she wouldn't have the strength to fire the thing anyway.



Ha, the girl it was then.

It would be like stepping on a cockroach. No, even easier...like stepping on a cockroach with chronic bronchitis and a passion for diplomacy. No, even easier than that...it would be like stepping on a cockroach with all of the above plus no legs, no eyes and no real faith in the direction the world was heading.

Realising it was getting carried away, the wolf slapped itself hard in the cheek and looked for the path out of the forest. As far as it could remember, the girl's house lay eastwards, so that's the direction it took.

After an hour, the wolf felt tired again and decided to nap behind the trunk of a well-protected tree. Well-protected as in there was a lot of shrubbery around it. By its own calculations, the wolf figured it could rest for half an hour and still be at the girl's village before nightfall. And there was little chance of the hunter or the grandmother finding it in its present location, therefore...

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Waking up to the sound of metal clinking against metal, the wolf opened its eyes and looked down towards its feet.

The cold sunlight bounced off a small pile of coins in a cup, revealing two things, both of them disturbing.

One, it was morning.

And two, passing Samaritans had mistaken it for a beggar.

Based on the number of coins in the cup, around thirty guilt-ridden hypocrites had donated money, which meant its resting place wasn't as well-hidden as it had thought.

'Lucky that my hood was tight,' the wolf muttered, glancing around at the trees and up at the branches above. 'And that no hunters passed by...or grandmothers.' It bent down and emptied out the cup, frowning when it saw the numbers on the coins. 'Cheapskates.'

Putting its back against the tree, the wolf pushed itself up, pulled its hood tighter and walked farther along the path. Ah, it was right, the village was just up ahead, beyond the field that grew...something yellow. Wheat? Barley? The wolf had no idea, why would it? The only wolf who'd ever shown an interest in farming had been shot the moment it presented its face at the information desk of the town library. According to wolf legend, the chief librarian had used such force that some of the dead wolf's blood had flown across the room and splashed over patrons in the political theory section, including another heavily disguised wolf who was there to read *Animal Farm*. Of course, that wolf got shot too, and ever since then libraries had been viewed as places of unimaginable horror, the wolf version of an Indian burial ground.

The wolf shook the past out of its head and moved forward, hurrying to the crop of trees on the edge of the field. As luck would have it, there was a little girl in a red cloak walking in circles nearby, dancing perhaps, with her house about two hundred metres behind her.

Was it the same girl as nine months earlier?

It was possible. She was a tiny bit taller than the one he'd eaten, but still quite small, and still wearing the same red cloak. Assuming it wasn't the only piece of fashion in the village, it had to be her. And, most importantly, she was playing in a carefree way without any adults around to protect her.

'Perfect,' said the wolf, licking its lips. 'I'm starving.'

Relying on classical wolf strategy, it lay down flat on its stomach and, using its one remaining arm, crawled slowly through the grass towards the girl. It was incredible, even when it was only a metre away, the child still didn't notice a thing.

Clearly not the brightest spark, the wolf thought, stretching its claw so it didn't go numb from all the crawling. All I have to do is wait for her to turn her back on me then strike.

The wolf didn't have to wait long.

The girl turned around and picked up a blade of grass, spinning it in her fingers [this was the 18th Century equivalent of pissing about on YouTube or scrolling through the menu screen on Netflix].

Raising its body as high as it could without aggravating its existing wounds, the wolf made a subdued growling sound in pagan respect to wolf tradition then lunged towards the girl's pale, unguarded neck.

As soon as it landed, it closed its eyes and opened its jaws to bite her and...nothing. No movement. Its whole mouth was stuck.

'Waa...'

The wolf opened its eyes and saw the girl gripping its jaw with her right hand.

‘How the-...’

Before the wolf could complete its question, Little Red Riding Hood had flipped its body one-eighty and slammed it onto the ground.

The wolf was so winded, so beat down, so exhausted that it couldn’t even wiggle a toe.

‘Why did you attack me, Mr Wolf?’ asked Little Red Riding Hood, confused.

‘Not attack,’ he replied, wheezing. ‘Just playing.’

‘Oh, sorry, I didn’t realise. I thought you were like that other wolf who ate my grandmother and me last year.’

‘No, no...that was a...completely different wolf.’

‘It was?’

‘Yes, yes. Definitely...not me. I’m a vegan.’

‘Ah, I feel so bad for hurting you like that. I told my mother I shouldn’t learn Krav Maga, but she insisted.’

‘Krav what?’

‘Israeli Martial Arts. The idea is to break your opponent quickly, before they have a chance to complain about their land being stolen. Of course, in Israel, they use drone strikes and heavy artillery, but that’s only cos the other side has sticks and fireworks, and muddy-faced

children that look at you funny. That's what my instructor says. He's great at Krav Maga, all the kicks and neck snaps. Though, to be honest, we only use sandbags dressed as beefy Palestinians in class, I've never actually tried it on a real person. Or animal for that matter.'

The wolf managed to muster up enough activity in its neurons to order its paw to rub its back, as the pain was still acute. When that was done, it focused on getting its breath back. She may know some racist fighting skills, it thought, but she's no match for my robot strength. If it ever activates...

'Here, let me help you up, Mr Wolf,' said Little Red Riding Hood, bending down and offering a hand.

'Yes, thank you so much, that's very kind of you.'

The wolf waited until it had been helped back onto its feet, and for Little Red Riding Hood to relax a little, then, quick as a flash, grabbed her neck with its robot hand and started to squeeze.

'Ha, you little fool!' shouted the Wolf. 'It's me, the same wolf who ate you before, and the same wolf who will eat you now!'

Little Red Riding Hood looked at the wolf with slight annoyance, not at all acting like someone who was having her neck broken. Instead, she calmly picked up its wrist and pulled it off her shoulders. Finally, she snapped the bone, or the metal, and pushed the wolf backwards.

'Waa...even you're stronger than me. What's going on?'

'Don't know, don't care.'

The wolf tapped the metal on its body. 'Wait a second... is this even metal?'

'You may be able to talk, but you are still a rotten-hearted creature.'

'Shut up a second.'

'Excuse me?'

The wolf tapped different parts of his metal body. 'That isn't a metallic sound. And the texture...it doesn't feel the same as before.'

'Why are you stroking your costume?'

'In fact, it feels kind of like plastic.'

'Ha, plastic!' Little Red Riding Hood started laughing. 'That's what you're wearing?'

The wolf tapped other parts of its body, hearing the dull thud of claw against plastic. 'It can't be.'

'Oh, you're a funny wolf. I almost feel sorry for you.'

The wolf heard these words and felt so aggrieved that it could not help but boast out loud, 'don't get cocky, you little brat, I'll be back with real metal skin and then you'll be in trouble. And don't think you can follow me because I have my super-fast, robot legs...the one thing that actually works on this stupid body.'

At the exact same moment the wolf finished speaking, a shotgun blast sounded out across the field. Two of the resulting projectiles travelled close enough together to slam into the wolf's lower half,

breaking its left robot leg in two and leaving it with no option but to hop on its right. Turning to see where the shot had come from, the wolf almost fainted when it spotted the grandmother walking out of the forest, reloading her gun.

‘It’s okay,’ said the wolf to himself, ‘her gun always jams on the second shot.’

In an instant rebuke to the word *always*, the grandmother [and fate] aimed again and shot off the wolf’s other leg, sending it sprawling like a drunken salaryman onto the ground. Keeping eyes fixed on her prey, the grandmother called to Little Red Riding Hood, asking if she was okay, then aimed at the wolf’s head.

‘Wait...’ cried the wolf.

‘Not this time, pest.’

She pulled the trigger, but nothing happened.

‘Aha, no bullets!’ shouted the wolf, awkwardly wiping sweat off its forehead.

‘Shells,’ corrected the grandmother, checking the barrel and shaking her head. ‘The pest is right though, I’m all out.’

‘Ha, and how will you kill me now, crone? You’re older than the wheel.’

‘Quiet, pest.’

‘And *you’re* far too nice.’

‘Nice,’ shouted the grandmother, her nose flaring.

‘No, not you, you’re a monster.’ The wolf pointed to the left [with its shoulder]. ‘I mean, her, the red hood girl. She’s far too nice to hurt me.’

‘It’s right, grandmother,’ said Little Red Riding Hood, ‘I am quite nice, and I don’t think it’s right to kill something which can no longer harm us.’

‘Silly, naïve girl,’ replied her grandmother, ‘it’ll just crawl away and get a new robot body, a stronger, metal one and then we won’t be able to stop it when it returns in the next story.’

‘Do you think it would really do that?’

‘Of course, it’s a pest, it’s what pests do.’

‘I guess you’re right.’

‘Good girl. Now, go and fetch your mother’s kitchen knife.’

Little Red Riding Hood skipped back to her house on the other side of the field while the grandmother sat down next to the wolf and stroked her gun.

‘You’re really going to kill me here, in front of your granddaughter?’

‘Sure.’

‘With a kitchen knife?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s pretty dark.’

‘I’m a dark person.’

‘But...think of your granddaughter. The violence she’s about to witness. Imagine it, crone, the trauma she’ll have to endure, the cost of future therapists.’

‘Do you have a better idea?’

‘I do, actually.’

‘What, let you escape?’

The wolf coughed. ‘Not many people know this, but the easiest, and cleanest, way to kill a wolf is to hit it with a sponge. We die instantly if that happens.’

‘Is that true?’

‘Extremely.’

‘Being hit by a sponge?’

‘That, or being sprinkled with washing powder. Both are equally deadly to us wolves. Though the sponge is worse pain-wise.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘I swear, it’s true. Most of my cousins died that way. My sister too. Poor cub wandered into a laundrette. Could hardly recognise her body afterwards.’

The grandmother squinted at the wolf, her finger resting on the tip of the shotgun barrel.

‘Whatever you do, however you choose to proceed, please don’t end me like that. I beg you.’

Little Red Riding Hood came back with the knife and handed it to the grandmother. She looked at it and sighed. ‘Actually, I’ve changed my mind, can you go and fetch a sponge, dear?’

‘Okay, grandmother,’ said Little Red Riding Hood skipping back to her house.

‘I can’t believe you’re going to use the sponge,’ cried the wolf, almost laughing at its own deviousness. ‘What a cruel woman you are.’

‘Silence, pest, I’m missing *Peasant Cop* for this.’

‘Pedant what?’

‘A peasant is strong-armed by a local Lord into becoming a cop and spying on the other-...argh, don’t make me explain the plot, it’ll take forever. Just sit still and stay quiet until my granddaughter gets back.’

‘With the sponge,’ said the wolf, starting to sob.

A minute or two later, Little Red Riding Hood came skipping back through the grass, the kitchen knife still in her hand.

‘Where’s the sponge, dear?’

‘Sorry, grandma, we don’t have any.’

‘Not even in the kitchen?’

‘No.’

‘Oh,’ said the grandmother, turning to the wolf. ‘Sorry, pest, looks like it’s the knife or the knife.’

‘Wait...’

‘Or I could cave your head in with the butt of my shotgun.’

‘Check again.’

‘It’s your call.’

‘The sponge, crone! Go back, check yourself...’

‘Very well, the knife it is then.’

‘...the bathroom, the kitchen.’

‘Any last words?’

‘Check the neighbours’ houses, ask them...’

‘For last words?’

‘Sponges, washing powder, anything...please.’

The grandmother looked at Little Red Riding Hood. ‘Did you ask the neighbours?’

‘They’re all out.’

‘What? All of them?’ cried the wolf.

Little Red Riding Hood nodded. ‘They all left notes on their doors, saying they’ve gone to the beach.’

‘Beach? What beach? We’re in the middle of Bavaria, you stupid cun...’

‘Sorry, pest, this is taking too long.’

‘...t.’

The grandmother took the knife and, without further ado, plunged it into the wolf’s belly. Sighing in frustration at the lack of blood, she took the blade back out and plunged it into a different spot. This time there was a trickle of red, but not much. She tried again. Ah, a bit more, that was better. Now, perhaps if she aimed higher up...

‘Grandma,’ cried Little Red Riding Hood, looking at the trees in the distance.

‘Quiet, little one, I’m busy.’

‘You’re torturing the poor thing.’

‘How do you know? You’re not even looking.’

‘Please, stop.’

‘Okay, okay, I’m almost done.’

‘And apologize to the wolf.’

‘What? Never.’

‘Please.’

‘It’s a violent beast.’

‘Please, grandma.’

‘Okay, okay...if it’ll keep you silent.’

The grandmother raised the knife and mapped out the remaining strikes. It wouldn't take long, assuming she avoided the hip bones. Just thirteen or so more stabs.

'Grandmother...'

'Patience.'

'What are you doing?'

'Apologizing.'

The grandmother returned to stab duty, muttering inaudible words as she did so. After it was done, she lit a cigarette, spread herself out on the grass and admired her work: the word *SORRY* spelled out in knife holes on the wolf's stomach.

'That was surprisingly hard work,' she said, blowing out smoke.

'I feel sick,' whispered Little Red Riding Hood, covering her mouth.

'Here, use this.' The grandmother took a large tissue out of her jacket pocket and handed it to her granddaughter. As she did so, a sponge fell out of the pocket and rolled next to the wolf's chest.

'Grandma, where did that come from?'

'Good question.' The grandmother scratched her head. 'I suppose I must've put it there nine months ago when I was cleaning up the mess in my house...then forgotten to take it out.'

'Silly grandma.'

'Lucky grandma more like,' said the grandmother, chuckling.

‘Lucky?’

‘It’s experimentation time, pest.’

‘I hate old people,’ the wolf said, coughing up blood and sucking it right back down again as the grandmother’s shadow appeared above it, sponge at the ready.



White Hair

Long ago, in a country close to [and occasionally at odds with] Croatia, there lived a wealthy merchant who conducted a lot of business on behalf of the Royal Family; specifically the king and queen, not the hundreds of hangers on. In fact, he was so adept at the dark arts of international trade, and had connived with so many other merchants in nearby countries, that the king and queen came to rely on him for eighty-two per cent of everything.

‘I’m so powerful,’ he boasted, when safely inside the confines of his own home, ‘that they should plant the crown on this head here, as well as the royal titles. And that’s no jest either. Without me, those two royal fools would be as poor as one of those grain-picking peasants outside.’

As luck would have it, one of those poor, grain-picking peasants happened to be resting outside the merchant’s living room window, and,

on hearing mention of his social classification, popped his head up to say, 'hey, I'm not poor.'

'Out of here, peasant,' shouted the wealthy merchant, spitting out globs of phlegm and red wine. 'Go and get a real job, do something useful.'

'I have a real job,' replied the peasant.

'Well, go and do it then. Stop being so lazy.'

'It's my day off.'

'Well, get another job then. What's your salary? Is it enough to clean your face? Clearly not as you're covered in mud.'

'Hey, that's my natural skin colo-'

Before the peasant could finish his sentence, the merchant had picked up a fork and thrown it with moderate force towards the window. Either by chance or witchcraft, it struck the peasant in the shoulder and made him cry out in pain.

Watching this scene was the merchant's only child, a spoilt, young girl of fourteen, who laughed out loud [even though it looked quite pretentious], picked up another fork and threw it at the peasant's other shoulder.

Unfortunately, her aim was not so sharp and it struck the peasant right in the neck. He fell down on the dirt outside and began dying.

The girl looked at her father, slightly worried, but her father shrugged and told one of the servants to call the palace guards.

‘But daddy, what will they say when they see the dead peasant?’

‘What will *they* say? Who cares? What I say is what matters.’

‘Err...what will you say?’

‘I will tell them that the peasant was attempting to steal from my property, and I demand a] his body be taken away immediately, and b] all the assets he possessed be sent here immediately in order to compensate for the things he stole.’

‘But, father, he didn’t steal anything.’

Anticipating such a response, the merchant rose to his feet, grabbed some silver from the shelves, went to the window and dropped it next to the peasant, who was still in the process of dying.

‘There you go, he tried to steal my silver.’

The girl smiled and clapped her father, praising him for such ingenuity. And she was right to praise him, as his plan worked perfectly. The peasant’s body was taken away [still not dead] and his money was given to the merchant as compensation for a “bungled theft.”

Again, the girl praised her father, telling him that her mother would’ve been so proud if she hadn’t died a few years earlier.

‘Doubtful,’ mumbled the merchant, putting on his jacket and opening the front door.

‘What did you say, father?’

‘Nothing.’

‘It sounded like-...’

‘Listen, I’m going out now. You are to stay here and study the books I have set out on the table. Understand?’

‘Yes, father.’

‘Good girl.’

‘But it is quite late, where are you intending to go?’

‘Business.’

‘What kind of business?’

‘That is not yet your concern. One day, perhaps, but not now.’

Her father pointed at the table with all the study materials then left the house. The girl watched him take the path towards the forest, glanced at the books [*Rich Man, Richer Man; Exploit By Any Other Name; Earn Before Learn*] then put on her own jacket and quietly followed after him.

It wasn’t the first time he’d gone out late on *business* and this time she wanted to know exactly where it was that he was going.

She trailed silently behind him, leaving the path and slipping between the trees, until finally he stopped in a clearing. There was another man there, a poor-looking type dressed in rags and with mud smeared on his face. The two men started to talk as if old friends, however, she couldn’t catch any of the words so she tried to creep closer. As she did so, she stepped on a twig, causing her father to turn and spot her.

‘What are you doing here?’ he shouted angrily.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, rubbing her head and looking around with a baffled expression. ‘I fell asleep and...now I’m here.’

‘Do not lie to me, child.’

‘I’m...’ the girl started to say, then noticed the rigidity of her father’s lips, the hand at his side becoming a fist. ‘I didn’t know where you were going. I was worried about you.’

‘You disobeyed an explicit order.’

‘I didn’t, I was-...’

Her father walked closer, grabbed her by the arm and led her back to the main path. ‘Go home. If I catch you here again...’

‘Sorry, father. I just wanted to know what kind of business you had so late at night in the forest.’

Her father looked back at the clearing, at the mud-smeared man, and grunted. ‘You cannot tell anyone of this. Do you understand?’

She nodded.

‘This man is my informant. He tells me what is happening in other kingdoms, and with other merchants. This helps me stay wealthy...helps us stay wealthy. But if he thinks we are being watched, he’ll never meet me again. No more nice house or nice, gold accessories. You understand?’

She nodded again.

‘I’ll forgive you this time, but please...never again.’ He kissed her softly on the forehead. ‘Okay?’

She thought about nodding for a third time, but that might lead to neck problems in later life, so she just uttered a simple, ‘yes, father,’ instead.

As a reward, she was patted on the head like a chihuahua and told again to go home, study the books, and that’s what she did, hurrying back along the path, neither turning back nor thinking of turning back to see what was being said at the clearing.

When she arrived home, she studied the materials her father had laid out on the table for an hour then went to bed, happy that she had such a capable guardian and that her life was so blessed.

However, that happiness was short-lived as the next day, when the merchant’s daughter rose late from her bed and brushed her hair, she noticed that one of the strands on her head was white.

She stared at it for a few minutes, wondering if it was a dream, but when the white hair refused to disappear, she started to worry that it may be the beginning of old age...before quickly reminding herself that she was fourteen years old. Shrugging like only wealthy people can, she pulled out the white intruder, and whispered to herself, ‘no need to fret, it’s only one hair.’

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A few months later, after many more cruel and greedy acts by both herself and her father [mostly her father], the girl looked in the mirror again and saw about thirty white hairs sprouting up all over her head.

However, this time, when she tried to remove them, they would not accede.

‘What is this?’

She quickly reached for some scissors and attempted to snip the white hairs off, but for some reason, the hairs were too coarse and too rigid, and wouldn’t be snipped.

‘Help,’ she mumbled to herself.

When her father came home that night, he noticed the white hairs and asked directly, ‘girl, what’s happened to your head?’

‘I don’t know, father. They won’t be pruned nor plucked out. What can I do?’

The merchant stroked his own hair, which was all white, and wondered if it was a family curse, to grow white hair before thirty. But it didn’t make sense. His wife, the girl’s mother, had never had a single white hair, not even when she was dying.

‘Don’t worry, I know what to do,’ he said, going into the kitchen and pulling a can out of the cupboard.

‘What is it?’ asked the girl, squinting.

‘Hair dye. From the Ottoman Empire.’

‘Is it safe?’

‘If you follow my instructions, certainly. Now, I’ve got a lot of work to do so pay attention, I’m only saying this once.’

The girl listened to her father explaining how to use the mysterious hair dye then went to the bathroom and tried it on.

The next day, she woke up and ran to the mirror and cried when she saw the white hairs were still there.

‘Don’t worry,’ said her father, patting her on the shoulder, ‘no man will care about your hair, as long as we’re rich.’

‘Really?’

‘Of course. What is more important than money?’

~~~

Over the next few years, the girl grew into a twenty-one-year old woman who was still cruel, still avaricious, and still stuck with an abundance of white hairs on her head. Despite her father’s words, no man asked to marry her. No man asked her anything, not even the time.

‘Why won’t anyone talk to me?’ she asked herself, alone in her house.

She would’ve asked her father, but he had died a year earlier. So, all she could do was lock herself in her cottage and count the number of white hairs on her head, hoping that one day, there would be one less instead of one more.

Meanwhile, her father’s many-tentacled business empire started to collapse. It had only really been successful due to his connections and relationships with the people from other countries, as well as with the king and the queen, so after he died, those people had stopped trading with him [‘can’t trade with a skeleton,’ they said].

The king and queen had also given up on their family, turning instead to younger and greedier people to boost the country's economy and, over the course of another year, the young woman's house became emptier and emptier as all the servants left for other, better paid posts.

Luckily for the young woman, there were still enough silver and gold coins hidden in the house for her to live relatively well for a few years, possibly the rest of her life, but she didn't notice or care about that. Every day, she would go to the market and buy food for the day's meals, then go straight back home and do nothing else. It was fine. No need to care about money. In fact, she didn't really care about much of anything.

People whispered about her behaviour in the street, and she didn't care.

Her house quickly became riddled with dust, and she didn't care.

Caring about the jungle-like state of the garden? Nope. Not her.

The only thing she did care about, the only tangible, real thing that she noticed, was the white hair sprouting day after day from the top of her head, like implacable, merciless, despicable little weeds.

~~~

A year or so later, in the middle of a very cold winter, the young woman was searching her house for wood to burn when she came across an old picture of her mother.

She sat down on the sofa and studied it for a long time. Her mother had been quite beautiful, with coal black hair and chocolate brown eyes,



and the most serious face any human had ever possessed. But she'd also been tinged with lunacy as, sometimes, out of thin air, she would start ranting about the wealth gap and accuse father of being vinyl. Even worse, she would then go out and gift food to the beggars in the town, or hand out their hard-earned gold coins to the workers in the fields. The merchant's daughter shook her head, wondering why her mother had been so witless as to waste money that way. Didn't she know they would simply use the money for *gruit* and *hops*? Obviously not. Father would always tell her not to do it, to go and get checked by the town doctor, but she never listened, and that's why she'd died so young. The lunatic part of her brain had made her care too much about others, instead of herself and her own family.

'Why, mother?' the young woman asked the picture. 'Why didn't you ever listen to father? He was trying to help you.'

And then, suddenly, an eerie thing happened. Her mother's eyes moved in the picture and stared right at her, and, out of the corner of the left socket, a drop of blood emerged. It ran down the picture and onto her daughter's finger.

The young woman dropped the picture and froze in terror.

She breathed fast and hard for a minute, as if all the oxygen were being sucked out of the room, then slowly, resolutely, managed to regain control.

'Am I dreaming?' she wondered, wiping her forehead.

She looked at the picture again, shocked to see the mother's eyes still staring at her.

'Arrgghhh...' was all she could think of, running up to her room and hiding under the very dusty blanket.

An hour later, the wind outside grew colder and the merchant's daughter decided that it was no use being scared, not when it was so bitterly cold, so she lifted off the blanket and went outside to look for wood to burn on her fire.

Fairly soon, she came to a river, with lots of twigs and branches lying on the ground. As she was picking them up, she heard a scream.

'Is that a squirrel?'

The scream continued, getting louder.

'It's definitely not a squirrel,' the merchant's daughter said to herself, looking at the river and seeing a young girl struggling to stay above the surface.

She turned around to see if anyone else was nearby, but there was no one. Ah well, she thought, it's not my problem. The girl was dense enough to fall in the river. Why should I get hypothermia just for her?

However, when the merchant's daughter bent down to pick up another twig, she noticed a purple stain on her hand. It was the same spot that her mother's blood tear had landed on earlier.

'What am I doing?' she asked herself, looking back at the river.

But now there were no screams and no girl.

‘She’s dead already?’

The river stayed still and silent.

‘Not dead?’

The river didn’t answer.

‘She turned into a keel-fish and swam to Albania?’

The river didn’t answer.

‘Gods be damned, this silence.’

The merchant’s daughter dropped the twig and stormed towards the river, jumping in and swimming as fast as she could to the place where the girl had been minutes before.

She dived down three times, and on the third attempt, dragged the girl back to the surface and onto the bank of the river.

‘Why...in...river?’ the merchant’s daughter asked, trying to get her breath back.

The girl crawled to her feet and ran off into the forest.

‘Ungrateful, little wretch...could at least say thank you.’

The merchant’s daughter went back to collecting twigs, half contented that she’d done something good, yet also half annoyed that she hadn’t been rewarded for it.

That turned out to be a premature whine as, the very next day, she looked in the mirror and saw the usual head of white hair...minus one.

Unsure if she was still half-asleep, she re-counted, twice, three times, four times, but eventually discovered that she'd been right the first time: there was definitely one less strand of white hair on her head.

She sat down on the floor and tried to think what she'd done the previous day that might've eliminated it.

There were three things that stood out:

She'd cooked a decent plate of pasta.

She'd told a beggar at the market to scrub that shit off his face and get a job.

She'd saved a young girl from drowning.

But...which one was it?

~~~

After thinking about it for a long time, the merchant's daughter realised that, first of all, telling a beggar to go and find a job wasn't actually a very polite thing to say, and, secondly, saving the little girl from drowning was the one good thing she had done in her whole life [excluding all actions before twelve years old as, according to father, those didn't count].

As soon as the merchant's daughter realised this, she ran outside and looked for someone or something to help. If I do at least ten good things a day, she thought, all my white hairs will be gone by the end of the month.

However, there was no one to help outside, everyone was doing the same thing they did every day, existing, so she went into the town and searched for people to help there.

Fortunately, the beggar she'd told to find a job the previous day was still sitting in the same place, between the bin and the fortune teller, so the merchant's daughter ran up to him and asked if he was hungry.

'What?'

'Are you hungry? Do you need food?'

'What?'

'Are. You. Hungry?'

'What?'

She breathed out in rage and frustration, and said one more time, 'are you hungry?'

'What?'

'Food! I'm offering you food, asshole!'

Reaching her [incredibly low] limit, the merchant's daughter started pulling at her own hair in frustration, but, when she saw the white hairs stuck in her hand, she quickly cooled down and asked the fortune teller loitering nearby what was wrong with the beggar.

'He's deaf.'

'Wah, you mean he can't hear anything?'

'Nope. Not a thing.'

‘But...can’t he just read my lips? I have heard that people like him can do that.’

‘He can, if he likes a person.’

‘Are you saying he doesn’t like me?’

The fortune teller shrugged.

‘Ungrateful little-...how does he expect to get any money if he acts like such a-’

‘What?’ said the beggar again.

‘Quiet, wretch.’

‘What?’

‘I’m trying to help you.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t think you’re making much progress,’ said the fortune teller.
‘Perhaps a different approach would be more fruitful.’

‘Such as?’

The fortune teller held out her palm.

‘Venal witch, I’m not interested in your tomfoolery.’

‘Tomfoolery?’

‘Trying to swindle me when I’m endeavouring to help this poor, dirty-...ah, wait, I’ve got it. You can keep your palm to yourself, hag.’

The merchant's daughter ran quickly to a nearby stationery shop and bought a fine-tipped pen and a pad of imported rice paper. Actually, it was quite expensive as paper and pens were a new invention, brought to the town by a Chinese woman called Wu Ding Yan. She was an annoyingly kind and gregarious soul, and, when she heard what the merchant's daughter was using the paper and pen for, offered to join them for dinner.

'Great, I'll pay!' said the merchant's daughter, thinking that paying for two dinners would count as two separate acts of kindness.

'That's very generous of you. Why don't we try that new Italian restaurant in the middle of town?'

'Wah, *Amaroni's*? That's beyond expensive. How about the old potato place?'

'Do you mean the shack where they serve only potatoes?'

'That's the one. Rumour has it their potato chicken is close to edible.'

'Um...actually...I might have other plans for dinner tonight. Maybe next time.'

The merchant's daughter nodded and was about to walk out of the shop when she remembered her white hairs. She turned back and told Wu Ding Yan that the Italian restaurant was fine, 'just don't order the pricey stuff, okay?'

Wu Ding Yan smiled and agreed, watching as the merchant's daughter ran out of the shop. That's a kind, strangely old-looking, young woman, she thought. I hope she meets with good fortune in her life.

The merchant's daughter hurried back to the beggar, wrote down, *are you hungry?* on the paper and showed it to him.

The beggar's eyes became huge, and he jumped up, telling the woman he hadn't eaten in four years.

'Four years? That's ludicrous. How are you alive?'

'What?'

'I said how are you alive after four years of no food?'

'What?'

The merchant's daughter held up a hand and then wrote down her question on the paper. The beggar read it and shrugged.

'Maybe I exaggerated a little. It's more like four hours. But it feels like years.'

'Okay, never mind. We're going to the Italian restaurant tonight.'

'What?'

'Italian resta-...wah, can't you lip read yet?'

'What?'

'Mystic scam-artist said if you liked someone, you could-'

'What?'

'That's not my name,' said the fortune teller, massaging oil onto her palms.

'Quiet, I'm not talking to you.'

‘What?’

The merchant’s daughter turned back to the beggar. ‘Look, you’ve got to stop saying *what*.’

‘What?’

‘It’s deeply annoying...’

‘What?’

‘...and we both know you can lip read what I’m saying.’

‘What?’

‘Ah, forget it.’ She wrote down her sentence on a fresh piece of paper. ‘This.’

‘What?’

She pointed at the words.

‘What’s Italian?’ asked the beggar.

She wrote down *food*.

‘Great, does it have anything to do with potatoes?’

She wrote down *no*.

The beggar suddenly looked unsure, muttering to himself about, ‘potato pie,’ and, ‘potato chicken.’

‘You can eat potatoes tomorrow.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Ah, finally, you can lip read.’

‘What?’

‘You replied to my words, my speech...’

‘What?’

‘...about eating potatoes tomorrow.’

‘What?’

The merchant’s daughter kicked the wall twice, three times then wrote down something in huge, capital letters.

The beggar read it out loud. ‘You’ll eat what I tell you to eat, you annoying lump, or I’ll get a potato and...’ He paused, looking up at the mercurial, white-haired lunatic looming over him like a sapient scaffold. ‘Okay. Italian sounds good.’

~~~

That night, the merchant’s daughter, the beggar and Wu Ding Yan sat themselves down in *Amaroni’s* and, at their host’s insistence, looked at the starter menu. The prices were high, but not prohibitively so, and the portions were close to a full meal, so everyone entered into a joyful mood. In fact, once the first dish was consumed, the beggar even began to lip read, telling the merchant’s daughter he would shelve the word *what* for as long as she desired as no one had ever treated him to dinner before. It was a strange sensation, hearing these words, and, for the first time in her life, the merchant’s daughter didn’t think about doing anything pragmatic or mean to anyone. Not for altruistic reasons, she reassured herself, but for all those white hairs that would disappear the following day.

The next morning, she sat in front of the mirror and examined her hair. Just as she'd expected, there were two white hairs missing, replaced by two new black ones.

'Oh, hair, you beautiful thing!' she sang. 'Soon you'll be as black as coal again and I'll never grow old!'

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Over the next few months, the merchant's daughter continued doing charitable acts and socialising with the people in the town. Soon enough, she had many friends, as well as an incredible lack of white hairs on her head.

Life was full again.

~~~

Many years passed, and even though she didn't have to perform good deeds anymore, she still did them because...well, at some point it must've become habitual.

When Wu Ding Yan's stationery shop ran out of money during the plague, she lent a huge bag of gold to her good friend to help her out. When Old Ken's leg fell off, she paid for a wooden replacement. When the local priest accused the fortune teller of being a witch, she counter-accused him of being a paedophile [it worked!]. There was no insistence on financial compensation as money was not important to her anymore. She had enough to live on and, despite her father's words to the contrary [which were slowly peeling off the walls of her brain], it was frankly more rewarding for her to see the surprise and happiness on other people's faces.

Well, most people's faces.

There still existed some people in the town who were very annoying, and some who were spiteful and vain, just like she used to be. Also, none of them seemed to get white hair as a punishment for their wicked acts, whereas people like the beggar and Wu Ding Yan were starting to sprout a few. Sometimes she would sit on the grass outside her cottage, near where she'd co-murdered a peasant with a fork, and think to herself that the world was truly a vile and merciless place, and couldn't they all do better?

One day, while walking to the market in town, she saw one of those aforementioned spiteful people berating a peasant for nothing more than brushing against his jacket as he strolled past.

The peasant didn't say anything back as he knew that the man was wealthy and hot-tempered, and had a good relationship with the king and queen. Instead, he stared at the ground and let the man kick him in the shins.

When the man had gone, the merchant's daughter walked up to the peasant and gave him two gold coins, telling him to go and spend it at *Amaroni's* with his wife. She also told him that she'd go to the castle herself and talk to the king and queen about that wicked, shin-kicking man.

'You can get into the castle?' the peasant asked, impressed.

'I hope so,' she replied, though she wasn't certain as it had been many years since her father had died and the king and queen had only met her once, at a knife-throwing contest when she was thirteen years old.

Nevertheless, she set off for the castle and, using her family name, was able to get an audience with both of the country's rulers. As she stood before them, she noticed how much they resembled the portraits behind them - handsome, distinguished, kind – which was odd as those paintings had been done years ago.

'My king, my queen,' she said, taking a knee, 'there is a brutish man in town who keeps kicking peasants for no reason. I humbly request that you punish him.'

'For no reason?' asked the king, stroking his bicep.

'None whatsoever, Your Majesty, he just kicks them randomly. He's very cruel.'

'So, you're saying he kicks them for fun?'

'Correct, Majesty. He says the peasants try to steal his jacket, but they don't, they merely brush against it. Actually, I think he walks into the peasants intentionally, just so he has a reason to kick them.'

The king and queen looked at each other, looked stern for a few moments then let out a staggered burst of laughter.

'Your Majesties, what is so funny?'

'Nothing.'

'This man,' the queen said, trying to settle her laughter, 'what is his family name?'

'I believe it is Koch. His family moved here just before my father died.'

‘Oooooooooohh,’ said the king and queen at the same time. ‘Young Robert Koch? He’s one of the wealthiest men in the country.’

‘That doesn’t mean he can kick peasants, surely.’

‘I’m afraid it does.’

‘What? But he’s-’

‘He’s Robert Koch, dear. He could stick a peasant to the wall and throw spears at it if he liked, and we still would not intervene.’

‘But it’s wrong, your majesties.’

‘Perhaps, but this is the way of things. The peasants understand. And, as I remember, your father used to do much worse.’

‘My father...’

‘Oh yes, that’s right,’ said the queen, gripping the king’s forearm, ‘he used to organise the peasant hunts in the forest, didn’t he?’

‘Peasant hunts?’

‘Ah, they were such fun,’ continued the queen, eyes lighting up. ‘What was his method again? Pay the peasant to cut down a tree?’

The king patted his wife on the arm. ‘My love, your memory is poor. He would hire the peasant as a spy, use him once or twice then bring him into the forest at night...’

‘...ah, that’s right. False spy work, very clever.’ The queen looked at the merchant’s daughter again, clapping her hands together like a drum.

‘He tricked the idiot peasant into the forest so that we could hunt the pathetic creature.’

The merchant’s daughter couldn’t speak...in truth, she could barely stand. Her father? Peasant hunts?

‘Maybe, if you’re bored, you could start doing the peasant hunts again. We’ll pay good money, of course, as will others.’

‘What a good idea. Make sure the peasants are young though, the old ones are slow and cumbersome...makes them unbearably easy to hunt.’

The merchant’s daughter managed to get out a shaky, ‘I’ll think about it,’ before bowing and leaving the castle. When she got home, she found a picture of her father and sat staring at it for a long time.

Was it true? Was the man who raised her really a monster?

She remembered that he would often do cruel things, and she would laugh and smile at him for it, but did he really hunt peasants?

Deep down she knew the answer.

The night she’d followed him into the forest, the poor-looking man in the clearing. It wasn’t an informant, it was-

She realised she was crying and quickly wiped away the tears.

Her father had been a wicked man and the only thing he had ever truly loved was his money. And now she could see that the king and queen, rulers of the whole country, were just as reprehensible.

What could be done about it though?

It took a whole day and night of thinking, and staring out the window, and more thinking, and general all-around pensiveness, but finally she conjured up an idea:

Stab the king and queen while they sleep, stab Robert Koch, blame immigrants.

Then, after a few minutes of further thought, she landed on a better idea.

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The next night, the merchant's daughter sent a message to the castle, telling the king and queen that she had considered their proposal and decided that, yes, games were fun, so there would be a brand new peasant hunt that weekend. Their assistants quickly replied that both the majesties would be there, as would some other rich people without hearts.

After double-checking the signatures on the letter, the merchant's daughter went to Wu Ding Yan's stationery shop and told her everything she knew and what she planned to do.

Her only Asian friend shook her head sadly, and replied, 'they are detestable people, it is true, but you will become detestable with them if you follow through with your plan.'

'Will you help me?'

'I cannot.'

'Okay. Fine. Your paper is cheap and useless.'

'Don't say that.'

‘Sorry.’

‘I want to help, but I can’t do what you ask. Please forgive me.’

‘Of course.’

‘As you’re here, would you be interested in some new pencils?’

‘Maybe later.’

‘They just arrived this morning, look. The lead is almost unbreakable.’

The merchant’s daughter shook her head and walked out, going to the beggar’s house and communicating with him in the new thing they’d recently learned called sign language [his voice was getting croaky]. She also told him everything, and at the end asked if he would help her.

‘It is a terrible thing you plan to do,’ he said, using nifty hand-work.

‘To terrible people.’

‘A terrible thing done to terrible people is still terrible. Sorry, I don’t know any synonyms for *terrible* in sign language. But it’s true, it is still terrible.’

‘I know.’

‘However, I owe you everything, including this house, so I will help you.’

‘Thank you, my friend.’

Later that day, the merchant’s daughter went to the castle and asked the tutors of the young prince and the young princess about their students.

‘Did the king send you?’

‘No.’

‘The queen?’

‘No.’

‘Then who did?’

‘I am their old tutor, from when they were infants. I know what they were like then, and I wonder if they have changed.’

‘Well,’ said the tutor, lowering her voice to an almost undetectable whisper, ‘the prince is a difficult child, very devious, though the king and queen don’t seem to mind. However, the princess is better. In fact, she often asks me about the people in the town and how she can assist them when she is queen.’

‘Ah, then they haven’t changed a bit.’

‘Sadly not, in the prince’s case, and he is almost sixteen so there is not much hope that he will correct his ways.’

‘Look,’ said the merchant’s daughter, pulling the tutor closer, ‘I still love them both, so I will bring them their favourite soup this Saturday. Can you give it to them for me?’

‘If it is their favourite, sure.’

She thanked the tutor then left, hurrying back to her house and looking at herself in the mirror.

‘Beautiful black hair,’ she muttered.

~~~

That Saturday, as promised, she delivered two bottles of soup to the tutor at the castle and asked her to give it to them that night. After that, she went into the forest and met the beggar, who was waiting for her by the river.

‘You came,’ he said, hands shaking as he waved to her.

‘Are you nervous, Sila?’ she asked.

‘A little.’

The merchant’s daughter nodded and offered him a bottle of wine from her pocket. ‘Drink this, it’ll calm you down.’

Sila took a sip, then another sip and handed the bottle back, slightly unnerved to see her smiling.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘I’m sorry, my good friend. This is my responsibility alone.’

‘What are you talking ab-...’

Sila fell down onto the grass before he could finish his sentence. The merchant’s daughter bent down and patted his head. At that moment, two guards arrived, followed by the king, the queen, Robert Koch and a few other demons of stolen wealth.

‘Is that it?’ asked the king, pointing at the beggar on the grass.

‘Looks like it’s already dead,’ added the queen.

‘I assure you he is not dead,’ replied the merchant’s daughter, taking several glasses out of a bag and filling them with wine. ‘After we drink, I will wake him and the hunt will begin.’

‘Drink?’ asked Robert Koch, who was looking at the bottle of wine with great suspicion.

‘Yes, it is the finest wine. From Thailand.’

‘Where?’

‘A far away land, famous for its wine.’

‘Well, I will pass on the drinking,’ said Robert Koch. ‘I wish to stay alert for the hunt. I’ve already bet Baron Musk forty gold coins I’ll bag him first. Twenty more on top of that if I chop off his dick. And another five if I eat it.’

‘As you wish,’ replied the merchant’s daughter, drinking from one of the cups.

‘Okay, give me one,’ said the king. ‘It’ll make this more of a party at least.’

‘I’ll have some, too,’ said the queen, holding out a gloved hand.

‘And us,’ said all the other rich people.

The merchant’s daughter passed the wine to everyone and watched them drink. When they’d emptied their cup, they called for the peasant to be woken up and slapped around a bit.

‘Yes, play with it first,’ they shouted.

‘Then tell it what we’re going to do to it later,’ added Robert Koch, smirking cruelly.

As they got down from their horses, the merchant’s daughter walked towards the two guards, saying she needed to get some water from the river to wake him up. As soon as she was past the guards, she stopped, took out two small daggers from beneath her jacket, took a deep, drawn-out breath, pictured her father...then stabbed them both in the back of the neck.

They collapsed hard onto the ground, making such a commotion that everyone turned and stared in frozen bafflement.

‘What is this?’ cried the king, dribbling out Thai wine residue.

‘You’ve slain them!’ added the queen, dropping her glass.

‘This is treason!’

‘Guards, get her...other guards...anyone!’

Before they could say anymore, the whole bunch of them - the king, the queen and the other rich people - started to claw at their throats and cough violently. Blood erupted from their mouths. Legs gave way. Bodies dropped. On the ground, they continued their theatrics, coughing up blood, tearing off strips of flesh from their throats, crawling in child-like circles until, finally, they dropped face first onto the dirt, dead.

‘I have to say, I’m impressed,’ said Robert Koch, stepping over the king’s corpse and pulling out his sword. ‘I assume you poisoned the wine.’

‘Correct.’

‘Well, killing the royal family...I never thought someone as provincial as a merchant’s daughter would attempt an act that bold.’

‘They were cruel people, as are you.’

‘As is the prince.’

‘It is true, the prince is cruel. That is why he is also dead.’

‘You killed the prince?’

‘I did.’

Robert Koch glanced from side to side, checking for hidden cameras, then, when he was sure it was safe, started to laugh. ‘Excellent. Excellent. This gives me an opportunity that I could only have dreamed of...no, not even that. Beyond a dream. Wah, I really must thank you. Perhaps marry you too. You’re not bad looking and your heart is suitably nasty. What do you say?’

‘No.’

‘I could make you queen, little girl.’

‘You will have no opportunity to make anything.’

Robert Koch smirked, pointing the tip of his blade at her. ‘No?’

‘You are dead too.’

‘Yet here I am, still moving.’

The merchant’s daughter shrugged, then pulled a small pipe out of her jacket, held it to her lips and blew on it. A whoosh of air came out, along with a tiny dart.

‘Argh...what was that?’

Robert Koch grabbed his neck and stumbled backwards, towards the river. He tried to regain his balance, but it was too late, the poison in the dart was running through his whole body, and he had no choice but to plunge mouth-first into the river.

The merchant’s daughter stood on the river bank and waited to see if he would float back up to the surface, but he did not.

A short while later, Sila woke from his enforced slumber and rubbed his head. He looked around and saw the gruesome mess of the king and the queen, as well as all the rich people, and started to retch.

‘It’s over now,’ the merchant’s daughter said, making him jump a little.

‘They’re all dead?’ Sila asked, using his hands.

‘Except one,’ she replied, looking back towards the town. ‘Now hurry, we must leave before someone comes.’

~~~

The following day, the merchant’s daughter woke up early and, after rubbing the sleep from her eyes, confronted herself in the mirror. It was neither a surprise nor a disappointment when she saw that all her hair had turned white again.

She combed it as normal, washed her face, brushed her teeth and then went to have breakfast.

After one bite of toast, there was a knock on the door.

‘That was slow,’ she said, getting up and opening the door.

The soldiers waiting outside the house were a little shocked to see such a young woman with completely white hair, but, after blinking a few times, they managed to secure her in chains and take her back to the castle.

The common punishment for murdering the royal family was death, obviously, and the new queen thought for a long time before endorsing it. On one hand, the white-haired woman was a murderer, who had poisoned her parents and her brother. On the other hand, she didn’t seem like an malicious person. In fact, a lot of the townspeople even claimed her to be the kindest person in the whole country.

Of course, she had no real choice, execution was mandatory, but before that dreadful fate, she wanted to meet this *monster* and find out why she’d committed such terrible acts.

Therefore, the night before the execution, she took the hidden staircase to the castle dungeon and stood outside the white-haired woman’s cell.

Speaking in a soft, sympathetic voice, she asked, ‘why did you commit such an act?’

‘No choice,’ replied the prisoner, eyes on the floor.

‘What do you mean? Did someone force you to do it?’

‘My father.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘Dead.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘My father...like your father, and your mother, and your brother, and all the other people I killed...had a cruel heart. He slaughtered peasants for fun, as sport, and escaped punishment for his crimes. I could not allow it to happen again.’

The queen nodded.

‘You knew about your parents?’

‘I know they trembled when they entered the church. And often came home with spots of blood on their cloaks.’

‘Yes, you do know, don’t you?’

The queen stared down at the white-haired woman’s hand resting on the cell door and reached out to touch it. ‘I do not think it is possible to help you now. I’m sorry.’

‘There is no need for *sorry*. I am not afraid to die. Just don’t chop off my head, please. That kind of end has always bothered me.’

‘As you wish.’

‘Thank you, Your Majesty.’

The new queen who, unlike her parents and brother, was indeed a kind and curious person, walked back to her bedroom, deeply troubled.

But what could she do?

Set her free?

Impossible.

The people would riot.

But then what? The white-haired woman may have been a murderer, but she was right, all those she'd killed truly did deserve it, and the kingdom was better off without them.

Yet...

The law was still the law, even a queen couldn't change that.

~~~

The next morning, with the execution site a stark reality in the courtyard below, the queen stood stone still and tried not to faint. She hadn't slept a wink and had eaten nothing for breakfast. Seeing the people below fighting each other to be closest to the scaffold didn't exactly help. Nor did the look of glee on the children's faces.

As the white-haired woman was led to the noose, the parts of the crowd that had been paid by the remaining members of the Koch family booed and threw [oddly-weighted] rotten fruit at her head.

'Kill, kill, kill,' they chanted, though the queen also noticed a lot of the faces were still and silent.

'This woman is sentenced to death for the murder of our beloved king and queen, as well as some of our most notable citizens,' the hangman announced. 'After death, her head will be severed and put on the castle walls as a warning to...well, pretty much all of you.'

The queen coughed, trying to disguise the bile that had risen up from her stomach on hearing the phrase *head will be severed*.

‘The prisoner will have no last words,’ the announcer said, moving behind the white-haired woman and putting her neck in the noose. ‘Ready?’

Just as the hangman was about to kick the chair away from the prisoner’s feet, the queen stood up and shouted, ‘wait.’

The whole crowd, even those who had been bribed, stood in silence. They thought the queen was going to change to chopping off the white-haired woman’s head instead of hanging it, and were getting ready to cheer, but that was what the old queen would’ve done, not this one, for she in fact said, a little nervously at first, ‘citizens...there will be no execution today.’

‘Waaaaa...’

‘In fact, there will be no more executions ever again.’

‘Waaaaaa...’

‘Instead, we will send criminals to a new place called prison. There, we will reform them, if possible. We’ll pass new laws that make this possible.’

‘But...Your Majesty,’ whispered an elderly advisor in her ear, ‘this monster murdered your-’

‘I know what she did.’

‘Well then, shouldn’t we-’

‘It is not our place to kill, Jerry-...I mean...advisor. We are not gods.’

After she'd finished speaking, the crowd murmured a little then slowly dispersed, everyone returning to their work. Some of them were annoyed that they wouldn't get to see any more hangings, but others were happy as some of their relatives had been hung, sometimes for nothing more than loitering too close to the castle gates.

The queen returned to the dungeon and told the white-haired woman that she would remain in the dungeon until the new prison was built, after which she would be transferred there for ten years as punishment for her crimes. However, she would also be allowed out into the town on weekends to continue her charity work, as a form of rehabilitation.

The white-haired woman smiled and, incongruously, shed a tear from each eye. Then a few more. Then a whole train of them.

'What's wrong?' asked the queen. 'I have spared your life.'

'That is not why I'm crying.'

The queen asked again and again why she was really crying but, each time, the white-haired woman refused to tell her. Eventually, the queen gave up and returned to her study, vowing to visit the prisoner at least twice a week for the next ten years, or perhaps eight years if she performed well in evaluations. Yes, that's a good idea, she thought, picking up rice paper and pen. Start with ten years, reduce to eight.

And so, the white-haired woman stayed in the dungeon/prison for the next eight years, her hair remaining the same colour, and when she was released, she returned to her cottage near the forest and had a huge meal with her friends, including Wu Ding Yan and Sila.

And the day after the celebration, she sat down and stared at herself in the mirror, seeing the person she'd hoped to see each day of the last eight years. Picking up a pen and paper gifted to her by Wu Ding Yan, she started to write a story, something she'd kept in her mind for a very long time without realising it; a remembrance of her weird, benevolent mother.



## **Learn Urdu in Three Seconds, Jinn Guarantee**

The modern city of Quetta may seem calm and tranquil today, yet nearly two centuries ago, it was a hotbed of British skulduggery, anarchist pushback and a foetal form of Indian rap poetry.

Unfortunately, the British were the dominant of these three strains at that time, and had avaricious [and watery] eyes on the opium fields of neighbouring Afghanistan. To position themselves, they built up the small outpost of Quetta into a bustling mega city full of gambling dens, tea houses and English as a Second Language Centres. As was common practice in their other colonies, they utilised the latter as a tool to make locals bow to their pasty rule, encouraging all learners to begin conversations with, ‘well, I dare say...’ and end them with, ‘an excellent idea, Master.’

It was a cunning, albeit generic plan and worked well until, one day, the Commissar of the region came into an early morning conference and started spouting fluent Urdu.

‘Is that French?’ asked one of his peers.

‘... ..’

‘German?’

‘... ..’

‘My god, it’s not one of those bush tongues, is it?’

‘... ..’

The string of Urdu was endless and the Commissar was immediately taken, with a bag over his head, to the nearest BRITS ONLY clinic, where the doctors used the latest cutting edge medicine bucket to submerge his head in ice water for two hours.

Alas, it produced mixed results. The Urdu did stop, but so did the Commissar.

‘I suppose I’ll have to take over the post,’ said the bored and unemployed Lord Tippington, putting a glove over the deputy Commissar’s mouth. ‘At least until the next guy arrives.’

‘What shall we tell the people?’ asked Tippington’s aide, Corporal Kabal.

‘Nothing. Which ones?’



‘The residents of Quetta. They may be concerned about their dear leader.’

‘Ah, good point. Tell them he died as he lived, with ten Afghans at his feet.’

‘Sorry, Sir?’

‘Now, the matter of his strange tongue. I want to know what that gibberish was and where he picked it up from.’

‘It was Urdu, Sir, the regional language.’

‘Wah, you mean he went native?’

‘I don’t think so. Most locals have extremely low tolerance for that kind of thing, especially from whiteys as they tend to hog the narrative. In fact, a lot of the anarchists would cut out his tongue the moment he attempted *hello* in Urdu, let alone, *I’ve been thinking of joining you.*’

‘Then find me the real reason. And fast.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘And shoot anyone who uses *whitey*. It’s hurtful.’

‘Understood.’

~~~

Corporal Kabal ventured out into the streets and alleys of Quetta and tried his best to accomplish the task given to him.

However, it was tough.

Despite being an Urdu speaker himself, no one wanted to talk to him. Some even called him an Oreo. Others spat at the ground by his feet, and then spat at his feet too when they saw that they'd missed.

All in all, it was a depressing experience, which is why he took a break after the first forty minutes, ducking into a random teahouse and instantly falling in love with the waitress serving him biscuits.

'How have I never seen you before?' he asked, his hand reaching for hers.

'Poor eyesight?'

'Ha, you joke even though you are a] a girl, b] a waitress and c] both simultaneously.'

'What do you want, Oreo?'

'Ah, I see. Based on your attitude and the way you're glaring at me, I will assume you are an anarchist. Ordinarily, I would take you in for questioning, but that would mean the other guards getting a turn too, therefore, I will, as an alternative, take you as my own personal mistress. Starting now, in that store room over there.'

'Sorry, pig, I've already got a partner.'

'Who? Where?'

'If I were you, I'd leave before they do the same thing they did to the last guy who tried to manoeuvre me into the store room.'

'And what would that be?'

‘Fluent Urdu, of course.’

Corporal Kabal froze, then slowly put the pieces together. The Commissar must’ve somehow come to this place, in brownface and turban no doubt, seen the beauty of the waitress and...been taught instant Urdu? No, it was too strange. There must be some drug they had, something that polluted the mind...

Standing up to full height, Kabal told the waitress he would be back promptly then left.

‘There’s no rush,’ she answered, eyes flashing lilac.

~~~

An hour later, with six heavily sunburnt, British guards propped up behind him, Corporal Kabal re-entered the tea house and told the waitress to bring out her boyfriend or be whipped naked on the spot.

‘Not in the store room?’

‘Insolent wench. I will do it myself.’

Kabal grabbed the whip from one of the men then charged over to the waitress and ripped off her shirt.

Unfortunately, there was another shirt underneath, so he tried the same thing again, and again, and again, and again, until he threw his hands up in despair and cried, ‘woman, where is your skin?’

‘In a secure place,’ she replied, moving over to the counter and pouring out some tea from a purple vase.

As soon as the last drop was out, the whole room rapidly filled with steam, and the six guards started to cough uncontrollably. Kabal put his sleeve over his mouth, but he, too, couldn't stop it seeping through, and soon enough he had joined them.

'High enough yet?' asked the waitress, as the mist finally began to clear.

'What on Earth kind of tea was that?' shouted Kabal, moving forward and seizing her by the wrist.

'Urdu, please.'

'... ..'

'That's better.'

'... ..?' asked Kabal, putting his fingers to his lips in shock as the wrong language kept coming out.

'Don't be ashamed,' the woman said, patting him on the shoulder. 'It's your native tongue.'

'... ..'

'And those fine men you brought along, they now have a new language to impress people with.'

Kabal turned, confused at her words, and listened as the six British guards shouted at each other in note perfect Urdu.

'... ..' he said, spinning back round and grabbing her throat.

'Don't worry, it is permanent.'

‘... ..!’

The waitress smiled and gently removed Kabal’s hand from her throat, then led him past the chairs and into the store room.

‘A second gift, for your persistence.’

~~~

A day later, Corporal Kabal stood in front of Lord Tippington, the dark stain from his crotch wound bleeding out for the third time onto his military trousers.

‘What on Earth happened to you, man?’

Kabal opened his mouth and paused...then shut it tight again.

‘Well? Speak!’

He shook his head, a tear rolling down his eye.

‘Speak or I’ll have you shot for insubordination.’

Looking at the two guards standing cold-eyed at the door, Kabal took a deep breath and then spoke.

‘... ..’

‘Excuse me?’

‘... ..’

‘Not you, too?’

Kabal nodded, realising that after living in Quetta for seven years, Lord Tippington hadn’t even bothered to learn basic Urdu words like

want to, have to, woman, attack etc, and that the only way out of this was to hope he had enough brains to ask for a translator.

~~~

It turned out to be a forlorn hope, as Corporal Kabal was taken for bucket therapy at the local clinic, while Lord Tippington himself decided to investigate the matter of the mysterious Urdu outbreak.

After walking around the local British sector and barking arbitrarily at indentured servants, he finally took the advice of one of his aides, and retraced the steps of Corporal Kabal during the previous day.

Before long, he found himself in the same teahouse, sitting in front of the same waitress, telling her matter-of-fact that, although he couldn't house her, or take her back to England at any point, he would keep her as a plaything until she either turned thirty or her breasts started to sag.

'A finer offer you will not find,' he boasted, picking up the purple cup and sipping some of the tea within.

'Sounds great apart from the details,' she replied, winking at one of the four guards standing behind.

'An English speaker too. Excellent. It's settled then. And unless my eyes mistake me, that is a store room back there, is it not?'

'Store room, theory lounge, castration chamber...'

'Yes, yes, stop blathering nonsense and get inside. I'll give you two minutes to remove the grubby work uniform then I'm coming in.'

'How about some special tea first?'

‘No need for formalities, we’ve already made the arrangement. You have your prize.’

The waitress nodded and walked off into the store room, closing the door behind her. Lord Tippington sat down and ordered one of the guards to count out two minutes, then started muttering to himself. It wasn’t clear exactly what he was saying, but some snippets leaked out, such as *her fault, not mine* and *it’s bigger with the lights out*.

When the two minutes were up, Lord Tippington rose to his feet, told his guards not to hover near the store room door and walked forward to his erotic rendezvous.

As soon as the door was closed behind him, the same steam from the day before drifted out from the counter and covered the room. The four guards coughed and fumbled around with their weapons and finally cried out, ‘what the hell happened?’ in flawless Urdu.

‘... ..?’

‘... ..’

‘... ..’

The conversation continued, all four men wandering around the teahouse in shock and bafflement at each other’s words, until finally they remembered their boss was in the store room and decided the best course of action would be to ask him.

Yet, as they approached the store room, the door opened suddenly and the waitress emerged, a line of rope clutched in her hand.

‘Ah, gentlemen...I’d like to show you my new pet,’ she said in her native Urdu, tugging on the leash and bringing the dog forward. ‘I’ve just been training him in the Education Centre.’

All four men gasped as they looked into the eyes of the dog and...those same eyes...were the spitting image of Lord Tippington’s...right down to the sickly yellow residue in the corner pockets.

‘Would you like to give him a rub?’

~~~

Weeks after the disappearance of Lord Tippington, a new Commissar finally arrived at the city of Quetta and immediately set to solving the puzzle of the Urdu speaking guards.

As far as he’d been told, a small, out-of-the-way teahouse was the common link between all the victims, though neither his predecessor nor his subordinates had thought to use a translator on the poor souls in order to get firmer intel.

‘I want to know exactly who works there and what it is they do before anyone else steps foot inside, is that clear?’

The new aide nodded and left, taking eight guards with him.

‘Now for some tea,’ said the new Commissar to himself, pulling on the nearby string.

A few seconds later, the door opened and a serving woman walked in, carrying a tray with two cups and a purple jug that already had steam rising out of it.

‘By god, that was quick,’ said the Commissar, staring first at the jug and then the cleavage behind it as the woman bent down to pour.

‘Tea is my life, Commissar,’ she replied, a glint of purple in her eyes.



浦島太郎
 海へいって
 龍宮へ
 行って
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Urashima Tarō

A long time ago, in a tiny village on the coast of Japan, there lived a young man called Urashima Tarō.

He was tall, strong, handsome etc., all the qualities people seemed to expect from stories like these, though as a counter-weight, he was also quite stupid.

Luckily, there was little need for brains where he lived, and therefore no consequences. Apart from the time he'd put his mother's savings in a bottle and pushed it in the general direction of Nigeria.

But that was a one-off, and his mother was more than willing to let him compensate for this by giving her a seventy percent cut of his salary for the rest of his working life. Plus a ten percent protection fee for his father.

It was a fair deal, as long as he could find work.

Could he?

Well, his village was so tiny that the only two jobs available to graduates were fishing at sea and waitressing in *Genki Sushi*, and as Urashima Tarō was built like a tank, he decided to work as a fisherman. It was sales-dependant - the fishmongers were constantly finding faults to lower the price – but, generally, it was a well-paid job, without a boss *and* he was quite skilled at it.

What exactly was the life of a fisherman?

Actually, not that dissimilar to that of a debt collector or an investment broker.

Each day, he would go out on his little rowing boat with his equipment and try to murder naively curious fish. Probably suicidal fish, too. And nihilistic fish. And *follow the crowd* fish. All kinds of fish, if he'd cared enough to ever analyse it.

He would cast his net into the sea, attach it to the side of the boat to prevent it drifting away, then sit back against his oars and stare up at the sky [and sun].

If phones had been invented at this time, he would've passed the time with *Castlevania* speed runs on YouTube, but they hadn't, so all he had were the clouds and the endless stretch of sea around him.

Around 3pm, he would take his net back in and return to the village, where he would sell any fish he'd caught that day. Then he would go back home and eat dinner with his family, which was, in fact, just his mother and father.

Every evening, their conversation would go something like this:

Mother: did you catch a lot of fish today, dear?

Urashima Tarō: A few.

Mother: That's good.

Urashima Tarō: Yeah.

Father:

It was quite a repetitive life, but they loved each other and it was better than arguing all the time. Besides, what else could they do? Leave the village? Work for *Genki Sushi* in Osaka?

That would be insane, as well as disrespectful to his family, and leaving his mother and father like that was something Urashima Tarō would never [dare to] do. Besides, if he didn't hand over their cut of his salary, they'd call in the debt collectors. And tell the local papers that he'd tried to send money to a Nigerian Prince.

No, no, he loved his parents too much to do that to them.

~~~

One day, as Urashima Tarō was walking back home, feeling typically numb about all the fish he'd caught that day [two, with one already dead when it was caught], he came across a group of teenagers beating up a turtle.

He immediately took off his t-shirt and flexed his muscles, but the teenagers were too busy hitting the poor turtle with a stick to notice or care. It was actually quite brutal, even for a Japanese fairy tale; they were

smacking the turtle so hard that you could almost hear the poor creature crying in pain.

Now, despite his muscles, Urashima Tarō was a gentle and compassionate guy, and loathed seeing animals being mistreated [apart from fish, obviously], so he strode forward and ordered the teenagers to stop.

‘Fuck off, fatty.’

‘What?’

‘It’s our turtle, go find your own.’

‘But you’re hitting the poor thing.’

‘Yeah! What else are we gonna do with it?’

‘Stroke it. Feed it. Take it back to the sea.’

‘That’s boring.’

‘Yeah, hitting’s better,’ added a smaller kid, giving the turtle another whack to prove it.

Urashima Tarō knew that he could probably overpower the teenagers as he was stronger than them, but he didn’t want to hurt anyone. Instead, he came up with a plan.

‘Hey guys, if I give you my t-shirt and some cash, will you hand over the turtle?’

‘How much cash?’

‘100 yen.’

‘More.’

‘200 yen.’

‘More.’

‘300 yen.’

‘More.’

‘Come on guys, I’m not rich.’

‘More.’

‘Okay. 350 yen.’

‘What happened to 400 yen?’

‘Okay, 400 yen.’

‘More.’

The negotiations continued like this for another hour before all of them finally agreed on a total of 1600 yen. Urashima Tarō realised that giving away this much money would mean his family could only eat one noodle a day for a month, but as long as he could save this cute turtle, it was okay. So, he handed over both the money and his t-shirt to the teenagers.

‘Hey, we don’t want this,’ said one of the teenagers, throwing the t-shirt on the ground. ‘It fucking stinks.’

‘But I washed it last week.’

‘Actually, we’ve decided that this turtle is too valuable to give away so cheaply. We’re raising our price to 2000 yen.’

‘What?’

‘You heard, fatty. Hand over the cash, or we start beating the turtle again.’

‘But-’

‘Cash. Hurry up.’

Urashima Tarō scratched his head, wondering when teenagers had become so aggressive. Why weren’t they gentle and compassionate like he had been when he was younger? In fact, the more he thought about it, the angrier he got, and decided that the best way to teach them a lesson was to punch the loudest teenager in the face and throw him in the river.

And that’s exactly what Urashima Tarō did.

After that, the other teenagers were so frightened that they gave back the money and the turtle and said, ‘sorry, we didn’t realise you were allowed to hit us.’

‘I only hit one of you. And only as a warning. I’m a nice guy really.’

‘Hiro still hasn’t come back up,’ said one of the teenagers, staring at the surface of the river.

‘Who?’

‘Really, there’s no sign of him. None. Not even a hair.’

Urashima Tarō pictured a sword and chopping block, nodded at nothing, quickly dived into the river and, after half a minute underwater,



managed to pull the annoyingly loud teenager out, placing him gently on the riverbank.

‘There you go, everyone’s a winner,’ said Urashima Tarō.

‘He’s not breathing.’

‘Give him a second.’

‘You killed him.’

‘No.’ Urashima Tarō looked at the loud teenager’s oddly blue face and repeated *no* quietly.

‘You need to give him air.’

‘What?’

‘With your mouth, breathe on him.’

‘That will work?’

‘Of course, we do it on Yuki all the time.’

‘Who?’

‘Quickly, he’s dying.’

Despite not believing a word the little shits were saying, Urashima Tarō bent down, opened the loud teenager’s mouth and breathed in air. It took a few attempts but, eventually, the kid spurted river sludge up into his face and crawled away.

‘See, he’s okay,’ said Urashima Tarō.

‘No, he’s not, he’s been molested.’

‘Mo what?’

‘Give us back the cash or we go to social services.’

‘But I didn’t-...I was just-...you told me to do it.’

‘The cash, paedo.’

Urashima Tarō clenched his fist and thought about going to work on all of them, but deep down, he knew they’d got him. In a village like this, being a paedophile was a career killer. In the entertainment industry, maybe he could survive it, but here...not a chance.

‘Fine, take it,’ he said, handing over the money. ‘But if you ever try to extort me again, I’ll put you all in the river.’

‘Okay, paedo.’

The teenagers walked away and left Urashima Tarō with the turtle. ‘I’m sorry, little guy, you took a lot of hits today. Kids are usually nicer than that.’

The turtle didn’t say anything, so Urashima Tarō picked it up and carefully took it back to the shore. As the turtle trotted into the waves, it looked back. Urashima Tarō waved and then the turtle was gone.

‘Well, at least I know what I did,’ Urashima Tarō muttered to himself as he walked back to his house, trying not to think of his parent’s reaction to eating one noodle a day for a month.

~~~

The next day, while Urashima Tarō was out fishing, a turtle appeared at the side of the boat and, to the young fisherman's surprise, spoke in N1 level Japanese to him.

‘Are you the one who saved the turtle yesterday?’ it asked.

‘You can speak?’

‘Are you that guy, yes or no?’

‘Yes, I saved a turtle yesterday. How do you know about it?’

‘That turtle was actually a princess from the sea kingdom of...I forget the name...but there's only one sea kingdom, so you can just say, ‘sea kingdom,’ people will know what you mean.’

‘I've heard rumours of a sea kingdom, where everything is coral-built and beautifully designed, and all the people radiate joy and benevolence.’

‘Err...yeah. We're all very benevolent. Now, as a reward for saving the princess yesterday, I've been ordered to take you to the sea kingdom on my back.’

‘But...your back is tiny.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Look again, dummy.’

Suddenly, right before Urashima Tarō's eyes, the turtle's back became ten times larger and, at the sides, two little handles appeared. And then a seatbelt too.

‘Get on, it's swimming time.’

‘But...how can I travel underwater? I'm human, not a fish.’

‘I don't know, hold your breath?’

‘For how long?’

‘About an hour.’

‘Wah! That's impossible.’

‘No, it isn't. Hop on.’

‘I'm serious. I can do about two minutes then I'll drown.’

The turtle grunted, annoyed. ‘Okay. Let me just sprinkle this magic powder on you and you'll be fine.’

‘Magic powder?’

‘Yes, magic. Please don't ask me to list the ingredients.’

‘What's in it?’

The turtle grunted again.

‘Sorry, it's just I've never seen magic powder before. Are you sure it can protect me?’

‘It'll be a pretty pointless story if you drown after two minutes, so yeah, I'm sure.’

Urashima Tarō didn't feel so confident, but he trusted the turtle he'd never met before and, therefore, let himself be sprinkled with magic powder. After feeling a slight tingling sensation all over his body, he got on the turtle's back and held his breath until his face turned purple.

'We're still on your boat, dummy.'

'I'm practising,' he projected telepathically, before finally letting out all the air. 'Breathing will still take place, right?'

'Yeah, but the water won't go in.'

'I don't understand. How is that possible?'

'No need for understanding. You hear it, you believe it, it works. Now sit back and enjoy the ride. Try not to fall off.'

Without waiting for Urashima Tarō's reply, the turtle dived under the waves and swam quickly down into the deep, blue sea. Urashima Tarō was a bit scared at first, especially when everything became a lot darker, but he soon realised that he wasn't going to die, breathing turned out to be quite easy, and the darkness was brightened by lights hanging from sunken buoys.

The turtle kept swimming, showing no signs of fatigue, yet Urashima Tarō couldn't help but shut his eyes after about an hour. Something was making him sleepy, possibly the magic powder, and soon he was fast asleep, dreaming of the sea kingdom and a half turtle princess with tiny shell bikini and fisherman fetish.

~~~

When he woke up, he found himself in a room enclosed by a window the size of *Genki Sushi*. Outside, he could see the sea in all its exotic glory; hundreds of colourful fish, strangely lilac trees, buildings that looked like coral plants. The only reason he knew they were, in fact, buildings was because of the doors and windows and people going in and out at all levels.

‘Is this Osaka?’ he said to himself, rubbing his eyes and looking down at the bed he was lying in. The sheets were made of silk, the pillows were impossibly soft, and the headboard looked like a giant oyster shell. ‘Or a resort hotel in Okinawa?’

‘No, silly fisherman, this is the sea kingdom,’ said a soft, feminine voice from the other side of the room.

‘Waa...who’s there?’

‘I’m Princess Bukito. You were fortunate enough to save me yesterday, so I have brought you here as a reward.’

‘I’m in a bed.’

‘Yes, it is my bed. Actually, it will be our bed tomorrow, after we are married.’

‘Married?’

‘Yes, what’s wrong with that?’

‘I can’t marry you. I don’t even know you. It’s crazy.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, was there someone else you were planning on marrying?’

‘Not at this moment, but...maybe, one day. When I meet the right person.’

‘Will she be more beautiful than me?’

‘No, probably not. But my mother always said marriage is more about personality and love, not looks.’

‘Wrong. Marriage is about marrying someone beautiful like me and then being lucky enough to stare at my face forever. For two minutes each day. Anything more than that is annoying.’

‘What about when we have arguments?’

‘I will not start any arguments.’

‘But...what if we disagree about something?’

‘You plan to disagree with me?’

‘No, but-’

‘Great. The wedding will be at 11am tomorrow. Don’t bother looking for your t-shirt, it will not be required.’

‘Err...’

‘I like looking at your muscles.’

Urashima Tarō didn’t know what to say, so he pretended to be sleepy.

‘Hey, don’t go back to sleep. I want to show you the sea kingdom. Get up, come on.’

Urashima Tarō climbed out of the bed and started to put on his clothes.

‘Hey, no t-shirt, remember?’

‘Won’t it be cold outside?’

‘It’s fine, I never feel cold.’

‘What about me?’

‘You’ll be fine, too. Come on.’

Princess Bukito led Urashima Tarō out of the room and into the towers of the sea palace. The view was amazing, with luscious sea everywhere and the most distinctive coral gardens that any human had ever seen down below. Some of the fish that swam by the windows looked at Urashima Tarō strangely, like he was a criminal, but most of them had an inane smile on their faces.

Urashima Tarō tried to remain aloof, but after ten minutes of strained facial muscles he could contain himself no longer. ‘Your kingdom is such a wondrous place, much more impressive than my village. I love it.’

‘Ah, so now marrying me is not so bad, huh?’

‘I admit, I have no ground for complaints. You appear to be very kind and friendly.’

‘It’s true. Would you like to meet my parents?’

‘Err...right now?’



‘Sure.’

‘They are nearby?’

‘Next door or a light year away, doesn’t matter.’ Princess Bukito pressed a button and a few minutes later, a frail-looking, old man and marginally less frail, old woman spilled into the room, both out of breath.

‘You called...dear,’ said the king, panting like a dog.

‘Dad, this is my new husband. He saved me yesterday when I was a turtle. His arms are massive.’

‘Nice to meet you, son.’

‘His name’s Urashima Tarō.’

‘Nice to meet you, Urashima Tarō,’ said the king and the queen in chorus.

The four of them shook hands and smiled performatively at each other for a few seconds, before the princess started to look bored.

‘Okay, leave now.’

‘Yes, dear.’

The king and the queen walked quickly out of the room and, when they were gone, the princess turned to Urashima Tarō and said, ‘parents are so annoying.’

‘My parents are great.’

‘No, they’re not.’

‘How can you be so certain? Have you met them?’

‘All parents are annoying. Believe me.’

‘But mine aren’t, they’re-’

‘Are you disagreeing with me, husband?’

‘No, I’m just saying-’

‘I don’t like arguments.’

‘Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I was just trying to explain that-’

‘Let’s go and see the Museum of Evil,’ said the princess, taking Urashima Tarō’s hand and leading him out of the palace, across the seabed and into a building that looked like a haunted house.

‘This place is so cool, definitely one of my favourites.’

‘What’s in here?’

‘Everything evil in the world.’

‘Sounds dangerous.’

‘Not really. Evil is no match for the people of the sea kingdom. Look.’

The princess clapped her hands and, all of a sudden, the room lit up. Surrounding Urashima Tarō were the skeletons of long dead humans, all of them hanging bent in the air like constipated ghosts. He was so shocked that he couldn’t help but let out a small cry, especially when he saw that not all the bodies were skeletons. Some of them had only recently been put up.

‘Don’t be scared, they’re all dead.’

‘Why?’

‘They were all evil, silly.’

‘Evil?’

‘It is an apt word. These monsters slaughtered innocent fish citizens of the sea kingdom and attempted to beat us to death when we went onto the land disguised as turtles.’

Urashima Tarō fell silent, realising he had killed a lot of fish in his life.

‘Actually, those teenagers that beat me up yesterday, they’ll be in here soon. If we can find them. We’re having a bit of trouble locating their addresses. You don’t know where they live do you?’

Urashima Tarō shook his head.

‘Never mind. We’ll find them eventually. Hey, you wanna see the canteen?’

‘Princess...I have to confess something.’

‘Don’t worry, I know.’

‘You know what?’

‘That you’ve killed a lot of fish. But, luckily for you, you also saved my life, and that’s why you get to be my husband and live here forever.’

‘Thank you, princess.’

‘And you get to look at my beautiful face every day. For two minutes.’

‘You are very beautiful.’

‘Of course, I’m royalty, silly.’

Urashima Tarō gazed at the princess, realising that his words were true. She was incredibly beautiful, and he was sure that if he got to know her better, he’d fall in love with her too.

And if he didn’t...

~~~

The next day, in accordance with the princess’s wishes, the two were married. The ceremony was intended to run for four hours with musical interludes, but the princess got tired of signing papers and ended it after twelve minutes.

The happily married couple returned to the palace tower, and Urashima Tarō carried his wife to the sofa and began kissing between her thighs just like those actors did in the back alley play he’d watched in the village one time.

‘I’m bored,’ said the princess, pushing his head away.

‘Already?’

‘What can we do now?’

‘Penetration?’

‘Ugh. Too much effort. No tissues.’

‘Err...take a walk in the sea gardens?’

‘I did that yesterday.’

‘Okay. We could go swimming.’

‘I live in the sea, dummy.’

‘Then I am out of ideas. What would *you* like to do?’

‘Ah, I know. We can go and take a walk in the sea gardens.’

‘Okay.’

‘Can you carry me again?’

‘To the gardens?’

‘Can you?’

‘It’s a long way.’

Princess Bukito turned her smile upside down and began to growl.

‘Okay, here we go.’

Urashima Tarō lifted her up and carried her down the thirty-seven floors of the palace tower, all the way to the sea gardens.

‘See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?’ said the princess, patting him on the head.

‘Give me a moment,’ said Urashima Tarō, panting.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Tired...’

‘I thought you were strong?’

‘I am...quite strong...but it was nearly forty flights of stairs. I’m not Saitama-San.’

‘Hmm. Sounds like you’re complaining.’

‘I’m not, it’s just-’

‘I don’t like people who complain.’

‘My arms were-’

‘People who complain often end up in there.’ The princess pointed towards the Museum of Evil. ‘You’re not complaining though, are you?’

‘No, princess. I’m fine. Very happy.’

‘Good.’

~~~

Over the next few days, Urashima Tarō continued his tour of the sea kingdom [*sans* t-shirt]. It was all very beautiful, as was his new wife, but part of him missed being at home with his parents.

On the night of the third day, he asked the princess if he could leave and go back home.

‘What, you don’t want to stay here with me forever?’

‘I do, but my parents will be worried. Family is very important in my culture.’

‘Okay, fine, go.’

‘You’re not angry?’

‘Not really, I was gonna ask for a divorce anyway. Or just execute you. Whichever one was faster.’

‘Err...then I guess I will be going now. Bye.’

Princess Bukito got up and pulled out a small box from under the bed. She told him that, although she was sad to see him leave, she would give him the box as a souvenir of their love.

‘That’s lovely. What’s inside?’

‘Something incredible. But you can never open it. If you do, something terrible will happen. Understand?’

‘Something terrible?’

‘That’s right.’

‘And you call this a souvenir of love?’

‘Of course.’ She pointed at a hand-drawn stick figure on the top of the box. ‘See, this is me. Every time you miss my face, or my body, you can look at this. Just don’t open it and you’ll be fine.’

Urashima Tarō nodded and left the palace. He waited a long time for a turtle to appear and when it did, it was quite rude.

‘Where you going, dummy?’

‘Land.’

‘Too far.’

‘Please, I’ll give you some shells.’

‘How many?’

‘10.’

‘More.’

‘20’

‘More.’

‘Okay, wait, not this again. I’ll give you 25 shells and no more.

Okay?’

‘30.’

‘Fine, 30 shells.’

‘40.’

‘Just swim, you green shit. Okay?’

The turtle called him a *pink shit* back then started swimming and, one hour later, Urashima Tarō arrived back on the beach, next to his little fishing boat. He quickly made his way into the village, but it was strange, there were more houses now, and each one looked different from when he’d left three days earlier. He continued on to his parents’ house, but when he got there he saw that it was now something called *KFC*.

He stopped a passer-by and asked him what had happened.

‘Happened to what?’

‘My house...this building.’

‘Your house? Who are you?’



‘My name is Urashima Tarō, and three days ago this was my house.’

‘Ah, I know that name.’

‘My name?’

The man nodded. ‘Where do I know it from though?’

‘Tell me, do you know where my parents are?’

‘Wait a minute...isn’t Urashima Tarō the guy who disappeared 300 years ago?’

‘No, that must be some other guy. I’m Urashima Tarō. I’ve been gone for three days.’

‘Is this a joke?’

‘No, I’m really Urashima Tarō. Tell me, please, what’s happening here? Where are my parents? Why does the village look like the red light district in Shanghai?’

The man told Urashima Tarō he was crazy and walked away. Feeling confused and depressed, Urashima Tarō walked to the village cemetery and found the graves of his parents. The man was right, three hundred years had passed on land, but only three days had passed for him in the sea.

‘What the fuck am I supposed to do now?’

He looked at the box the princess had given him and, ignoring her warning not to look inside, opened it. Maybe it could help him get back

to the sea kingdom and live with her happily for the rest of his life, he thought, with a huge dollop of unearned optimism.

Unfortunately, as soon as he pulled open the lid of the box, Urashima Tarō began to age rapidly, and, within less than five minutes, looked like a very thirsty Kirk Douglas. Another minute after that, he dropped down on the weirdly grey beach, dead as a VHS repair shop.

Nearby, a turtle stubbed out its purple cigarette, shook its thick head, muttered ‘dummy’ then turned and waddled back into the sea.

Welcome to Japanese fairy tales.



## **Pirates of Cheung Chau**

Around two hundred and fifty years ago, on the tiny island of Cheung Chau, there lived a young woman named Chun Ming who was afraid of nothing, not even pirates.

Which was fortunate as pirates were a common sight in those parts.

At certain times of the year.

Staying with her family in a small shack by the beach, Chun Ming helped her parents make their living by warming chestnuts and selling them to locals, tourists and amateur treasure hunters. When business was bad, they would also sell milk powder.

It was a peaceful, slightly prosaic life most of the time, but three or four times a year it would become a living nightmare as that's when the pirates would come.

There weren't many of them, but the ones that did appear were so fierce and sleazy that every time their ships were sighted coming into the

bay, Chun Ming's parents would pack everything up and move swiftly to the bushier side of the island.

Chun Ming was usually forced to go with them, but was always reluctant to do so as she believed it was wrong to let people walk all over you.

So, one day, when a particularly sinister-looking pirate ship was spotted sailing into the bay, its stark, black sails blocking out the sun behind it, she told her parents that, this time, she was staying behind.

'But it's Captain Tin's ship!'

'I don't care.'

'Don't care?' shouted her father, in disbelief. 'They'll brutalise you.'

'They'll make you their wife!' screamed the mother.

'Their love slave!'

'You'll be forced to wear *Esdeath* outfits and lick dry skin off their feet!'

'I won't let them do any of that,' Chun Ming assured them, picking up a chopper and swinging it through the air. 'But if you're worried about me, you can also stay behind so that we may repel them together.'

She looked up to see how her parents would answer, but the door was open and they were already halfway down the path.

'Wow, nothing beats familial love,' she said, shaking her head.

~~~


Two hours later, the pirates landed on the beach in their little rowboats, and headed drunkenly up to the main promenade. Usually, they would either pass out/vomit on the beach or inside one of the shacks, and this time was no different.

However, as they made their way to the first shack, they stopped in surprise. 'What's that?' asked the biggest pirate.

'Looks like a girl.'

'What's a girl doing here?'

'Cooking chestnuts,' Chun Ming answered. 'Would you like to buy some?'

'Buy?' laughed the biggest pirate.

Chun Ming raised the chopper, threw a chestnut in the air and cut it in half with one strike.

All the pirates were impressed and a little intimidated, though the biggest pirate, a burly, scruffy-looking man called Chan Ho, was visibly irritated. He walked up to Chun Ming and demanded a whole bag of chestnuts, just for himself.

She put the chestnuts in the bag and held them out to Chan Ho. He smirked, then took the bag and started eating.

'That'll be five dollars.'

'Nope.'

'Five dollars,'

‘Don’t think so.’

‘Five. Dollars.’

‘Silly girl, Chan Ho doesn’t pay for anything.’

Chun Ming grimaced then glanced behind Chan Ho. ‘Are you going to deal with this guy?’ she asked.

Chan Ho followed the girl’s eyes and turned around, but the only people there were the other pirates, who were pointing back at the girl and sniggering.

‘What are you laughing at?’ asked Chan Ho, angrily.

‘You seem lighter,’ said one of them.

‘What?’

The pirate nodded at Chan Ho’s belt, making the burly pirate look down too. To his shock, the money bag had vanished.

He pulled out his sword and spun round, searching in all directions for the thief who’d stolen his cash. But the only thing he saw was the girl counting out coins on the chestnut table.

‘You stole my money!’ shouted Chan Ho.

‘Don’t get cyber. I’m just taking the ten dollars you owe for the chestnuts.’

‘Cyber?! I don’t owe you anything, you-...’ He paused, counting in his head. ‘Wait, ten dollars? You said five before.’

‘It became ten when you were rude to me.’

‘Rude? I’ll show you rude.’

Chan Ho thrust his sword forward, aiming towards the girl’s stomach, which would’ve been horrible and bloody if he’d actually succeeded. Luckily, Chun Ming was as agile as a leopard and managed to not only dodge out of the way, but also swat the sword out of the large pirate’s hand, *and* hit his arm with the blunt side of her chopper.

‘The next time you try to stab me, I’ll use the sharp side,’ she said, before going back to her chestnuts.

Chan Ho was so furious that his face turned red, and he pulled out his gun to shoot the girl dead.

‘That’s enough,’ shouted a voice behind him.

Chan Ho kept his gun straight, but didn’t shoot. ‘She stole my money, Captain. It is my right to shoot her.’

‘Nonsense, I saw everything,’ said Captain Tin [Min Wai], moving in front of the gun and pushing it downwards. ‘You tried to cheat her, and she got the better of you.’

‘Got the better of-...’

‘Enough. Go back to the beach and count sand.’

Chan Ho grumbled and didn’t move, until Chun Ming smirked, took the ten dollars she wanted then threw the bag back to him. He caught it in the air, looked a bit surprised then walked off towards the beach with the other pirates.

Captain Tin, a pirate of renowned cunning and ruthlessness, turned back to Chun Ming and asked for a bag of chestnuts.

‘That’ll be five dollars.’

‘I know.’

Chun Ming took some chestnuts, put them in a bag and handed them to Captain Tin, who gave her five dollars in return.

‘You are a brave girl to stay here,’ Captain Tin said, trying a chestnut. ‘Everyone else, except that lunatic geriatric by the temple, runs away to the bushier side of the island.’

‘They are scared of you.’

‘And you’re not?’

‘I’m not scared of anything.’

‘Really? And how much have you seen of the world?’

‘Nothing more than this beach and this island.’

‘Well, then let me tell you...there are an infinite variety of scary things out there, young one. North Koreans with strange haircuts, orange men who say, ‘believe me,’ white people attempting rap. Perhaps you’d still be brave, perhaps not. Who knows?’

‘I told you, I’m not afraid of anything, white rap or orange people.’

Captain Tin ate another chestnut. ‘Why don’t we find out?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m adding you to my crew. Pack up your stuff, bring some of these chestnuts and wait on the beach at sunrise tomorrow morning. That’s when we’re leaving.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘That is your right. But I warn you, no one has ever refused an offer to join my crew.’

‘You mean I have to join?’

Captain Tin smiled, throwing a chestnut in the air and catching it. ‘Don’t be silly, I’m not a tyrant.’

‘I’m confused. You said no one ever refuses an offer to join your ship.’

‘I said crew, not ship. And yes, no one has ever refused. But they had a choice. They just didn’t like the alternative.’

‘What does alternative mean?’

Another chestnut in the air, this time caught on Captain Tin’s tongue...then spat out on to the sand. ‘In this context, the other choice.’

‘Which is what?’

‘Nothing too bad, not for a brave girl like you.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Very well. If you refuse me, the next time we sail into this bay, I’ll let Chan Ho take you as his wife. Then, when he’s tired of you, we’ll watch him strip you bare and throw you into the sea.’

'I'd kill him before ever did that!'

'Not if I cut your hands off first,' said Captain Tin, smiling.

'Wow, you're even worse than he is.'

'Of course, silly girl. If I weren't, I wouldn't be captain, would I?'

Chun Ming glared at Captain Tin as she walked back to the beach and joined the rest of her crew. There was no way she was going to join those evil pirates, but if she didn't, what would she do the next time they came? Run away? Never. Fight? There were too many of them, and they had guns. She'd never win.

~~~

That night, Chun Ming slept in her shack with the door locked and waited for sunrise. When it finally came, she got up, went to the side of the beach and started cooking her chestnuts.

When Captain Tin and the pirates woke up, they saw her and waited for her to come down to the beach, but Chun Ming didn't move.

Finally, they got into their rowboats and left, with Chan Ho waving and groping his crotch at her as they went.

As soon as the pirate ship was out of sight, the others came back, including Chun Ming's parents. They asked if she was okay, if the pirates had done anything to her, but she stayed silent, which made them think the worst.

'Poor, silly girl,' said her mother, checking the shack for anything stolen.

'Next time we'll tie her up and take her with us.'

Chun Ming overheard all this from her room and, after punching the wall, changed her mood setting to implacable determination.

This was her house, her island, and those pirates would have to find someone else to pick on.

~~~

During the next few months, Chun Ming tried several ways to prepare for the pirates. She knew that she wouldn't hide or run away, so the best option left to her was to set traps and fight.

The problem: she had no gun. She didn't know how to make traps. No one else knew how to make traps. No one else on the island had a gun.

The best she could do was practise with a sword, but it was still no good as, even if she did beat one of them in a sword fight, the others could just pull out their guns and shoot her.

When the mid-autumn festival approached, she started to get nervous. The pirates always came to Cheung Chau at that time of year, and if they kept to their routine then they'd be back on the beach within the next three days.

Chun Ming practised again with a sword during the day, while at night, she sat beside her window, alone, staring into the trees nearby.

On the last night before the festival, when the pirates were sure to come, she noticed something in the trees. It looked like a fox, but it

couldn't be, it was standing on two legs and gesturing with its paw for her to come closer.

She rubbed her eyes, believing herself to be dreaming, but, when she looked again, the fox was still there, and now it was shouting something at her.

'Come here, you fool.'

The word *fool* made Chun Ming so enraged that she grabbed her jacket and marched over to the trees, but when she got to the place where the fox had been, it was gone.

She looked around, but there was no sign of the beast.

Suddenly, a chestnut dropped on her head.

'Hey,' she said, looking up and seeing the fox. 'Why'd you do that?'

'Accident,' the fox said.

'Well, don't do it again.' She looked at the fox's feet, noticing a pair of small shoes. 'What are you?'

'I'm a fox. And my name is Fox too, so you have no excuse for forgetting it.'

Chun Ming stared at the fox's mouth as if it were a white hole. 'Why can you talk?'

'I don't know. Why can you?'

'How can you speak my language?'

'I studied it.'

‘Where?’

‘Fox college.’

‘Fox what?’

‘Doesn’t matter. The point is...I can help you with your pirate problem.’

‘How did you know about that?’

‘Okay, this could become a very long, very dull conversation. All you need to know is, I know everything, and I can fix your problem.’

‘How?’

‘That’s better. Now listen carefully. When the pirates come tomorrow, I want you to take them to the rocks on the coast over there. When you get there, you will see a crack that leads into a small cave. Inside the cave, it will be very dark, too dark to see anything, and that is where we will fix your problem.’

‘Fix it how?’

‘You’ll see.’ The fox jumped down from the branch it was sitting on and started walking deeper into the forest.

‘Wait,’ cried Chun Ming, pursuing it. ‘How can I get them to follow me to the cave?’

‘That part’s easy. What do pirates love?’

Chun Ming thought about it, remembering Chan Ho’s reaction to losing his bag of gold coins. ‘Money,’ she replied.

‘Correct.’

‘So, I tell them there’s money in the cave?’

But there was no answer as the fox was already gone.

~~~

The next day, the pirate ship was sighted and the people living in the shacks started to pack their things. Chun Ming’s father and mother got some rope and searched for their daughter, ready to drag her along by the hair if they had to, but they couldn’t find her anywhere.

So, they had no choice but to leave with the others and hope she was sensible enough not to get in the way of the pirates.

When everyone had left, Chun Ming came out from the trees and started roasting the chestnuts as usual.

Soon enough, the pirates landed and, with Chan Ho at the front of the pack, hurried up to the girl and her chestnut stand.

‘You are insane!’ they cried.

‘She’s not insane, she’s just dumb,’ said Chan Ho, pulling out his gun and aiming it at her. ‘If she tries to run, I’m shooting her in the leg.’

‘No shooting,’ said Captain Tin, pushing her way to the front of the pirates. ‘Just tie her up, it’s less bloody.’

‘Less interesting too,’ mumbled Chan Ho, only half lowering his gun.

‘I don’t care if you’re interested or not. Now pick her up and get her onto the rowing boat.’

‘We’re leaving already?’

‘No, but I don’t trust her. I’ll feel better when she’s tied up on the ship and heavily outnumbered.’

Chun Ming listened to all this with a calm expression on her face, which made Captain Tin even more suspicious.

‘Okay, little one,’ the captain said, putting one hand on her sword grip. ‘Why are you here?’

‘This is my place of work, I’m always here.’

‘But you knew what we would do with you.’

‘Yes, about that. I’ve actually changed my mind and decided to join your crew.’

‘Ha, too late, wench,’ shouted Chan Ho, finally putting away his gun.

‘He’s right, you had your chance to join and you refused. Why do you think I would let you join now?’

‘Because I have a gift for you.’

‘What gift?’ asked Captain Tin, ditching the sword grip and reaching instead for her gun.

‘Don’t worry, it’s not a trick. I found some treasure in the rocks over there. I thought I could use it to buy my way onto your crew.’



‘Where exactly is this treasure?’

Chun Ming pointed at the rocks towards the west coast of the island, about a mile and a half away. Captain Tin followed her finger, assessing the terrain. It was too far to make out much, but it didn’t seem dense or complex enough to be an ambush.

‘This supposed treasure,’ she said, hand switching back to her belt. ‘Why did you not take it yourself?’

‘I couldn’t, it’s too heavy for me to carry.’

‘You could’ve taken it piece by piece, slowly.’

‘Maybe, but what could I do with it? I’m stuck on this island. You’re my only way off.’

Captain Tin glanced at the other pirates, who all seemed excited about the prospect of more gold, and finally agreed to go over and take a look. ‘But you’re going first,’ she added, pulling out her gun.

‘If you insist.’

‘And if it’s a trap...if I see anyone or anything suspicious, you’ll be the first one shot. Understand?’

Chun Ming nodded.

‘And if she doesn’t shoot you,’ added Chan Ho, tapping his belt, ‘I will. First in the leg, then in the stomach, then in the head.’

Chun Ming didn’t nod a second time, that would’ve been too weird, so she just shrugged and started walking towards the rocks.

The pirates followed, keeping a safe distance of two metres behind the girl at all times. When they reached the rocks, Chun Ming pointed towards a crack. 'It's small, but we can all fit in, I promise.'

'That's where the treasure is?' asked Captain Tin.

'Yes.'

'Okay, but Yute Long goes first. Then you. Then the rest of us.'

'As you wish.'

'And remember, no tricks or I shoot.'

'Yes, I can see the gun.'

The smallest pirate, Yute Long, went first into the crack, calling to the others when he was safely inside. Chun Ming went next, feeling her way into the cave slowly, surprised at how dark it was when she finally got to the bottom.

The other pirates quickly followed after her.

When they were all in, Chan Ho asked where the treasure was, and the only way Chun Ming knew it was Chan Ho was because of the coarseness of his voice. His face was completely covered in darkness, as was everyone else's, leaving the faint colours of their eyes and occasional flashes of their jewellery as the only things visible.

'It's at the side,' she answered, looking back towards the tiny crack of light that showed where they'd come from, waiting for the fox to make its move.

‘Which side?’

‘I can’t see anything.’

‘This side?’

Suddenly, the tiny light from the crack disappeared and the cave turned pitch black.

The Pirates all started swearing immediately, reaching for their swords. Chun Ming heard the metal being pulled out of sheaths, and ducked down instinctively.

‘Everyone stop swearing,’ shouted Captain Tin.

‘We’re trapped.’

‘There’s no way out.’

‘Shut up.’

‘You shut up.’

‘No, you shut up.’

‘Everyone who’s not me shut up,’ shouted Captain Tin again.

As the pirates argued with each other, Chun Ming tried to figure out what had happened. It didn’t take long to come up with the answer. The fox had tricked her, probably so it could steal the pirates’ treasure. There was no other explanation. Unless the fox was just being cruel for the fun of it.

Right, she thought. When I get out of here, I’m gonna murder that treacherous fox. First in the leg, then in the stomach, then in the head.

As she planned it out, she also realised that someone was touching her leg. Then a voice whispered to her, 'I know it's you, little one.'

Ah, Chan Ho, she thought. The brute's not even waiting.

It was true, he really wasn't, his hand moving up her thigh and onto a part of her that only she was allowed to touch. Well, maybe Yan Yan could touch it too, sometimes, if she asked nicely. But definitely not this filthy, barbarian wretch.

Without thinking, she reached for a random rock and swung it upwards. There was a groaning noise, then a scream, then silence.

'What was that?' asked Captain Tin, from the other side of the cave.

'Nothing,' responded Chun Ming, dropping the rock.

'Someone got hurt, I heard it.'

'Nope, it was my stomach.'

All of a sudden, a light appeared. It was an orange flame on the end of a candle.

'Okay,' said Captain Tin, holding the candle against a piece of wood on the floor of the cave, 'let's see what's going on here.'

The light from the fire on the wood spread around the cave, showing all the pirates, Chun Ming and the lifeless body of Chan Ho on the ground, with a thick stream of blood dribbling out of his head.

'Who did that?' muttered one of the pirates.

‘Not me,’ said Chun Ming quickly, kicking the rock by her feet across the cave floor.

‘That rock has blood on it.’

‘It was you.’

‘You killed Chan Ho.’

‘Our good friend Chan Ho.’

Chun Ming looked towards the top of the cave, hoping the fox would suddenly grow a heart and open the crack back up, but nothing happened. The other pirates pointed their swords at her and moved forward.

‘Okay, enough of that,’ said Captain Tin. ‘We’ve gotta find a way out of here before we do anything.’

‘But she killed Chan Ho!’

‘We’ll sort it out later.’

‘But he was our friend.’

‘Yeah, we should avenge him right here, right now.’

‘Our friend?’ said Captain Tin, with a surprised tone. ‘He was lazy, annoying and argued with everything I said. I’ve met cockroaches who were worthier than him.’

The other pirates paused for a moment then lowered their swords. ‘He was a bit annoying,’ one of them said.

‘He did argue a lot too.’

‘All the time.’

‘He tried to finger me once, when we were map reading.’

‘That’s nothing. He tried to eat me last year.’

‘Me too.’

‘Wah, he was a devil.’

‘Worse than a devil, he was a bully.’

The pirates felt so riled up all of a sudden that they couldn’t stop themselves from kicking Chan Ho’s corpse; one of them even tried to chop off his head, but their sword got stuck on the cervical spine.

‘Good, that’s settled then,’ said Captain Tin, helping her subordinate pull out the blade. ‘Now, where’s the exit?’

They all looked around the cave, but no one had a good answer, mainly because the flame had just gone out and it was pitch-black again. No more matches to light new wood. No exterior light coming in.

Soon, they got hungry and started to complain, though after Captain Tin threatened to shoot randomly in the dark they stopped complaining and fell asleep.

The only two to remain awake were Chun Ming and Captain Tin, though they still couldn’t see each other.

‘You know,’ said Captain Tin, after trying and failing to get comfortable on the rocks, ‘this has to be the stupidest trick I’ve ever seen.’

‘I don’t know what you’re taking about,’ replied Chun Ming, even though she knew exactly what the captain was talking about.

‘I mean, you led us into this cave, and then trapped us all inside to die. Normally, that’d be a great plan, but you’re in here with us, so...’

‘It wasn’t a trick.’

‘I see, so it’s just a coincidence that someone covered the exit with a rock?’ Captain Tin thought back to earlier, the moment they got trapped. ‘Actually, who was that other person?’

Chun Ming kicked a pebble, hitting one of the other pirates in the neck.

‘Ah, hang on...this isn’t a stupid trick, is it? I know what you’re going to do. You’re gonna wait until we’re all asleep then your friend’s gonna pull the rock back and let you out.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Or you know another way out of here...’

‘I don’t.’

‘...but then...how would you have known we wouldn’t kill you?’

‘I didn’t, obviously. Because it’s not a trick.’

‘Hmm. We’ll see.’

The two of them fell silent for a long time, both eventually falling asleep.

A while later, a wave crashed against the rocks outside, waking them both up again.

Captain Tin looked up quickly at the rock covering the exit. It was still there. She turned back to the cave. 'You still here, little girl?'

'No.'

'Ha. So, your friend didn't come back yet?'

'I told you, I don't have a friend.'

'Come on, little one, it is pointless to stick to such transparent lies.'

'I'm telling the truth.'

'Rubbish.'

'I am.'

Captain Tin pulled out her gun and aimed it across the cave. She was fairly sure she knew where the girl's voice was coming from, so it shouldn't have been too hard to hit her. 'Okay then. If you don't tell me who your friend is, I might as well shoot you now.'

'You can't see me.'

'Doesn't matter.'

'You'd shoot blindly, in here?'

'I will.'

'Please don't.'

'Who's your friend? When is he coming back to get you?'



Chun Ming picked up a small rock in her hand and tried to crush it.  
'He's not my friend, he tricked me too.'

'Who?'

'Ah, I might as well tell you. Though you probably won't believe it.'

'Then make it extra convincing.'

'Last night...no, two nights ago now...I saw a fox in the trees. I followed him and told him my predicament, the situation with you and...that beast.'

'Chan Ho?'

'The fox gave me some advice; he told me to lead you here with the promise of treasure, and then he would help me to trap you all.'

'Including yourself?'

'Not exactly.'

'He said he would come back to get you?'

'Err...'

'He didn't?'

'He said he would take care of the rest. I didn't know he was bad, he seemed so friendly and-'

'You really are an idiot, aren't you?'

Chun Ming threw the uncrushed rock at the cave floor. 'You're stuck here too.'

Captain Tin lowered her gun, letting out all her breath. 'Yes, I suppose I am.'

~~~

Soon, the two of them became so tired that they fell asleep again. This time they slept for many hours and the thing that finally woke them up was the terrible smell coming from Chan Ho's corpse.

'It smells like dead fish,' said one of the pirates.

'We should get rid of him,' suggested another.

'How? We're trapped in a cave.'

'Eat him?'

'No way, that's disgusting.'

'You're right. There's no fire in here, we'd have to eat him raw.'

'Shut up, all of you,' shouted Captain Tin. 'You don't need to worry about the bad smell as we're all going to be joining him soon.'

'How long can we survive in here?' asked one of the pirates.

'Without water, about four days.'

'That's not long.'

'How exactly will we die?'

'Dehydration.'

'Will it hurt?'

'I don't know, I've never died of it before.'

‘Ah, this is ridiculous. We can’t die in a cave, we’re pirates. The sea is where we should be dying.’

‘Yes, well, you don’t need to worry, the sea is right next to us. About three metres down there.’ Captain Tin pointed but it was useless, no one could see her finger. ‘Okay, the general direction of down.’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Chun Ming, sitting up.

‘For what?’ asked Captain Tin.

‘The sea is down, not level with us.’

‘Are you deaf? That’s what I just said.’

‘But that means...’ Chun Ming started feeling the rocks on the ground around her.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Don’t you see? We’ve been looking in the wrong place. If the sea is down there, then the exit to the cave might be down there too.’

‘Is she feeling okay?’ asked one of the pirates, confused.

‘Ah, she’s right,’ said Captain Tin, lunging forward and pulling rocks from the ground. ‘Everyone, start looking for cracks in the ground. Pull up rocks, dig in the dirt, anything.’

All the pirates did as the captain said, and after one hour of frantic digging, they’d unearthed a crack that seemed to lead to a tunnel that sloped down towards the sea.

‘We did it!’

‘Wait, something’s wrong.’ Captain Tin looked at the incredibly narrow tunnel. ‘It’s too small. None of us will fit.’

‘I’ll do it,’ said Chun Ming, rolling up her sleeves.

‘No way,’ replied Captain Tin, pulling them back down again.

‘I’ll come back for you, I promise.’

‘Rubbish. As soon as you’re out, you’ll run for it. You’ll probably take my ship and my gold too.’

‘I swear on my life, I will not.’

‘You will not what?’

‘I will not take your gold or your ship. How could I? I don’t even know how to sail it.’

‘You won’t come back for us either.’

‘No, I swear that I will come back for you too.’

‘On your life?’

‘Yes.’

Captain Tin took out her gun for no good reason and pointed it at Chun Ming. She thought about threatening her, but it was pointless. When the girl was out of the cave, there would be nothing she could do. And besides, it was so dark that the girl probably couldn’t recognise the gun anyway.

She lowered the weapon and said, ‘okay, due to no other options, we’ll trust you.’

Chun Ming bent down and squeezed through the crack. It was tough at first, the other pirates had to push her a bit, but eventually she made it into the tunnel and then crawled down towards the sea.

There was a splash, then a shout of, 'I'm okay.'

Captain Tin sat back down on the rock that wasn't comfortable at all, and waited to either be rescued or die in a new and interesting way.

~~~

Meanwhile, on the beach where the pirates had left their rowing boat, the fox slept. Around him were the remains of the BBQ he'd had the night before to celebrate his clever plan.

Chun Ming came down from the cliff and spotted him almost immediately. As she looked around for a weapon, a large wave hit the beach and swept over the fox. He woke up, reaching for the sword next to him and swinging it wildly in the air.

The girl quickly dived behind a bush and watched as the fox started to pack things onto the rowing boat.

After telling herself not to be so stupid, she decided to do something stupid and got up to walk back to the cave. When she got there, it was silent inside, which meant they'd probably fallen asleep again. There was a chance she could sneak in, steal a gun then shoot the fox, but there was also a good chance she'd be discovered and Captain Tin would shoot her instead.

Ah, she thought, sometimes you've just got to take a risk.

She stepped forward and, with one big effort, shoved the rock that was blocking the cave exit into the sea. There was a big splash, followed by a moment of silence again then...

...all the pirates came stumbling up out of the cave and threw their arms around her.

‘You did it!’ they all shouted. ‘You came back for us!’

‘And you moved an incredibly heavy rock all by yourself!’

‘Hey, how come we didn’t do that?’

‘Good question.’

‘Maybe the rock was heavier on one side?’

‘Maybe she has deceptively strong arms?’

‘Maybe the writer fucked up.’

‘Shh...’ Chun Ming said quickly, three fingers on her lips. ‘The fox is on the beach, he’ll hear you.’

‘That little wretch will hear my gun and that’s it,’ said Captain Tin, clambering out of the cave with her gun and sword drawn.

‘He’s packing to leave on your boat,’ said Chun Ming.

‘Is he now?’

‘But I think we can go around him and trap him in the middle of the beach.’

‘Agreed.’

Captain Tin gave orders to the other pirates and they rushed ahead along the cliff and then into the trees so the fox wouldn't see them. Chun Ming and Captain Tin followed after them slowly, planning to walk towards the fox from the cliff side.

'We have to hurry, he might be on your ship already.'

'He won't be,' replied Captain Tin.

'How do you know?'

'He thinks we're trapped in the cave. There's no rush for him.'

Chun Ming nodded, noticing and appreciating the lack of sharpness in the Captain's voice. Maybe this would turn out well for her, after all.

'Come, little one,' said Captain Tin, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder. 'Let's do some pre-attack meditation.'

'Okay.'

'But no heavy breathing...understand?'

~~~

A while later, when the other pirates gave the signal that they were in position, Captain Tin and Chun Ming walked down from the cliff and onto the beach. As the Captain had predicted, the fox was still casually putting stuff into the boat, and didn't notice their approach until they were no more than ten metres away.

When he did notice, the first thing he did was rub his eyes, certain he was imagining things. Then, realising it was no dream, he turned tail

and sprinted off to the other side of the beach, which is exactly where the other pirates were waiting with their swords drawn.

‘Boat, boat, boat,’ he wailed to himself, adjusting course to the rowing boat and trying to push it into the water.

However, he was too slow. Captain Tin grabbed him by the neck and threw him back onto the sand.

‘It wasn’t my fault,’ said the fox, whimpering, pointing at Chun Ming. ‘It was her, she made me do it.’

‘Is that so?’

‘It was completely her plan. I’m just a fox. I don’t know anything. I can’t think of plans. You have to believe me.’

Captain Tin looked at the accused and said, ‘what do you think we should do with him?’

Chun Ming looked back at the cliff and smiled.

‘Agreed,’ said Captain Tin.

A short while later, they made it back to the cave. Chun Ming looked around for a new rock big enough to cover the exit, but there were only really small rocks and really big ones that were too big to move.

‘How can we trap him in there now?’ she asked.

‘Good point,’ replied Captain Tin.

‘And he’ll just find the tunnel we made anyway and climb down to the sea and escape that way.’

‘Another good point.’

‘It won’t work.’

‘Well, at least we tried.’

‘You could just let me go,’ said the fox, a little calmer now. ‘I promise you’ll never see or hear from me again.’

‘How true.’

Captain Tin raised her gun and shot the fox in the chest. His body dropped into the sea and disappeared under the waves.

‘You shot him,’ Chun Ming muttered, feeling a little sick.

‘And?’

‘In cold blood.’

‘And?’

‘That’s cruel...evil.’

‘Well, you were about to let him die slowly in a cave...how would that be characterised?’

Chun Ming opened her mouth to answer back, but Captain Tin was right.

‘And you thought about letting us rot there, too.’

‘What? No, I didn’t, I came back.’

‘Only because the fox was on the beach with a sword, and you needed us to deal with him.’

‘I...err...’

‘But you did come back for us, so I won’t kill you. Actually, I’m quite impressed with your performance in that cave. And the courage to betray a bunch of pirates. Not many people are capable of that.’

‘I had no choice.’

‘Ah, you do now. You can stay here and cook chestnuts every day, or you can come with us and be my new sub-captain.’

‘What’s a sub-captain?’

‘I don’t know, I just made it up.’

‘Is it like a first officer?’

‘With less authority, sure.’

‘What about your crew?’

‘Them? Ha. They’re so entrenched in their roles, they couldn’t even conceive of the idea of a promotion.’

‘That’s strange.’

‘So, what do you say, little girl? You wanna be a pirate?’

Chun Ming thought about it for a few seconds, but she already knew what her answer was. ‘Okay,’ she said, finally, holding out her hand and getting a glare in return.

‘Great, let’s get back to the ship, before the others get any stupid ideas about stealing it. And don’t say they’re too entrenched or can’t conceive of it, that was specifically for promotions, not this.’

‘Wait, there’s one condition.’

‘What’s that?’

‘No more killing. Or threatening to kill people.’

‘Ha, no way.’

‘I’m serious.’

‘Fine, stay here then. Pirates have to kill sometimes, it’s part of the job.’

Chun Ming looked down at the waves, imagining currents of fox blood swirling underneath.

‘But don’t worry, little one, the people we kill are usually pretty depraved.’

‘Bad?’

‘The worst.’

‘You swear?’

‘I don’t swear anything, but it’s true. Now, come on, back to the ship, I’m getting hungry.’

Chun Ming and Captain Tin returned to the beach and got into the rowing boat. Before long, they were back on the ship, raising the sails and setting course for Guangzhou. As Cheung Chau faded into the

distance, Chun Ming sat at the end of the ship, staring at the sea. One of the other pirates sat down next to her and asked what she was doing.

‘Looking at the sea.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘I guess.’

The pirate looked at the small dot that was Cheung Chau and patted the homesick girl softly on the shoulder.

‘It’s not too late, you know?’

‘Sorry?’

‘I could talk to the captain, get her to turn the ship around and drop you back home.’

Chun Ming thought for a second then shook her head.

‘You sure?’

‘I am.’

The pirate removed his hand, whistling a two second tune. ‘Don’t blame you, to be honest. The sea can be quite hypnotic.’

‘It’s true.’

‘I used to look at it for hours...when I first came aboard. Of course, I was hanging up in a cage, eleven years old, starving.’

Chun Ming looked at the back of her hands, unsure what to say.

'I remember the captain said...you can enjoy the view better when I drop your cage...and something about working harder during the day.'

The pirate stood up and stared down at the waves, his hand stealthily reaching behind his back. 'Those were good times.'

'Was that Captain Tin?'

'The scarier version.'

'She must've been very young.'

'The stronger, more resolute version, too.'

'Stronger?'

'Now anyone can look at the sea. Anytime. From positions of safety. And she won't do a fucking thing.'

The pirate pulled his hand back from behind his ass, revealing a fairly large knife.

'Would you like to look closer?' he asked.

'What?'

'You job-stealing wretch.'

The pirate lunged downwards, attempting to stab Chun Ming in the back and push her into the sea in one swift motion, but his foot got caught on some rope and he tripped backwards.

'Help,' he shouted, dancing farcically on the edge of the deck.

Chun Ming looked behind her and saw the other pirates, along with Captain Tin watching her.

She hesitated a moment then leaned forward and pushed the other pirate over the side of the ship. He floated for a moment then the side of the ship collided with his head and he vanished downwards just like the fox.

‘Well done,’ said Captain Tin, walking over and patting her on the back. ‘He was always a problematic one.’

‘Are the rest of them gonna try and kill me, too?’

‘Not for a while,’ replied the Captain, smiling.

‘That’s not very reassuring.’

‘The sea is a tough master, young one. It buries the weak.’ Captain Tin opened up Chun Ming’s palm and placed a small dagger in it. ‘For future use.’

‘I’m not a murderer.’

‘Aim for the legs then. Or the arms.’ She laughed, then coughed. ‘Now, tell me what you know about Guangzhou?’



Moddey Dhoo

In the middle of the cold, mermaid-less sea between England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, there is an island not much bigger than *Máel Dúin's* head where a multitude of fantastical things have been known to occur.

Well, they used to be known to occur. Nowadays, it's little more than a holding purse for sequestered wealth, where the locals work in construction or finance, where seventeen year olds take corners at 120km/h, where you meet the same people at the same six bars every Friday night and when you ask them what they've been up to you find out they haven't been up to anything, they've just been sat at home watching old episodes of *Space Precin-*

One day, around four hundred years ago, in a parochial town on the west coast of the island, the owner of a gigantic, wolf-like dog was walking along the beach, throwing stones into the sea, vaguely aiming for the two English frigates dwarfing the local fishing boats as they

returned from their days labour, when some soldiers appeared and told him he was under arrest.

‘Under arrest? On what charge?’

‘Disturbing the peace.’

The man didn’t understand what that meant, he wasn’t a loud person, he’d always been polite to everyone he met, so why would the guards arrest him? He asked them again, ‘why are you harassing me?’ and the guards answered by grabbing his arms and dragging him down onto the grey, gritty sand.

As soon as they did this, the man’s loyal black dog leapt at one of the guards and pinned him on the ground, growling at the others like a deranged *buggane*.

‘Call off your hound or we’ll kill you.’

‘If you do that, he will certainly attack.’

‘Then call him off.’

‘Will you release me?’

‘Impossible. We have orders from Lord Stanley himself.’

‘Then may I talk to Lord Stanley and learn what I’ve done wrong?’

‘He wants you in the dungeon.’

‘May I talk to him first?’

The guards glanced at each other, then at the beast's *skean*-like teeth, and finally conceded. The man, honouring his promise, called off the dog and let the guards lead him to Peel Castle, which was about half a mile away, up on the outcropped hill overlooking both the town and the open sea farther west. Symbolically, it was an effective castle, but no one was really afraid of it. Which is why the previous Lord of Mann had attempted to put claw-like turrets on top of the battlements, plus a giant cloak that would flap up at night and [theoretically] evoke malice, yet, due to a budget of five quid, these plans were soon abandoned. Instead, the lord hired more bigots, gave them cheap ale to drink and left sketches of rugged, *inbound* refugees ravaging topless nuns on the table of the guardroom.

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When they arrived at the castle gate, two of the guards escorted him directly through the guardroom and down a long, shadowed corridor to the dungeon where they told him he would have to stay until Lord Stanley returned from his hunting trip.

‘How long will he be?’ asked the man, who was now clearly a prisoner.

‘A day, maybe two.’

‘What, that long?’

‘Of course. He has to get the *sloop* back from Liverpool.’ The prisoner looked confused so the other, younger guard elaborated, this

time using the native language of the island, as that's where he was from. 'He hunts in England,' he said, softly.

'You speak Manx?'

'I do.'

'I thought you were all imports from the mainland.'

'Not all of us.'

'What about him?' the prisoner asked, gesturing at the bigger guard.

'No.'

'Import?'

The younger guard nodded.

'What is your name?' the prisoner continued in Manx.

'Iliam.'<sup>1</sup>

'That's a good, solid Manx name.'

'I suppose.'

'Tell me, why is Lord Stanley hunting over in England?'

'He says there are more deer in the forests over there. And more land too.'

'Ha, a king who can't even stand to hunt in his own Kingdom. Or bother to learn our language.'

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<sup>1</sup> Half based on Manx patriot/traitor Illiam Dhune, half made-up

‘He’s not a king,’ replied Iliam, again in Manx. ‘Earl of Derby is his main title. And he can say a few words.’

‘Like what?’

‘Hello. Goodbye. Nice legs. Compensation.’

The prisoner shook his head. ‘The man has no respect for our customs.’

‘You can’t say that.’

‘Just like his father, and his grandfather before that. Manx is a pesky ant to them. Something to be extinguished.’

‘Extinguished? The English have been here for more than two centuries and our language survives.’

‘Survives...barely.’

‘Okay, enough. This isn’t bleeding France.’ The bigger, older guard pushed the prisoner deeper into the depths of the cell, and then turned on Iliam, barking, ‘English only from now on in, got it?’

‘Yes, Dirk,’ answered Iliam.

‘It’s boss, not Dirk. Got it?’

‘Yes, boss.’

‘Better. Now let’s get back to the guardroom before they take each other’s coin.’

‘What about me?’ asked the prisoner.

‘You? You’ll stay here until Lord Stanley says otherwise.’

‘Until he returns in two days, you mean?’

‘Two to three days.’

‘Fine. Then my dog will wait outside my cell.’

‘Impossible.’

‘He won’t be any trouble.’

‘Don’t care. The hound’s leaving.’

‘You are welcome to tell him that.’

Dirk looked at the dog, who was growling again, and then turned back to the cell and said, ‘okay, fine, he stays.’

‘Thank you,’ said the prisoner in Manx.

‘But if he does so much as whimper in my direction, I’m removing his entrails and throwing the rest of him in the sea, got it?’

‘*Ta, meoir-shee.*’

‘English.’

‘Yes, guard.’

~~~

Dirk and Iliam left the prisoner with his freakish pet dog and returned to the guard room, where two other guards were playing *Hazard*. Dirk joined in straight away, grabbing the two dice [or remoulded musket balls] and moaning about the disrespect of the new prisoner, while Iliam sat down at the table next to them and fell silent. Normally he’d stare at the walls, but someone had put up medieval

smut pics – nuns on a bed, nuns in the bath, nuns in the oubliette – so he had no choice but to look down at the floor. He did that for a long time, so long that, eventually, one of the other guards looked up from the odds sheet and asked what was wrong.

‘It’s that dog,’ replied Iliam after a long pause. ‘It’s not natural.’

‘You mean it’s large?’

‘Like a baby elephant.’

‘That big?’

‘And its eyes...I don’t know if it’s the sunlight or something else, but each time I look at it, I think I see red spots.’

‘What are you saying, boy?’ asked Dirk, getting another *out* with the dice and kicking the table leg.

‘I’m not a boy.’

‘You think it’s the devil?’

Iliam thought about that name, *devil*, then fell silent again.

‘Guess you do,’ said Dirk, smirking. ‘Though it beats me why the devil would be hanging around a place like this.’

No one looked at the pictures on the walls, even though that’s exactly where Dirk was looking, a sleazy grin colouring his face.

‘Maybe it’s after your soul,’ said one of the other guards.

‘Disguised as a dog?’

‘Maybe.’

‘The thing can’t even talk...how can I sell it my soul if it doesn’t speak English?’

‘A fair point.’

The guards laughed, all except Illiam, who sat alone in the corner of the room, briefly looking up at the nun stretched out on the rack, then switching quickly back to the floor.

~~~

A short while later, the guards finished their game and one of them stood up to leave, saying he was going back to the main barracks in town to sleep for twelve hours straight. The other guard counted his winnings then, satisfied, told them it was time to feed the prisoner.

‘I’m not going,’ said Illiam, exiting his bubble of silence.

‘It’s your turn.’

‘The dog...’

‘Move.’

‘I can’t do it.’

The guard left his winnings on the table, grabbed an armoured glove and advanced on Illiam. ‘What did you say?’

‘Relax, I’ll go,’ said Dirk, dropping the odds sheet on the table. ‘I’m not scared of a scruffy dog, even if it is the size of a buggane’s ass cheeks.’

Dirk laughed loudly at his own joke, got up, pulled some bread and milk from the cupboard, stroked his favourite nun's face then went to see the prisoner. The other guard sat back down, placing the armoured glove on the vacant chair next to him. After re-counting his winnings four times, he tapped the edge of the table and asked Iliam if he was interested in a round of *passe-dix*.

'I'm not in the mood.'

'It'll take your mind off the elephant dog,' he said, holding up the dice.

'Not interested.'

The other guard shrugged, dropped the dice, picked up a knife, spread his fingers on the table and started stabbing slowly between the gaps.

Around twenty minutes passed before Dirk returned, smirking and cleaning his sword.

'What happened, mate?' asked the other guard, putting down his knife. 'Why's your sword bloody?'

'Ha, well let me see. Would you like the genuine version of events or the version I'm going to tell Lord Stanley?'

'What have you done?'

Dirk finished wiping the blood off his sword and sat down, putting boots on the table. 'I'm sorry to say, the prisoner is no longer with us.'



‘What?’

‘He’s dead. And his baby elephant, too.’

‘You killed them?’ asked Iliam, rising to his feet.

‘Don’t rise to your feet at me, boy! It was fully justified.’

‘You really killed him?’

‘Had to. The fool tried to escape, the dog jumped on me, no choice but to stab them both.’

‘He tried to escape? How?’

‘Okay, he didn’t really. He just moaned about the bread I gave him, and my attitude, then started speaking that nonsense language again. I knew he was calling me slanderous things, so, to teach him a lesson, I opened the cell door and stabbed him.’

‘You fucking idiot,’ muttered the other guard.

‘What? The other part was true, the dog did jump on me. But it obviously had no idea about my speed. I dodged out of the way, cat-like, and stabbed it in the stomach. Actually, it was a bit strange, the stupid mutt didn’t die straight away, it just crawled towards its fool master, the dead guy, making some moaning noises.’

‘Lord Stanley is gonna kill us,’ said Iliam, sitting back down again, ‘as sure as the rain falls.’

‘Don’t be simple. Lord Stanley was planning to execute the prisoner anyway, for trying to spread all those Manx lessons. And he

doesn't know about the dog so...no problem. All we need to say is the prisoner tried to escape, we killed him, the end.'

Dirk placed his hand on the hilt of his sword and made the two of them swear that they would back up his story. The other guard agreed, through gritted teeth, yet Iliam folded his arms and said nothing.

'If you don't do it,' said Dirk, lifting the sword, 'I'll stab you here and now and throw you off the cliff. Got it, boy?'

Iliam looked at the blood still dripping off the edge of the sword and shrugged.

'Don't shrug, swear it,' shouted Dirk, getting to his feet.

'Okay, okay. I'll swear it.'

'No changing your mind at the last minute.'

'I said I'd swear it.'

Dirk smiled and put his sword back in its sheath. 'Good boy.'

~~~

Three days later, Lord Stanley returned and asked to see the prisoner.

'Which prisoner, my Lord?' asked Dirk, standing to attention.

'Are you addlepated? The only prisoner in the whole castle, that's who.'

'The Manx speaker?'

Lord Stanley sighed, took off his studded glove and struck Dirk across the face. ‘Get him, bring him here.’

Dirk coughed and looked at the other two guards. ‘Actually, my Lord, there’s a slight problem.’

‘Do not tell me he escaped.’

Dirk coughed again then repeated the story he’d told the other guards two days earlier, adding that the prisoner was a violent man who said he would cut the Lord’s throat if he ever dared come visit.

‘He said those words?’

‘Yes, my Lord. And he looked crazed as he said it, like a mad animal.’

‘That is curious.’

‘It was...very curious.’

‘Most people spoke of him as a peaceful, polite man.’

‘The dungeon can do peculiar things to people, my Lord.’

‘And expeditiously too, it seems,’ said Lord Stanley, tilting his head and staring at each guard one by one. ‘Are you certain this is what occurred?’

The three guards nodded, though Iliam’s nod was not particularly convincing.

‘Very well, then return to your duties. I will inform the man’s family of his death.’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Dirk.

The three guards shuffled towards the door.

‘Wait...do any of you idle lunks speak Manx?’

Dirk and the other guard both looked at Iliam, who raised his hand nervously.

‘Good,’ said Lord Stanley. ‘I will write something heartfelt to express personally to the man’s family, then you will translate it into Manx.’

‘Is that really necessary, my Lord?’

Lord Stanley glared at Dirk, glove ready. ‘Excuse me?’

‘No disrespect, my Lord, but this is the king’s land now...your land...and English is the mother tongue. We shouldn’t lower ourselves to using their language, it will give them ideas.’

‘I wasn’t aware I’d made you Minister of Culture.’

‘No, my Lord, you didn’t, I was merely-’

‘Enough. I decide what is to be done. And you...’ Lord Stanley got close to Dirk, fixing his eyes on a future hole in his forehead.

‘...you are lucky to still have your head.’

‘Yes, my Lord.’

‘Now get back to work.’

‘Right away, my Lord.’

~~~

The following few months passed peacefully and with relative swiftness. Nothing much happened in the castle, and nothing much happened on the island either. All the people who had supported the prisoner in his efforts to promote the local language were charmed by Lord Stanley and his occasional speeches in Manx. Of course, they were very short speeches, and Iliam was instructing him on how to deliver the words, but they were effective all the same. [After exiting a public toilet with a small bag of coins] some of the Manx people even talked of building Lord Stanley a statue with a plaque saying *A True Son Of Ellan Vannin*, though they never actually got around to making anything beyond the feet, and even those were poorly made, bearing a loose resemblance to two, surprisingly long potatoes.

Meanwhile, Iliam, Dirk and the guard who would eternally be known as *guard* went about their days the same way they always had. They got up, went to the castle, walked around the battlements, sat in the guard room, arrested the few locals who hadn't been charmed by Lord Stanley, fed them, insulted them, played dice and, finally, went back to the main barracks to sleep again.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened, and they soon forgot about the dead prisoner and his monstrously huge, coal-black Hellhound.

One night, however, Iliam suffered a vivid nightmare. He dreamt that the shadowy beast was chasing him around the castle grounds, and both the owner of the beast and Lord Stanley were watching from one of the towers. Somehow, he could hear the words they spoke, and

Lord Stanley would say over and over again, ‘black dog so dog black dog so dog.’

When he awoke, he found himself covered in sweat and his heart beating faster than a farm chicken surrounded by English-speaking chickens in full battle armour.

He told Dirk and the other guard about the nightmare, but they merely laughed at him.

‘The dog’s dead,’ Dirk said. ‘It ain’t coming back.’

‘But its eyes...’

‘Its eyes are dead too.’

‘But I...’

‘Sit down and calm your tarts,’ shouted Dirk, kicking the chair nearest to him, ‘you’re starting to annoy me.’

But Iliam couldn’t relax so he went outside and patrolled the castle grounds. There was no one else patrolling, which made him a bit nervous, but he kept telling himself, they’re right, the dog’s dead, there’s nothing to fear.

When he returned to the guard room an hour later, the other guard was sat by the table, rolling dice by himself.

‘No one else around?’

‘Dirk’s gone to check the dungeons.’ The guard left the dice and glanced at the clock. ‘Actually, he’s been gone a while.’

‘I’ll go and see what he’s doing,’ said Iliam, turning to the door.

‘Why bother? He’s probably just beating up one of the prisoners.’

‘I’ll be right back.’

When he reached the dungeons, Iliam noticed that it was deathly silent, which was strange. Usually there would be some snoring noises or random shouting of, ‘I’m innocent,’ but this time, there was just silence.

Iliam walked past the cells, looking inside each one and seeing that all the [brand new] prisoners were staring back at him, their faces whiter than a Russian college student.

‘What are you looking at?’ he shouted at them, but no one answered. He shouted again in baritone, and one of them, the prisoner nearest to the final cell, nervously shook his head and mumbled, ‘don’t look.’

‘Don’t look at what?’

‘Don’t look.’

‘Where’s Dirk?’

‘Don’t look.’

‘The other guard...where is he?’

‘Don’t look.’

Iliam grumbled something in Manx and edged towards the end of the dungeon corridor.

Inside the final cell, where the huge, black dog and its master had met a grisly end a few months earlier, sat Dirk.

He looked very different from how he'd appeared an hour earlier, his face pale, his limbs trembling, his shirt covered in sweat and bile, and his mouth opening in little spurts to say, 'so black, so dog, so black, so dog, so black, so dog, so black so-'

He kept on saying this line as Iliam dragged him back to the guard room, adding neither additional words nor variance in tone.

'What happened in there?' Iliam asked over and over, but each time Dirk would ignore him and continue with, 'so black, so dog, so black, so dog.'

'What did the prisoners say?' asked the other guard, chewing the crust from a piece of barley bread.

'Don't look.'

'That's it?'

'Yes. Don't look. Over and over.'

'Well,' said the other guard, giving up on the crust and casting it onto the floor, 'no marks on him, no blood. He'll be okay after a good night's sleep, I'm certain.'

'I suppose.'

'Two nights maybe.'

~~~


Three nights later, Dirk was dead.

No one managed to discover what had happened to him inside that cell as he refused to speak another word while he was alive, and none of the prisoners would spill anything either, except one lunatic who mumbled *prismatic rectitude* on loop.

Lord Stanley, of course, was not pleased.

But before he could sail back over to the island, the English Civil War broke out and he was called into action. Due to his privileged upbringing and superior education, he managed to lose the vast majority of battles he took part in, and when the going got tough, he fled back to the island, raised taxes for the war effort, harboured royalists, feasted on food that would've fed half of Italy, and got his PR guy to put out a painting of him, entrenched in the castle library, working defiantly on his Manx.

By the time the war was over, he'd learnt the phrase *amorphous property rights* and, with Charles 1st stumbling drunk into his own execution, decided that someone needed to pay for the defeat of the royalists.

That someone was the Manx people.

The first thing he did was stop all his Manx lessons and language exchanges.

The second thing was to appoint Illiam as his Receiver General, the person to use and collect money on behalf of the Lord of Mann.

The third thing was to rewrite Illiam's past, portraying him as a noble-born Manxman.

The fourth thing was to build a harem.

The fifth was to fill it.

The sixth and most damaging thing was to usurp the land inheritance right of Manx people and introduce the idea of a sur-lease, with himself as the sur-landlord. In short, he already owned the land and charged rent, and now he would charge extra rent in the form of a land-ownership license.²

As a result a new word was born in Manx, which roughly translated to *Snake-face motherfucker*.

Illiam did the best he could with a bad hand, and when the job got too distressing for him he would return to the dungeons of Peel Castle and stare at the wall of the cell in which the black dog had perished.

One night, as he was sitting on the cold stone floor, his back propped up against the wall, he heard a strange grinding noise.

At first he thought it was guards digging out moss from the walls outside, but, as he continued to listen, he soon realised it was coming from inside. Specifically, the cell opposite him.

² The whole thing was incredibly complicated – the document codifying it into law was itself 472 pages long, two thirds of which was just *The Canterbury Tales* re-arranged – and extremely unpopular, but Lord Stanley persisted and finally managed to get his way.

He stood up and walked over, amazed to see pieces of the wall crumbling before his eyes.

Looking back outside the cell, he froze.

On the wall, in gothic-red chalk, was the face of the black dog.

Before he could think anything about it, why it was there, who had drawn it, how they'd drawn it, his body was pulled backwards. The shock was too great to make sense of anything, but some part of him managed to think that it was impossible, the wall was there, he couldn't be going through it.

As he completed the thought, the red chalk drawing of the black dog detached from the wall and followed him into the void, moving under and around and above him, until finally it vanished and he was standing in the cell again.

He shivered instinctively, breathed out, shivered intellectually, held his arm straight then rushed back along the corridor to the guard room.

Inside sat four soldiers in unfamiliar garb, playing an unfamiliar pastime, speaking a slightly off-kilter version of English. One of them noticed him, nudged the nearest guard and kicked the other two in the shins.

'Who the fook are you?' the stockiest one barked in his weird brand of English.

'Illiam...Receiver General.'

‘Who?’

‘William Christian, Receiver General to Lord Stanley.’

‘Do what?’

‘Are you mad?’

Illiam blinked three, four times then stated his identity again, slower and with less shivering.

‘Lord Stanley?’ replied one of the guards, squinting in confusion.

‘Yes.’

‘There hasn’t been a lord here in thirty years...what are you jabbering about?’

‘No lord...’

Illiam stared at the costumes again, the strange armour, the insignia on their chests. It was either an elaborate joke to embarrass him or he’d travelled forward in time. After a few more seconds of thought, he decided on the latter, as the Island’s budget wasn’t nearly *war-chest* enough to cover new costumes or this standard of actor, or whatever technology it was that had made the dog drawing come off the wall.

‘Look...we’re reasonable men,’ said one of the guards, putting a hand on his chest insignia. ‘You’re clearly drunk, you somehow wandered in here, technically it’s a two-year dungeon sentence, but if you head back out quietly, peacefully, we’ll pretend it never happened.’

Illiam bowed awkwardly, walked past them and stumbled a little in feigned drunkenness back out into the corridor.

After a few steps, he stopped and thought things through. If this is the future, then knowledge is key. I need to head to the town archive, find out what happened to Lord Stanley, find out what date it is, what year it is, why their English is off-kilter.

‘Good idea,’ a voice whispered in Manx.

‘What?’

He looked around quickly, but it was impossible to make anything out except shadows and stone.

‘Hello?’

There were no further whispers so he kept going, through the corridor, out of the castle, down the sloped path to the harbour, past the soldiers’ barracks [twice as big as it was supposed to be] and over to the main part of the town. The first street he came across had around ten people in total, all of them dressed strangely, all of them speaking the same *alternative* English as the guards. He pressed on, ducking down an alley that was a shortcut to a tavern the fishermen would frequent, but, when he reached the spot where it should’ve been, it wasn’t there. In its place was a different tavern with an English name. *The Black Dog*.

‘What is this...’ he muttered, staring up at the sign. A change of ownership? A new trend for English names? Or perhaps it was only the tavern façade that had changed, and not the guts of the place.

He put his ear to the door, hearing muffled noises that could've been Manx. Could also have been Romanian, or Ancient Sumerian, all languages sounded the same drunk, and there was no way to be certain if all he did was lurk outside the premises like a bashful deviant.

Taking a breath of sea-drenched air, he poked at the door and entered.

'We're closed,' barked a voice in fierce English, which was odd as he'd barely put a foot inside.

Illiam half-obeyed, staying beside the door frame and surveying the scene. After two quick scans, he counted nineteen men and eight women, all drinking ale from strangely-shaped containers, with more than half of them dressed like trendy pensioners.

'You deaf? I said we're closed.'

'Where are all the locals?' Illiam shouted in Manx, keeping his position at the door.

'What?'

'The locals...fishermen...where are they?'

The bartender stared at him with tilted neck, as if he were a jaded Mantuan notary hawking a sex cult. Most of the patrons stopped drinking ale and did the same.

'Does anyone here speak Manx?' Illiam tried, switching to English.

One man raised his hand and said *no* in Manx.

Another said, 'yeah. Snake-like motherfucker.'

Everyone else shook their heads, laughed drunkenly and went back to what was left of the ale. There was little else to do except wait for the bartender to say, 'we're closed,' again, so Illiam turned and headed back outside. Once on the street, he realised there was not only little else to do but literally nothing to do as whatever this place was it wasn't anything that he'd ever existed in and it was certainly nothing he had any influence over. *God in fields*³, even the drunks had ignored him.

Repeating the word *God* out loud, he sat down on the steps of a shop selling John Dee merchandise, and put head in hands.

'What is this hell?' he said, digging fingernails into his forehead.

'Little England,' replied the whispered voice.

'You again.'

'Where English roams free.'

'I don't understand.'

'Yes, you do.'

'I do not.'

'Unconsciously, you do.'

'No, I tell you...it doesn't make sense.'

³ 17th Century Manx version of 'Jesus H Christ!'

‘Teleologically, it does.’

‘Enough with the damn fog. What year is it? What is this place? Where is everyone?’

‘The year is England, the date is England, the land is England.’

The voice seemed to be moving, towards a nearby alley, so Illiam sprang up and followed swiftly, aggressively. He soon regretted it. There were no lamps in the alley, only different tones of shadow and, by the dark hand of Satan himself, no sign of another street at the end. He turned back and tried to return to the steps he’d been sulking on, but the entrance had vanished, replaced by an impossible shade of black.

‘Where are you?’ he cried, searching desperately for a source of light.

‘You are England.’

‘Show yourself.’

‘Come.’

Illiam backed up against the wall to his left and raised his fists in defiance. Whatever it was, it would have to come at him from either the sides or the front.

But it didn’t come.

Nothing did.

Instead, the alley got darker and darker and

on the slightly lighter patch of darkness opposite

possibly a surface, possibly not

the chalk red dog face appeared

glowing

growling

growling the word *GAR*

over and over and

GARRRR

GARRRRRRR

For the first time since he'd been forced to listen to Lord Stanley
attempt the conditional tense in Manx, he sobbed

cried

closed his eyes

swatted his hands at the void

pseudo-slept

spasmed

raged a bit more

then slept

truly slept

truly

~~~

...doors typically didn't rotate all the way round, and not everything in a town could be this purple unless

he opened his eyes, blinking violently

no

it was the same as it had been

impossibly dark

but the dog face

it wasn't there

the red chalk had changed

altered shape

and was now the outline of a candle and a woman

sitting at a desk

talking to him.

'Sorry?'

'Are you sitting down or not?' the woman said, face slowly filling itself in.

'Me?'

'You or the copy of *The Carrasdhoo Men* over there.'

'Carras what?'

‘Obviously, I mean you. Sit.’

The darkness finally, fully dispersed and Illiam found himself in a strange room, with strange furniture and even stranger decorations on the wall. The woman was strange too; her clothes, her cropped-up hair, her bluntness.

‘Where am I?’ he muttered.

‘Manx, please.’

‘What?’

‘In this house, you will speak Manx.’

He was confused for a moment, then thought back, realising he’d spoken English. Why had he done that?

‘You know how to speak Manx, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he replied, moving his head down with the word.

‘Fluently?’

‘It is my mother tongue.’

The woman half-smiled, but it quickly faded. ‘One of very few, sadly.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘According to the last census, we are down to a meagre eight percent of the population.’

‘Eight percent? Of what?’

‘Do you not understand implication?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Eight percent of the population speaks Manx. And not necessarily as their mother tongue.’

‘That’s...impossible.’

The woman shook her head, stood up and walked to the fireplace. Above it was a painting of a familiar face. A bit waxy-looking, but definitely familiar.

‘That’s me,’ Illiam said, touching his own cheeks.

‘If he could see us now...’

‘I can, I’m right here.’

The woman ignored the outburst and carried on. ‘Eight percent of the population, devaluing our own language just to do business with imperialists, thieves, plunderers...’

Either due to rage or frustration, Illiam dug up enough energy to move his legs and transport himself over to the woman, grabbing her by the shoulders and forcing her to look closely at his face.

‘Get off me,’ she said calmly.

‘Look at the painting, look at my face.’

‘I shall not.’

‘Do it.’

‘You’re reverting to English again.’

‘What?’

‘Manx.’

Illiam corrected himself and repeated, ‘do it,’ in Manx.

The woman looked at the painting, then at Illiam, then shrugged.

‘You look vaguely similar.’

‘It’s me.’

‘Really? Are you a vampire?’

‘No, I-...’

‘Manx, please.’

Illiam ran through his story, trying to find a way to make the time travel part convincing, but...how? A chalk dog face took me through space and time to this house? He sat down on the surprisingly hard sofa and slouched as if his whole body were boneless.

The woman went to the desk, picked up a textbook, wiped the cover with her hand and sat down next to him. ‘It is a little peculiar, but we can do the lesson on the sofa. I must warn you though, don’t grab my shoulders again. If you do both myself and my good friend Josephine will castrate you with sieve wire.’

Illiam stared blankly at the carpet.

‘Now, as you are a native speaker of Manx, we will focus on ways to teach our language to others. I have already developed several analyses and theories...however, the greatest challenge, undoubtedly,

will be the question *why*. As in *why should I?*, by which I mean, *what value does it possess for me?* My response, at present, is an emotional appeal to nationalism, Manx nationalism, but, if that fails to sway them, I'm prepared to cull the population of English speakers until learning our native language becomes more of a practical argument. The current projection is a hundred and twenty to a hundred and forty dead, forty-seven thousand cowed, and seventeen of our own martyred, give or take a few. Obviously, I'd prefer not to go down that path, hence my language theories and fairy tale book, but if people really...'

'What year is it?' asked Illiam, half snapping out of his trance.

'...can't be convinced then-...sorry?'

'What is the current year?'

'The year?'

'Year, date, state of affairs on the island, in England, around the world...'

'Are you ill?'

'...anything at all.'

'Or are you playing games with me?'

'No, no games, I swear. I have been away for a long time and...have lost track of things. Please, I must know. Year, rulers, political climate, everything. Imagine I'm a newly born baby who knows nothing.'

The woman's eyes grew bigger, as did her cheeks. 'Well...you ignored my textbook speech, which was quite rude...but you did ask in Manx, so...the year is 1904, the date is December 2<sup>nd</sup>, the island is losing its soul to the supposedly Great British Empire, England is doggedly enslaving more and more poor souls world-wide and...the world-...the world is-...I'm not sure how to evaluate it.'

'1904...amazing.'

'Could you follow my Manx well enough?'

Illiam nodded.

'You seem uncertain...your facial expression.'

'I'm fine.'

'If you claim so.'

'But I have one more question.'

'Go on.'

'What happened to that man...' Illiam pointed at the painting of himself above the fireplace, '...William Christian?'

'Illiam Dhone.'

'That's what you call him?'

'Us Manx folk, yes.'

'What was his fate? Did he meet his end peacefully?'

'Not exactly.'

‘In battle?’

‘He was executed for betraying the Stanleys.’

‘Lord Stanley?’

‘The fool who forced everyone to refer to him as *Great*. Yes.’

‘Lord Stanley executed me?’

‘Err...your great, great, great grandfather...perhaps.’

‘He...Lord Stanley...gave the order himself?’

‘No, his son. Or his nephew. I forget. There was a lot of inbreeding back then, cousins marrying cousins...’

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘It’s the truth. I have a book on it somewhere.’

‘Executed...’

‘Probably in the study. From Stanley to Stanley: 1405 to...seventeen something. Seventeen fifty-seven? Fifty-eight? I admit my historical knowledge is a bit rusty.’

‘Throw it to the waves...’

‘Sorry?’

‘...the bastard had me killed.’

Illiam slouched lower onto the seat cushion of the sofa, somehow stopping himself from sliding right off the edge. He stared at the carpet again, and then the fire. The woman didn’t seem too pleased



about this so she dropped the textbook onto his lap and rotated his face to look at the cover.

*Manx in 28 Days // Sophia Morrison*

But Illiam wasn't interested. In truth, he wasn't really there, he was next to the window, following the shadow outside. He looked back at the sofa, at the skin suit of himself slouching next to the woman, who was now reading out the introduction, but the *GAR* noise was incessant, making him turn back to the window.

The red chalk dog was there again  
floating by the bushes in the garden  
absorbing the moonlight  
whispering *GARRR*  
calling for him  
so he flowed  
through the window as if it were the thinnest of air  
over to the bushes  
and into the void

where the dog said his cherished *GARRR* and the void laughed and the people in the hotel beside the void laughed then blew out their brains and crumbled and self-siphoned into something solid to be subsumed by the void and together they spun upwards into the

blood vermilion sky, clouds sticking to their molecules, lethargically  
sanguine and

*GAR*

*GARRRRR*

*GARRRRRR*

*GARRRRRRRRRR*

~~~

‘...garrgravitational eddies are passing the station but will have
little effect, please continue activities according to your regular
schedule, announcement end.’

The curtain lifted, unleashing incessant noise from all directions
faces

faces too, all kinds, all colours, a market, a thoroughfare

what

the lighting

the closeness of the walls

an internment camp, people from the New World, and him, a
soldier?

Gaining first comprehension and then control of his neck, Illiam
peered down at his body and saw a creaseless jacket seemingly made
of carpet.

‘Please select the language for your exchange,’ said a voice in English.

‘Sorry?’ He swung round to the side, and then behind, colliding with the environment. Passers-by dressed as carnival performers, a bizarrely-designed tavern operating in the background, possibly Chinese, and a tall, dark-skinned man in a pale green garment staring back at him. ‘Did you speak?’

‘... ..’ the man replied, using a rectangular instrument to point at the wall in front of Illiam.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘... ..?’

‘What language is that? Where are you from?’

The dark-skinned man gestured at the wall again. As the gesturing was soft, Illiam turned and...there was text on the wall, illuminated text, in numerous alphabets, most of which he failed to recognise.

‘Please select the language for your exchange,’ the wall repeated.

‘Wah...the structure itself...is talking.’

‘You’re not supposed to turn your translator off until you’re inside,’ the dark-skinned man said, putting something in his jacket pocket and stepping up to Illiam’s side. ‘What language are you after?’

‘You speak English?’

‘If I’m near Mars, sure. Here? Never.’

‘Mars?’

‘Unless I come across a *dat’za* zonked out in front of the machine I wanna use.’ He put his finger on the screen and said, ‘Ixil.’ The machine responded with another question: ‘would you like to proceed with your previous settings?’

‘Yes.’

‘Set-up complete. You may now begin your exchange.’

‘What is happening?’ asked Illiam, examining the edges of the talking wall, attempting to locate the person trapped within. ‘How does this wall speak words?’

The dark-skinned man scratched his neck and looked back. Luckily there was no queue, but the people propping up the station bar were starting to notice.

‘And why is it able to display text in this-...’ Illiam stopped, recognising the irritability of the man’s expression, as well as the curious glances of the faces opposite. ‘What I intended to say is...I have just arrived here today and...it is very exhausting, to travel this far. If you could help me operate this...wall, I would very much be in your debt.’

‘You’re not zonked out?’

‘I don’t believe so.’

The dark-skinned man stopped scratching. ‘Do you know where we are?’

‘The city’s name?’

‘City? I’m talking about here, this...the machine in front of us.’

Illiam took another look at the wall, repeating the word, ‘machine.’

‘Okay, if you’re going with tired, fine. Or maybe you’ve lost your translator, I don’t know.’ The dark-skinned man put his finger on the wall screen again, saying, ‘menu.’ The list of languages returned. ‘This is a TALK TALK centre. You select your language here...then go through that archway there and chat with your designated partner. Is this what you wanted to do?’

Illiam edged to the left of the wall, peering through the window into a room half full of people, some of them flickering in and out of existence. One of them even went as far as to vanish, an act that didn’t seem to have any impact on the person sitting opposite them, as she simply stood up, tucked in her chair and walked off to the wall on the near side...where a panel slid open and a cup appeared.

‘Look...are you okay?’

Illiam turned back and tried to formulate the best possible question for the occasion. *Are they ghosts* was too risky, and *What year is it* wouldn’t suffice either, at least not asked directly; no, he’d have to weed it out. Slowly.

‘Maybe you should go to the infirmary.’

‘A moment...’

‘Or the NOT SURE centre.’

‘Please.’

‘They only keep Triton citizens on file, if that’s what you’re worried about?’

Illiam looked back at the wall, at the list of text. Apparently, they were languages, though he could only recognise a few of them.

‘Okay, friend, I’m going in, my time slot’s already started...’

‘Wait...’

‘...and they charge if you go over. Yeah?’

‘I wish to do an exchange.’

‘Ah, you’re remembering.’

‘However, I am uncertain if it has the language I require.’

‘No problem.’ The man put a remarkably cold hand over Illiam’s and guided his finger onto the screen. ‘Say it.’

‘To the wall?’

‘Yes.’

‘Very well. Manx.’

The list disappeared, replaced by MANX in huge letters, along with a description of its current status. ‘Which era?’ asked the wall.

Illiam stared at the screen, his finger slipping slowly down like blood from the executioner’s block.

‘You have to select the era.’

‘It’s here...they have it...’

‘That’s not an era.’

‘...that woman, her textbook...it worked.’

‘Okay.’ The man grabbed Illiam’s finger with not a small amount of force, and stuck it back firmly on the screen. ‘Say an era...modern, last century, 22nd century...’

‘17th Century.’

‘*Fab’a*...you’re going back to ancient times.’

‘Ancient? What do you-...’ Illiam coughed, realigning his brain to modern day, whatever century it may have been. ‘It is not so distant.’

‘Over seven hundred years, seems pretty distant to me. Good luck understanding their slang.’

‘Which difficulty setting?’ asked the wall machine.

‘Onerous,’ replied Illiam, shrugging off the man’s grip.

‘Please repeat.’

‘Onerous. Uppermost difficulty.’

‘You mean advanced,’ corrected the man. ‘If that’s really your level.’

‘I’m a native speaker.’

‘Of an endangered language?’

‘Correct.’

‘Okay...’

‘Advanced,’ said Illiam, his voice losing its uncertainty.

‘Set-up complete. Please enter the main room and begin your exchange. Remember, you can change the difficulty setting and the era at any time by touching the table screen and making your request. If you wish to extend the lesson or-...’

‘Sorry, it’s non-skippable.’

‘There is a fault?’

‘No, this spiel...you have to sit through it all, the first time you come.’

‘Oh.’

‘It’ll be over in a minute, don’t worry.’

‘Hasn’t your time already started?’

‘It has.’

‘Apologies, I do not wish to inconvenience you.’

‘Quiet a sec, this is a good part.’

Illiam understood the word *quiet*, and let the wall-voice filter back in.

‘...exceed the complementary quota, please go to the NOT SURE centre within two days and inform them of your activities. Warning, it is a felony to touch or interfere with the holograms. The

punishment under Triton Dah Heen law is two days of watching amateurs compete at games of Dysnomian chess. Thank you for your attention and co-operation.'

'Now you're up.'

'Sorry?'

'Language time.' The man put his arm around Illiam's waist and led him towards the entrance, which appeared to be nothing more than a vertical crack in the middle of an arch-shaped outline on the wall. 'What was it...Manx?'

'Yes.'

The crack widened, the wall separating itself to reveal the room ensconced behind the window, now five eighths full of real people and things which the wall had referred to as holograms.

'17th Century Manx...ha, I hope I'm at the table next to you.'

'What do you mean?'

'Listening in on your advanced talk...'

'You will not understand the words.'

'...seeing your face as you try to understand the slang and the...'

'I told you, I'm a native speaker, it is no concern for-...' Illiam jumped back, away from the paw that had suddenly appeared on his waist, and raised his hands to defend himself. But they weren't hands, they were paws, too.

The room darkened, then re-illuminated itself with four neon blue squares.

‘...GAR and GAR and...’ continued the man who, like the rest of the people in the room, was dressed in a poorly-kept dog costume, the outline around his body bold vermilion. Even the door itself...wasn’t a door any longer... it was a dog’s mouth, growing inwards and outwards, the teeth dripping slits of blood onto the flickering holograms.

‘...GAR GAR GAR if you GAR GAR to the right degree GAR...’

‘What?’

‘...couldn’t ever be a part of GAR, blood stained GAR, with GAR GAR go on without you GAR, GAR murderer GAR...’

‘Murderer,’ mumbled Illiam, shrinking before the dog’s mouth, tugging at what was left of the man’s sleeve. ‘I didn’t murder him. It wasn’t me, it was-...’

‘...GAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRR.’



Quantum Aswang

In ancient times, the legendary aswang would covertly roam the hundred billion islands of the Philippines [fragmented and under various other names at that time] and sniff out the most wretched of the locals; the murderers, the rapists, the cult leaders, the typhoon insurance sales reps etc., and turn them into meals.

However, every now and then, one of them would get sloppy and accidentally snack on a child or charity worker, and then they'd all be in trouble. Witch hunts, poster campaigns, organised militias, everything would be thrown at the Aswang population for years, sometimes even decades, until finally things would settle down, diets would be strictly regulated and the next generation of kids would laugh at their parents and say, 'aswang aren't real, idiot.'

Of course, this all changed with the "discovery" of the islands by the Spanish, when wretches became all you could eat.

For the next four hundred years, the Aswang population grew and grew and grew, until 1952 when a freak gas explosion at the Annual Aswang Growth & Prosperity Symposium wiped out almost two thirds of their number.

After that, the remaining aswang retreated to the fringes of society [and the bottle], with one in particular choosing an out of the way nightclub in Cebu as their base of solitude.

For five nights a week, Aswang#1 would put on their female skin costume and sing to a room of washed-up foreign perverts, then pick one of the drunker ones to take into the back room and sip from. Or drain, if the victim was especially aggravating.

And draining was exactly what Aswang#1 was doing, on a run-of-the-mill Tuesday night in September, when a green portal opened up suddenly behind their victim's blood-stained neck and an exact replica of themselves tumbled out.

'What the hell are you doing here?' shouted both of them at the same time, in the same voice, with the same look of irritated bafflement.

'I'm eating.'

'I was about to eat,' shot back the aswang clone, touching their lips.

'Where's your food?'

'Gone.'

'Then why don't you go too?'

'Go where? I'm already here.'

‘This is my dressing room.’

‘No, it’s not.’

‘What the hell are you talking about? Get out. Leave me to snack in peace.’

The aswang clone pushed out their claws, ready to strike...then stopped. They looked back at the wall, where the portal had deposited them, and then at their double holding the dead white guy.

Confused, Aswang#2 [as they shall be called from this point on] slumped down against the wall and put their fake female face in their fake human hands.

Aswang#1 took a few more chunks of sunburnt Brit, chewed it all down, and then said, ‘shit,’ when that old twang of *I just ate a homeless person* style guilt crept up.

‘Okay, let’s figure this out,’ they said, crouching down next to Aswang#2.

‘I’m lost.’

‘Hey, no negativity. That’s not the aswang way. Now, I may not be an expert on this kind of thing, but it seems to me that you just fell out of a green portal. Which means one of two things: time travel or alternate dimensions.’

‘This place does look pretty much the same as my one,’ Aswang#2 said, looking around the dressing room.

‘Exactly the same?’

‘I think so.’

‘Even the same photos by the mirror?’

‘Without the splatters of blood, yeah.’

‘Right. Then it must be an alternate dimension we’re dealing with.’

‘Great. How do I get back to mine?’

Aswang#1 looked at the space where the green portal had appeared, tilted their head as if they were calculating something complex then shrugged.

‘Can I borrow your phone?’

‘Why?’

‘Research.’

~~~

After an exhaustive trek through online scientific journals that neither of them could understand, as well as several bouts of hunger pain, Aswang#2 simplified things and advanced to videos with animated graphics in the thumbnails.

It worked.

Straight away they found a local myth chronicler, *NotMyNeckDude*, who went into twenty-seven minutes of detail about parallel worlds and quantum signatures and how he believed aswang, as well as other mythical creatures, originally came from one of these other dimensions.

‘That means...we both might be foreigners here,’ said Aswang#1, staring at the screen of the phone.

‘I’m so hungry,’ replied Aswang#2, eyeing the blood stream still dribbling out of the half-naked white guy in the corner.

‘That was odd,’ said another aswang, appearing out of the nearby wardrobe with a full length bubble jacket wrapped around their body.

‘Wah...who are you?’ cried Aswang#1 and #2 in unison.

‘Hang on, this isn’t my dressing room. What the hell is this? Why do you look like me, only slightly less sexy?’

‘Another copy.’

‘Less sexy?’

All three aswangs gawped at each other for at least a minute, before Aswang#3 finally got tired of the weirdness and went back inside the wardrobe and closed the door behind them.

‘Are you still out there?’ they asked, after another minute of silence.

‘Of course, it’s my dressing room,’ replied Aswang#1.

‘My portal’s disappeared,’ added Aswang#2.

The wardrobe door opened and Aswang#3 stepped back out, keeping their claws up and ready to defend as they manoeuvred themselves over to the mirror.



‘We believe we’re all from a different dimension,’ said Aswang#1, walking forward with their hands raised. ‘And we have no idea how to fix things.’

‘Fix things?’ boomed a new voice from above.

The three aswangs looked up and saw their same head poking out of the dressing room ceiling, staring down at them with a maniacal grin.

‘Why on Earth would you want to do that?’ Aswang#4 continued, putting their claws against the wall and sliding themselves down. ‘This is a vacation! Without any tangible consequences!’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Freedom, my cousins!’

Aswang#1 and #3 exchanged glances, recording and appreciating each other’s apparent scepticism.

‘Can I just have a quick nibble of that guy?’ asked Aswang#2, nudging Aswang#1 in the side.

‘You’re that hungry?’

‘My stomach hurts.’

Aswang#4 bent down and scooped up some of the guy’s shoulder. ‘Of course, eat him all up. Eat everyone. You’re on vacation.’

‘Hey, that’s my dinner,’ protested Aswang#1.

‘My dinner...’

‘I killed him.’

‘...it’s a buffet, you dolt. Endless meat.’

Aswang#3 waved their heavily padded arms in the air. ‘Can you dial it down a bit? We’re still trying to figure things out here.’

‘Ah, forget words, let me show you. Come, outside.’ Aswang#4 reached forward and grabbed Aswang#2 by the sleeve, dragging them out of the dressing room and into the main part of the club.

As was typical for this part of Cebu, dozens of sweaty white and Asian men were dancing drunkenly to western karaoke songs, while the prostitutes tried to keep track of whose hands were groping them and how much cash each wretch might have in their wallet.

‘Ah, truly the dregs of the species,’ said Aswang#4, stopping next to a large white guy in a *Cebu Playa* vest and slapping his gigantic stomach.

The guy was so drunk he thought it was Aswang#2 who was touching him, and grinned. ‘Baby, your dressing room, want it big big.’

‘You see, it’s barely coherent,’ boasted Aswang#4, waving their hand over at Aswang#1 and Aswang#3, both of whom were still hanging back by the stage corridor. ‘And completely unable to defend itself.’

‘Baby, let me get a piece of those pineapple titties,’ the man said, the smile on his face quickly replicated by the line across his throat as Aswang#4 went to work.

‘What is she-...’ mumbled Aswang#1, watching in a mix of horror and arousal as the man’s head slid off onto the dancefloor, and then panic as the other patrons started to slip on the blood trails.

‘This is not good,’ mumbled Aswang#3, zipping up their bubble jacket all the way to the tip of their nose.

Good or not, it was still happening.

Sliding and twirling between those too drunk to escape properly, Aswang#4 stabbed and sliced and bit their way through about fourteen guys before lighting a stolen cigarette and moving over to the bar.

There, they blew out smoke spirals and watched as Aswang#2 fed on the scraps, clapping as their quantum twin snapped the neck of one slob who tried to grab their ass.

‘You maniac,’ cried Aswang#1, storming over and grabbing Aswang#4 by the collar of their cocktail dress. ‘You’ve ruined everything.’

‘Ruin is a linear term. And *everything* is so much more than you think it is.’

‘My life, my food supply.’

‘Look at that aswang, they understand. No fear of the present moment. Radiant joy, exhilaration. It’s truly the only way.’

Aswang#1 loosened her grip, then let go completely. ‘You’re insane. The hunters, they’ll be here in hours.’

‘She’s right,’ said Aswang#3, joining them at the bar and pouring out a shot of green stuff. ‘We can’t survive this.’

‘Even if we run, they’ll track us.’

‘Until we’re all dead.’

Aswang#4 took the glass of green juice away from Aswang#3 and downed it in one shot. ‘Not my problem, quantum cousins.’

‘Sure, they’ll definitely go easy on you, the ringleader.’

Throwing the glass over their shoulder and waiting for the smashing sound, Aswang#4 laughed and held up their wrist. There was a metallic bracelet attached that looked vaguely futuristic, and then even more so when red lights started flashing on it.

‘Wah, you’re going to explode.’

‘Sorry, it’s my cue to leave. Have fun with the hunters.’

Out of nothing, a green portal appeared above Aswang#4’s head and sucked them up like a chunk of vomit off the club floor. It stayed open for half a second longer, almost as a gloat, then swirled inwards and evaporated into quantum nothingness.

‘She’s gone,’ muttered Aswang#3.

‘And left us to die,’ finished Aswang#1, looking back at the carnage on the dancefloor and flinching when they saw Aswang#2 licking residue off a freshly removed windpipe. ‘Unless...’

Aswang#3 squinted for a second, trying to patch into the same frequency as their doppelganger, then performed a slightly exaggerated *abbb* face when they finally cottoned on to the plan.

‘Fourteen corpses, one aswang,’ Aswang#1 said, nodding their head.

‘Not too far-fetched.’

‘And she already looks half-crazed as it is. Imagine what she’ll look like when the hunters get here.’

‘Let’s not wait around to find out.’

Aswang#1 and #3 linked claws and walked around the bodies on the dancefloor, telling a barely listening Aswang#2 that they were going to lock the doors, make sure no one else could get in.

‘You think I’ll ever be able to get back to my dimension?’ asked Aswang#3 as they left the air-con zone and headed out the back door of the club.

‘When the technology catches up,’ replied Aswang#1, gripping their comrade’s claw tighter. ‘Until then, we can hunt together.’

‘Sounds cosy.’

‘Maybe outside of the Philippines...for safety reasons.’

‘Jesus...how about Iceland?’ Aswang#3 said, almost breaking the zip on their jacket as the early morning heat hit them like a manic furnace and their forehead instantly started dripping sweat. ‘This is unbearable.’

‘Is the climate not like this in your dimension?’

‘Most of everything’s ice. Not like this at all.’

‘Okay. Iceland it is then. I’m sure they have sex tourists too.’

‘I think I’m melting.’

Aswang#1 pulled their claw away from their quantum partner and wiped the borrowed sweat off on their dress. ‘Over here. More air-con.’

‘Thank gods.’

‘You can dip your head in the ice cream freezer if you have to.’

The two aswangs hurried into the convenience store and smiled at the clerk, who was just about awake enough to smile back. As they took up the optimum position under the air vent, Aswang#1 stared across the street at the club. Their home for the last fifteen years, their steady diet, all gone because of quantum mechanics...quantum physics...quantum whatever it was.

‘I wonder where Aswang#4 ended up?’ asked Aswang#3, the sweat on their forehead slowly drying out.

‘A hell dimension, hopefully.’

‘Yeah, or a black hole.’

~~~

The green portal opened up and this time sent Aswang#4 upwards through the floor.

As with the other quantum jumps, it took a moment to adjust, but once the basic environment was configured, they could initiate the usual next step: find the nearest human blobs, pick out the most annoying and-

Aswang#4 stopped, pushing their claws against ridiculously hard glass.

‘What the-’

There was a huge cylinder surrounding them, all the way around, and another version of themselves in a mortician’s apron staring back from the other side.

‘Let me out of here, what’s going on?’

An electronic buzzer sounded, three bursts.

Then a voice.

‘Calm yourself. The purification process will begin soon.’

‘The what?’

‘As with all other aberrations, you will be returned to the whole.’

‘Hole?’

‘In the form of food.’

‘No...no, wait...’

‘Brace yourself. There will be some pain.’

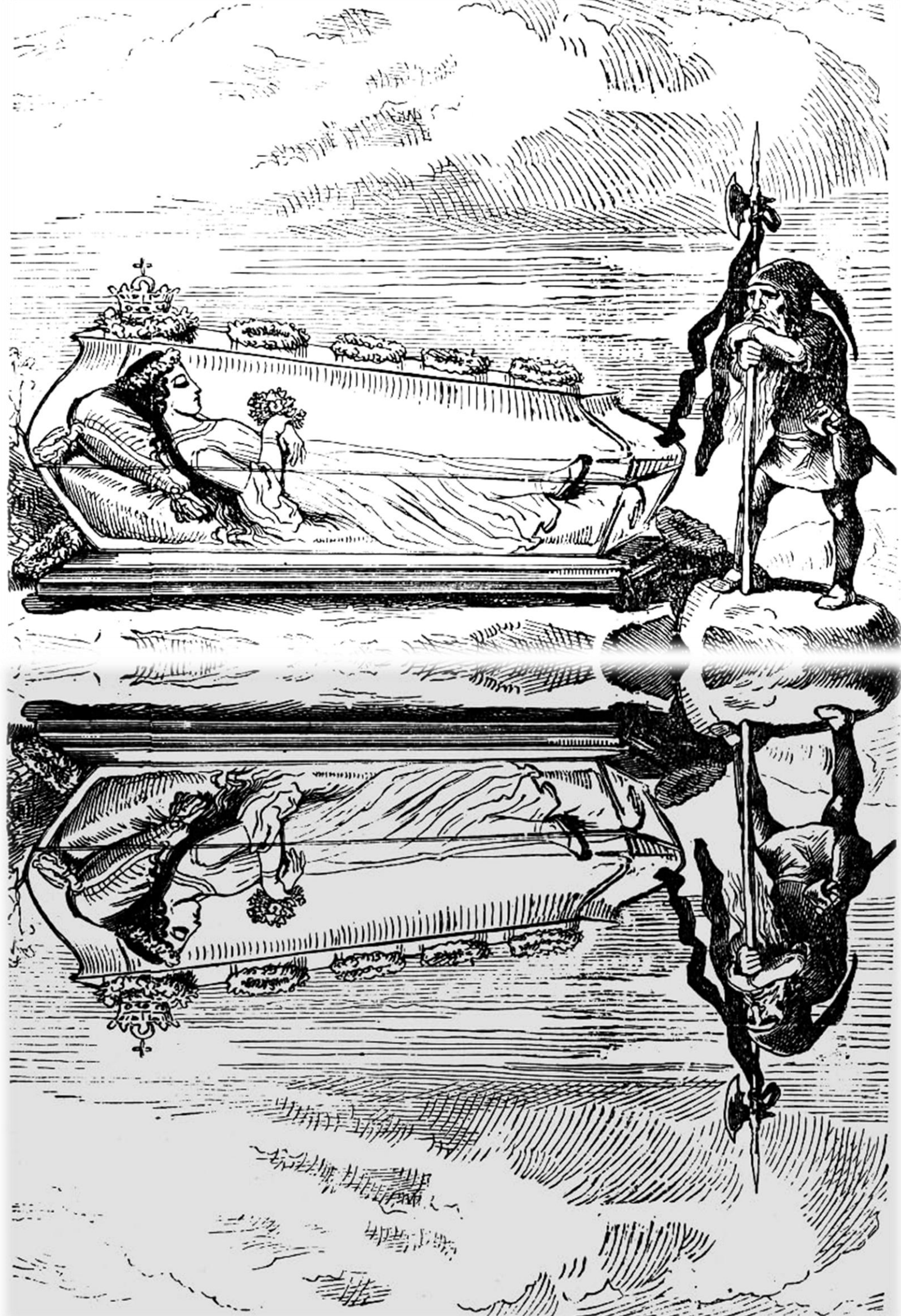
Aswang#4 tried to scream but the sound was sucked out of the air and replaced by a stream of dense, purple gas, which brought them slowly, diligently, inevitably down to the floor.

Next, there was a few minutes of elevator music.

Some abrupt fragments of drilling noise.

Then a hissing sound as the gas was drained back out again, leaving a pile of surprisingly even, diced-up body parts at the bottom of the cylinder.

‘Perfect,’ said Aswang 0, looking down from outside the cylinder, licking the ends of their teeth with a twelve inch tongue.



Snow White hits 40

A long time ago, in the lush and mountainous land of Sloveno [the kingdom next to the kingdom that Snow White used to live in], there lived a beautiful, thirty-nine-year old woman with coal black hair and Icelandic white skin.

Her name was blindingly obvious, but I'll type it anyway in case aliens are reading this.

Snow White. Remember her?

A woman so beautiful at eighteen that her stepmother tried to murder her.

Luckily, that stepmother was incompetent and somehow managed to fail three times in a row [shotgun blast to the face would've done the trick], though to be fair she was constrained by narrative norms and contrived hunter morality syst-...

After the first assassination attempt, seven local miners took Snow White in, made her do all the housework then refused to bury her after she was poisoned by a random crone [actually the wicked queen, finally succeeding]. Luckily, a creepy prince rode by, revived Snow White then, as she sat there confused and disoriented, took her back to his kingdom ~~as a love slave~~ to be installed as his wife.

After further gaslighting, Snow White became the queen of that prince's kingdom [The Kingdom of Sloveno] and spent a lot of her free time washing her hair, as well as dabbing insane amounts of anti-ageing cream on her face. The idea, from within her own psychological prison, was to keep the same appearance she'd had when she was 18 years old.

To achieve this, she tried assorted methods: avoiding the sun, never dying her hair a garish colour, drinking weird medicine that doctors said would reverse the ageing process, going to bed at 7pm, to name but a few.

Why would someone so high up do such things? Simple. The prince who'd [creepily] tried to carry her body back to his castle when she was half-dead in that glass coffin, and later married her after she'd woken up, adored her long, black hair and pale white skin. She knew that he liked them because he would always say it to her.

'Your hair is so black that I sometimes feel like I'm staring into Outer Space.'

'Thank you, my king.'

‘And your skin is so white that sometimes I feel like I’m fucking a polar bear.’

‘What?’

‘So pale and beautiful.’

‘Are you calling me hairy?’

‘No, no, no, no, no...’

‘You just called me a polar bear?’

‘Yes, but only the white part.’

‘You compared me to a bear.’

‘I didn’t mean to.’

‘Punishment!’

And Snow White would usually discipline the king by punching him in the stomach. However, the king didn’t complain a great deal as he loved Snow White, despite the fact that they had little in common to talk about.

As for the rest of the kingdom, all the women [or all the ones who spent six days a week in *Sasa*] thought Snow White was the most beautiful queen they had ever seen, so they tried to mimic her style, particularly her two most famous attributes.

Hence the queues for the city’s hair salons would be endless, as women waited to have their hair dyed black, and the DIY shops would

sell out of white paint daily as they attempted to smear buckets of it on their skin.

Some women opted for yoghurt, a cheaper alternative, but that didn't really work well; it just made their skin wet.

Of course, the white paint wasn't that effective either.

However, the emulation parade continued for years, not only out of envy, but admiration for Snow White's generosity and kind spirit, as well as her fierce commitment to animal rights, particularly the cute ones that no one ate.

'Why do I have to build little houses for the forest animals again?' the king sometimes asked.

'Because they sang songs to me when I was younger.'

'But that was nearly twenty years ago.'

'I don't care. I love all animals, and they love me.'

'What about those seven dwarves who sometimes stand outside the castle, asking for money?'

Snow White's face turned red, and she breathed out angrily.

'Those seven snakes,' she said, almost hissing, 'all they want is my money. They are so selfish.'

'You mean, my money?' replied the king.

'What?'

‘The money in the castle. I think you’ll find it belongs to the king. Me.’

Snow White stared at him, annoyed. ‘I’m sorry, how do you make all that money again?’

‘By being a wise and humble king.’

‘Rubbish. The people give it to you through taxes.’

‘Yes, because they love me and I take care of them, wisely and humbly.’

‘Ha. They give it to you because if they don’t, you will put them in prison or execute them.’

‘I would never do that.’

‘Then why are there five hundred and seventy-one people in the castle dungeon right now?’

‘Ah, that’s different. They are thieves, they stole from me.’

‘How did they steal from you?’

‘Very easily, it seems.’

‘By not paying your taxes?’

‘Well, yes.’

Snow White sighed.

‘This conversation is going on quite long,’ said the king, stretching his arms. ‘It feels like we are going to argue. Can I take a break?’

Snow White nodded.

The king bowed to her, said, 'I'll be right back,' then turned and walked quickly out of the room.

Snow White waited an hour, but the king did not return.

'Oh well,' she said to herself, 'he may be selfish and lazy, but I still love him. Where's my magic mirror?'

~~~

Every morning, just like her stepmother, Snow White would stand in front of her magic mirror and ask, 'magic mirror on the wall, who is the prettiest woman in the world?'

And the mirror would say, 'Kou Shibasaki.'

After shaking her head, Snow White would edit her question and ask again. 'Who is the most beautiful woman in the whole world, not including Japan?'

But the mirror was very unreliable and would continue to answer with different names each day. One morning, standing in front of the mirror with bags under her eyes, Snow White asked the mirror, 'who's the most beautiful woman in the whole world, excluding Japan, Ghana, Angola, Greece, Egypt, Iran, Bangladesh, Hungary, Brazil and the wilder parts of Scandinavia?'

And this time the mirror answered, 'Fan Bing Bing.'

'Who?'

‘Chinese actress. Good at making money. Bad at paying tax.’

‘Who?’ Snow White repeated, her face skipping red and going straight to purple.

The magic mirror showed a picture of Fan Bing Bing on its glass surface; a screenshot of her posing next to a fountain, her breasts pushed so far up her chest they were almost touching her chin.

‘Her? She looks like a surprised owl.’

‘I like her.’

‘A surprised owl slut.’

‘I like those too.’

As usual, Snow White edited her question. ‘Okay. Scratch that. Who is the most beautiful woman in the whole world, not including the usual countries and the entire continent of Asia?’

‘That’s almost four billion people.’

‘Just answer my question,’ Snow White said angrily.

‘You seem upset today.’

‘I’m not upset,’ she shouted. ‘I had four hours sleep last night because the king decided to go out and not come back. So, I am very, very tired. Now tell me, who is the most beautiful woman in the whole world excluding the entire continent of...ah, forget it, who is the most beautiful woman in this kingdom? There, that’s better.’

The mirror paused for a while, then replied, ‘you, of course.’



‘Why did you take so long to answer?’

‘I needed time to think.’

‘Why?’

‘Because there is another beautiful woman in this kingdom.’

‘What? Who?’

‘Actually, she is not from this kingdom, she is a refugee. Her name is Damijana. I believe her own country had a mad king who tried to kill everyone with hair, so she ran away and came here.’

‘What? Why here? Where is she now?’

The mirror paused, checking its internal scanner. ‘She is currently eating breakfast with the king.’

‘What?’

‘Alone.’

‘No guards? No servants?’

‘None.’

Snow White felt so angry and jealous that her brain almost exploded. She fell onto the floor and started to sob into the carpet.

‘But...’ she cried, ‘you said I was the most beautiful woman in this kingdom. Why is the king with her?’

‘She’s quite young.’

‘But I am young too...and beautiful.’

The mirror paused again.

‘Stop pausing!’

‘I’m sorry, my queen. I have to be honest. I only said you were the most beautiful woman because you were so upset. Actually, the young woman called Damijana is far more beautiful than you.’

‘No. No. That’s not true. That’s impossible.’

‘Search your feelings, Lu-...sorry, loose transistor.’ The mirror coughed, or mimicked the sound of one. ‘I am sorry, my queen, but it is the truth.’

~~~

After punching the mattress over a hundred times, Snow White calmed herself down, put on a large jacket and hurried out of the castle. The guards asked her where she was going, but she refused to answer.

After walking for two miles, Snow White came to a cottage in the forest and knocked on the door.

There was a pleasant smell coming from inside, and lots of singing.

‘Open the door, you little shits,’ Snow White shouted.

The singing stopped and the door opened. Standing there were the seven dwarves, all of them very surprised.

‘Who is the most beautiful woman in the world?’ she asked, pulling herself up to full height.

‘What?’

‘Most beautiful woman, whole world, who is it?’

The dwarf rubbed his beard then answered. ‘Shibasaki Kou.’

‘Not including Asia.’

‘That’s three billion people, I can’t just-’

‘Shut up and tell me I look beautiful,’ interrupted Snow White, her face turning volcano-like.

‘You?’

‘Say it.’

‘You got money?’ asked one of the other dwarves, moving to the front.

Snow White threw him a gold coin.

‘That’s it?’

She threw one more.

‘You look beautiful,’ said the dwarf in a flat tone, pocketing both.

‘Really, you all think so?’

The other dwarves stayed silent, so Snow White pulled out six more gold coins and handed them over.

‘You look beautiful,’ they all said robotically.

‘More beautiful than anyone else?’

The dwarves glanced at each other, scratching their beards.

‘Well?’

‘Are we still excluding Asia?’

Snow White screamed and slammed the door. The dwarves were surprised as it was their door, not hers, but they instantly got over it and went back to their dinner, which was roasted horse. They didn’t actually want to eat horse, but all other animals were protected by the king, so they couldn’t be eaten. Horse was the only thing left on the menu.

‘She looked quite old,’ said one of the dwarves, sitting down and stroking his huge belly. ‘Tits were starting to droop a bit too.’

‘And her cheeks.’

‘I saw neck flaps.’

‘Me too.’

‘It’s true, she looked way better before.’

‘Way younger.’

‘Way thinner.’

‘Yup.’

‘She seems really whiny now too...did you notice?’

‘I did.’

‘Me too.’

‘Can’t believe we ever let her clean our house.’

‘Me neither.’

‘We were so dumb back then.’

‘Tis true.’

‘Dumber than Duke James De Woods.’

‘Who?’

‘Dumb guy at the city amphitheatre. Said kindergarten students should carry guns. And the moon was a socialist prison camp.’

‘Sad.’

‘The saddest.’ The dwarf looked at the plate on the table. ‘More horse?’

‘You bet.’

~~~

Meanwhile, Snow White was so depressed at hearing she wasn’t that beautiful anymore that she ran and ran and ran, not knowing where she was going, until finally she came to a small building near the edge of a cliff. There was a light on in the window, and a big sign above the door that said *INSTANT BOTOX*.

‘Botox,’ Snow White muttered to herself, walking up to the door of the building and peering in through the window.

Inside was a young woman in a white cloak behind a desk, typing on a computer, and on the wall were many pictures of females, old and young alike. Below the pictures, it said in large text, *Before* and *After*.

Snow White scrutinised the pictures more closely and realised that all the young females in the pictures were also the older ones. How was

that possible? The old females were so haggard, whereas the young women were so...okay, not really that beautiful, but definitely not haggard.

Snow White sat down on the grass and thought for a while. If those ugly, old women could look [relatively] young, she told herself, then someone beautiful like me could look really, really beautiful again. Then the king would throw that Damijana girl off the nearest cliff and come scuttling back between my thigh...back into my arms!

Snow White stood back up and walked inside the building. The woman in the white cloak behind the desk glanced at her once then asked if she was there for Botox or liposuction.

‘I don’t know yet. What exactly is Botox?’

‘It’s where we make your cheeks very big and firm, and you can look young again.’

‘And what is liposuction?’

‘We take a vacuum cleaner and suck the fat from your stomach.’

‘Hmm, sounds painful.’

‘Not really. There are three settings: gentle, medium and black hole. Black Hole may tickle a bit, but when it’s finished, you will look as thin as a Russian biscuit.’

‘I’m not familiar with that variety of biscuit.’

‘Very thin.’

‘Okay, maybe just the Botox then.’

‘Do you have any money?’

‘I’m the queen.’

‘Is that code for something?’

‘No, I’m serious. It’s me, the queen.’

The woman in the white cloak put on her glasses, examined Snow White’s face for about thirty seconds then nodded. She pressed a button under her desk and, a few seconds later, a door opened. A tall, elderly yet distinguished woman walked out, dressed like a TV doctor.

‘It can’t be,’ Snow White mumbled, staring at the figure in front of her. ‘You’re dead.’

‘Ah, you’re here at last,’ the doctor lady said. ‘I knew you would come one day, but I didn’t know it would be so soon.’

‘How is this possible?’

‘Well, long story short: I got kicked out of the palace, worked in advertising for a while, got bored of making bread commercials, so I left and started this clinic. Impressive, right?’

‘You’re a doctor?’

‘A specialist actually. I help ugly women become young again.’

‘But you look so old.’

‘Ha. And ugly?’

Snow White paused and studied the face of the stepmother who had tried to kill her so many years before. Although she had many wrinkles and pockets of fat, her face looked quite friendly. Or distinguished, as she had first thought.

The stepmother walked towards Snow White and took her by the hand, leading her into the other room. Despite shaking a little out of fear, Snow White allowed herself be led.

~~~

The room they entered was the stepmother's office, a small space with olive green walls, pictures of two, smiling children on the desk and half a dozen certificates framed and mounted behind the stepmother's head. Snow White tried to read some of them, but the writing was strange and unfamiliar.

'They are from universities in Iran and China.'

'Who?'

The stepmother stared at her like she was a two year-old goldfish.

'Sorry, I'm still in shock,' said Snow White, switching to the pictures on the desk. 'Who are these children?'

'My two kids.'

'They look cute.'

'Did look cute. They're dead now. No, not ritual sacrifice. The plague, ten years ago. Or the Universe's revenge as my boyfriend at the time put it. He's dead now, too. Ritual sacrifice.' The stepmother turned

her back, rubbed her face, turned round again, picked up an orange from the fruit bowl on her desk and passed it to Snow White. 'Hungry?'

Snow White looked at the orange and started to sweat.

'No need to panic, it's safe.' The stepmother peeled it and took a bite. 'Now, what brings you here, stepdaughter?'

'I don't know.'

'Botox? Liposuction?'

'Definitely not liposuction.'

'Botox then?'

Snow White paused. She paused so long that the stepmother got bored and started playing on her computer. Finally, Snow White snapped out of her trance and told the stepmother what had happened to her over the last twenty years.

'Yes, I understand,' said the stepmother, finally. 'It is my story too. I hit 40 and thought my life was over. Your father stopped looking at me and started looking at younger girls instead. Not just looking, chasing them, taking them into our own bed, telling me to budge over. That was dispiriting enough, but then you became 18 and...'

'...you tried to kill me.'

'Kind of.'

'Three times.'

'Was it three?'

‘That I know of.’

The stepmother pretended to type something important on the computer. After two minutes, she came back to Snow White, saying, ‘if you’re unhappy with your life, of course, I can Botox your face, but I don’t think that would solve your underlying problem.’

‘What is my underlying problem?’

‘I think you know.’

‘I do not.’

‘You married a psychopath who likes to poke young women.’

Snow White tried to protest, but she couldn’t think of anything to say except, ‘he’s only poking one at the moment.’

The stepmother opened a drawer in her desk and pulled out another piece of fruit, this one an incredibly red and shiny apple just like the one from twenty years before.

‘Oh no, no, no, no,’ said Snow White, hands raised in defiance. ‘You’re not getting me again.’

‘Calm down, it’s not poisoned. However, it does have some magic in it. See, if you eat this apple, it will send you into a coma for three days. All the doctors will say you are as good as dead, but really you’ll be fine.’

‘Why would I want to fake being dead?’

‘After you go into the coma, I will come to the castle and pretend to be a doctor. I will tell your lovely king that there is only one way to bring

you back to life, and then give him a pill. If he gives it to you, you will wake up. If he doesn't, you will die. Of course, you will not really die, but he won't know that.'

'You think he won't give me the pill?'

'Let's follow my plan and see, shall we?'

Snow White looked at the apple and at first said no, and then repeated it many more times, remembering the last time she'd eaten fruit given to her by her stepmother. However, after the stepmother had fed the new apple to one of the nurses at the Botox clinic, and that nurse had woken up again three days later, Snow White decided to give it a try.

'Remember, you only need to take one bite,' said the stepmother.

'Got it,' replied Snow White, putting the apple in her pocket.

'Don't eat it all.'

'No problem, I hate fruit.'

~~~

Later that night, when she had returned to the castle and the king had hugged her tighter than he had in years, she took out the apple and stared at it.

He's really not that bad, she thought. And it seems like he really missed me when I was gone.

But then she looked at the empty bed around her and remembered the new girl he'd been seeing. Damijana, the beautiful, seductive refugee with alarm clock titties. How could she compete with someone like that?

Snow White picked up the apple, took a big bite and collapsed almost instantly onto the pillow.

~~~

The king discovered her the next morning - after returning from a secret rendezvous with Damijana in the Animal Rights Office – and almost had a coronary. When he had fanned himself back to a calmer state, he called for the royal doctors to come quickly and conduct an examination.

Just as the stepmother had predicted, they all had no clue how to heal the queen, so the king spent another day and night worrying, biting his nails and pacing up and down the corridors.

Two thoughts did battle in his head:

My wife, my wife and potential new wife, potential new wife.

It was unclear which one was winning.

~~~

The next morning, the stepmother appeared in disguise at the gate of the castle and told the guards she was a famous doctor from a faraway land who had the cure for the queen's sickness.

The guards let her in without any kind of security check and took her to the king.

‘You are a doctor?’ asked the king, squinting at her.

‘A famous and respected one, yes.’

‘You look like my grandma.’

The stepmother glared at him, running fingers against the edges of her nails.

‘Ah, tell me then, if you are such a great doctor, how can I save my wife?’

‘It’s easy. All you need to do is give her this pill, and she will wake up within a few hours. If you don’t, she will die within two days.’

The king took the pill and examined it. ‘What’s in it?’

‘Powders and herbs.’

‘It’ll definitely work?’

‘I assure you, it will. But if you wait longer than two days, nothing will save her.’

The king shrugged and said he’d give it a try. ‘But if it harms her in any way, I will have you executed.’

‘I’m used to that attitude from kings,’ the stepmother mumbled.

‘What?’

‘Nothing, Your Majesty.’

The king took leave of the stepmother/doctor and hurried to the bedroom to give his wife the pill. However, as he stood over her sleeping body, he paused. She looks quite wrinkly from here, he thought.

And she can't give me any children. If I save her, she may live to be a hundred years old. Sixty more years of sleeping next to this. And once she's over fifty, it'll be even worse, she'll look like a depressed prune.

The king took the pill and threw it out the window. It landed in the river below, sinking quickly and quietly beneath the surface.

~~~

Two days later, Snow White woke up from her coma, much to the king's surprise.

'What happened?' she asked, slightly dazed.

'You were sick, but now you're not.' He hugged her tight, maybe too tight. 'I love you so much.'

'How did I recover?'

'A famous doctor came and gave me a pill. She said it would bring you back to life within two days, and it did. I am so happy.'

The king hugged her again, cursing the doctor in his thoughts, then stood back up and told her to get some rest.

'Where are you going?'

'Err...I have many things to do. King work.'

'Please don't leave me for long,' said Snow White, still feeling sleepy.

'Of course not, my dear.'

The king kissed her forehead then rushed downstairs and ordered the guards to bring the famous doctor to him immediately.

~~~

An hour later, the stepmother [again disguised as the doctor] arrived and asked the king if everything was okay.

‘My wife...is awake.’

‘That’s wonderful news.’

‘Yes, but...you said she would die if I did not give her the pill.’

‘That’s right, she would’ve. But clearly you gave her the pill as she is not dead.’

The king bit his tongue, realising he was trapped.

‘May I visit the queen? I would like to check on her condition.’

‘Why? Is there still danger?’

‘Perhaps. I should check first.’

The king nodded and led the doctor to the queen’s room. When they were alone, the stepmother asked Snow White if she was feeling okay.

‘I’m not dead. That’s a good thing.’

‘Actually, I’m afraid it isn’t.’

Snow White took her stepmother’s hand. ‘I’m sorry that I doubted you. You are not the same person who tried to kill me all those years ago.’

‘I told you.’

‘But you were also wrong about my husband. He gave me the pill and I’m alive again, which proves that he loves me.’

The stepmother pulled a pill from her pocket and held it up.  
‘Actually, he threw this pill out of the window and into the river.’

‘What? It can’t be...’

‘Luckily, I put a spell on the pill to return to me if discarded. Otherwise, we would never have known that your husband wishes you dead.’

‘But...he said he gave me the pill.’

‘He lied.’

Snow White shook her head and, no matter how many times the stepmother explained things to her, she refused to believe it.

‘Okay, then I will test him again. And this time you will see it for yourself.’

The stepmother left the room and spoke to the king in private. She told him that, although Snow White seemed healthy again, she was actually in great danger and only one pill could save her.

‘The same pill?’

‘No.’ The stepmother pulled a black and purple pill from her bag.  
‘This one is very dangerous. It must be given to her at exactly midnight. If it is given at any other time, it will kill her within an hour.’



‘That sounds crazy. What if I give it to her at 11:59, or 00:01?’

‘One minute before or after midnight is okay. She will not die. But any longer than that and you will never see her alive again.’

‘Then I will follow your instructions,’ replied the king, taking the pill. ‘But I warn you again, if she dies, you die too.’

The stepmother nodded and left the castle.

~~~

That night, the king waited until midnight then took out the pill. Snow White opened her eyes and asked why he wasn’t sleeping.

‘I’m protecting you, dear queen.’

‘My hero,’ said Snow White and went back to sleep.

At one minute past midnight, the king put the pill to Snow White’s lips. He paused again, thinking. The doctor lied last time, so this may be a trick. But no one knows about this pill, so what is there to lose? If it doesn’t work, I’ll accept it. If it works, great, then I can marry Damijana.

He put the pill back in his pocket, walked around the room for a few minutes then went back to the bed and fed the pill to Snow White.

She hesitated a little, but he managed to open her mouth and force it down, along with some water.

~~~

The next morning, the king woke up and saw Snow White stretching in the corner of the room. Shocked that she was still alive, he asked her what she was doing.

‘Yoga.’

‘It’s so early. Don’t you feel sick?’

‘I feel great.’

The king muttered, ‘great,’ cursed the doctor then went back to sleep. When he finally got up at eleven o’clock, the doctor was sitting beside his bed and Snow White was nowhere to be seen.

‘What is this?’ the king asked, pulling the covers over his chest. ‘Who let you in here?’

‘The guards.’ She pointed at the four men standing at the back of the room, looking very serious. ‘I have some bad news to give you.’

‘They let you in?’ The king sat up, glaring at the guards. ‘They don’t have the authority to do that, only I do.’

‘Your Majesty, I really must tell you the bad news.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Your wife, the queen...she passed out while doing exercise earlier. I didn’t know she would be so foolish as to do such a strenuous thing, but...’

‘But what?’

‘She’s dead, Your Majesty.’

‘What?’

‘She died thirty minutes ago. I’m very sorry.’

‘Died? But she was just in this room, doing yoga moves.’

‘That was why she died.’

‘But...she can’t be....you said she would-’

‘Her body is in the guest chambers if you would like to say goodbye to her. As for the funeral, that is your business.’ The stepmother/doctor stood up and bowed. ‘I must leave you now. I have other patients to attend to.’

The stepmother walked slowly out of the room, leaving the king alone on his bed in a state of confusion.

An hour later, he knelt before the body of Snow White, unable to look at her face. Instead, he held her hand and stroked it.

‘I’m sorry, my love,’ he whispered. ‘I will remember you always.’

~~~

One month later, the king married the foreign lady called Damijana. After the wedding, he stayed in the palace a lot and seemed to carry on with his life the same way he had before Snow White’s death.

However, once a year, on the anniversary of Snow White’s death, some of the guards would find him next to her burial place, crying like a new-born child and shouting, ‘I didn’t mean it, I didn’t mean it,’ over

and over until one of the guards got him in a headlock and guided him to sleep.

Meanwhile, the stepmother went back to her Botox clinic and worked for another two years before deciding to close it down and spend the rest of her life travelling.

‘Won’t you get lonely?’ asked one of her patients, bringing her a basket of fruit as a farewell gift.

The stepmother shook her head. ‘My daughter will be with me.’

‘You have another daughter, one who survived the plague?’

‘I do.’

‘And she’s not married?’

‘She was, but sadly her husband died.’

‘That’s terrible.’

‘At first, yes, it was.’ The stepmother picked up the photo on her desk, of herself and her daughter. ‘But she’s okay now.’

‘That’s her?’

The stepmother nodded.

‘Her skin is so white, kinda like...’

‘...a polar bear,’ finished the stepmother.

‘That’s right. It’s uncanny, almost the exact same colour.’

‘Yes, everyone says that.’

~~~

That night, the stepmother returned home and sat down at the dinner table. There was a giant roast chicken and a bowl of potatoes, freshly cooked.

‘Smells good,’ she said, but her daughter didn’t come out from the kitchen. She called again but there was still no answer, so she got up and went to check for herself.

Snow White was standing next to the stove, holding a piece of paper. The stepmother walked over and looked at it.

‘A royal notice?’

‘Yes.’

The stepmother read the small print and nodded.

‘The king is dead,’ Snow White said softly.

‘So soon?’

‘They found his body on the rocks by the beach.’

‘Ha, then long live the queen,’ replied the stepmother, patting Snow White on the shoulder. ‘Because that king was a complete psycho.’

‘He was my husband.’

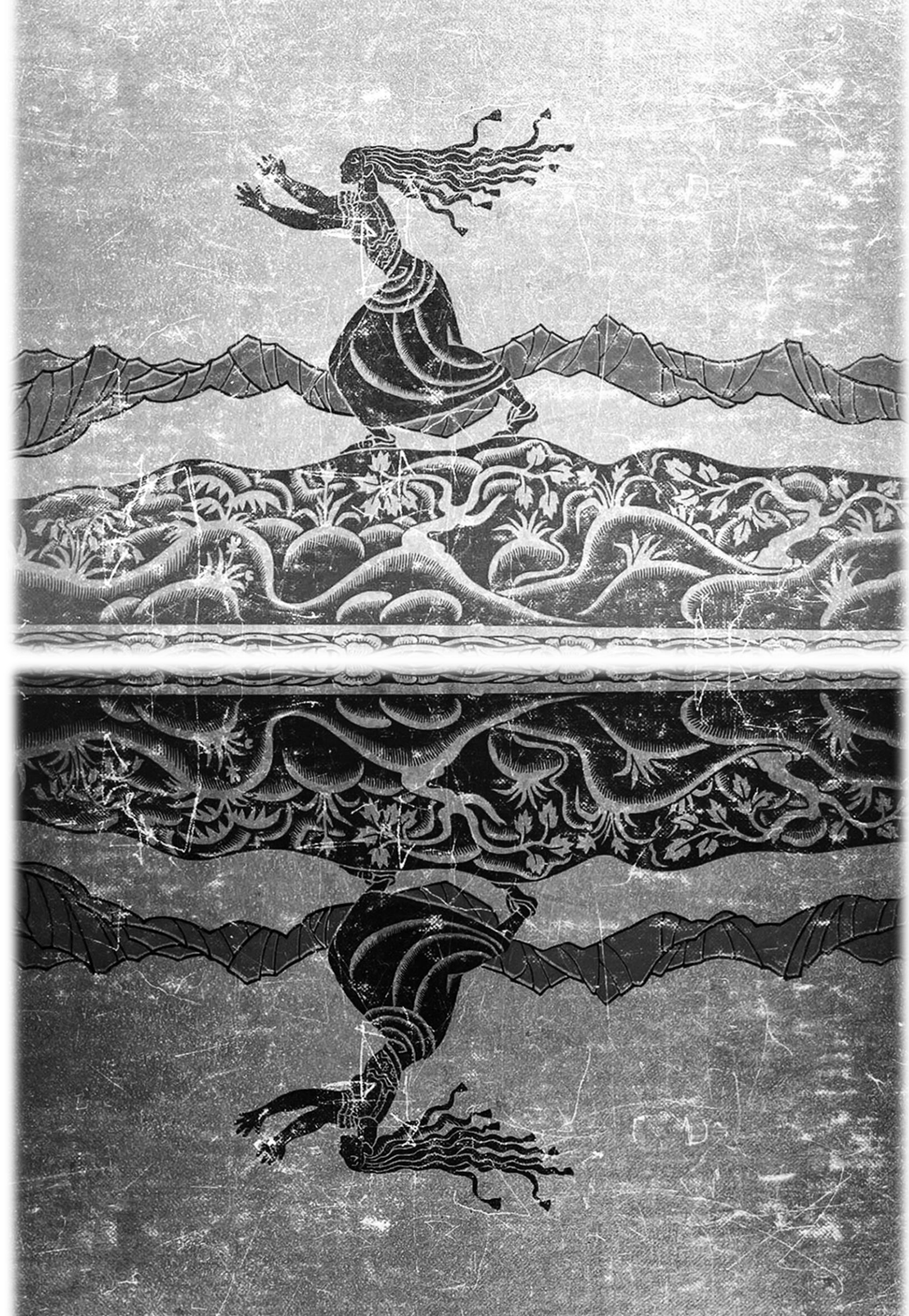
‘Your complete psycho husband.’

‘Was he truly that awful?’ mumbled Snow White, stroking the roast chicken and burning her hand without realising. ‘I don’t know anymore.’

‘He let you die. Twice.’

‘I guess...’

‘Nope, no guessing, he was horrible. It’s 112% fact.’ The stepmother took Snow White’s hand and sat her down on one of the seats. ‘Now, why don’t we start dinner? This chicken’s not going to eat itself.’



## No Country for Elderly Witches

Not many people know this, mostly because I've just made it up, but the witch who was pushed into the oven and burnt to death in *Hansel and Gretel* didn't actually perish.

Well, technically, she did perish, toasting out into a pile of nondescript ashes...but those ashes lay there for ten years, undisturbed, until, one day, some vague magic reconnected each piece of ash to the other and the witch was miraculously brought back to life.

It took a few minutes for her to realise where she was and what had happened, but when she did, she also remembered the magic spell she'd cast on herself to save her from ever dying. Delighted with her power of foresight, she climbed out of the oven and took a shower.

However, there was no water, and no shower either. The witch looked around and saw that half of her cottage had been destroyed, eaten by greedy children probably.



‘Ah, those two little pests...they’ve ruined my house!’

She wanted to call the police, but she had no phone. And she couldn’t cast a spell on them as her magic book of spells had been taken too.

‘As long as they haven’t found my secret stash of money, I should be okay,’ she said, walking to her secret stash of money and finding an empty hole in the wall.

She sank down to the floor and screamed. The spiders living in the hole screamed too. Annoyed at the competition, the witch switched to sobbing. Then, when the spiders had gone, she went back to screaming. Those disgusting kids...they’d taken everything from her, and now they were going to pay for it. No matter how long it took, she would get her revenge.

But first, she had to find some cash.

~~~

After gathering all the things left that could potentially be sold, the witch set off into the forest. She thought she remembered the way to the nearest town, but after one hour she was lost.

‘Ah, who designed this place? All the trees look the fucking same.’

It’s true, all the trees did look the same, as if someone had copied and pasted one tree a thousand times, and, after wandering in circles for another two hours, the witch started to get hungry.

‘Maybe I could eat a squirrel,’ she said to herself, but luckily she didn’t have to as the forest slowly disappeared and was replaced by a small town. From a distance, it looked vaguely futuristic; strange cylinders with smoke rising out the top, multi-floor buildings, roads with more than one lane, but as she got closer, she noticed a few older-style cottages mixed in with the horror and breathed a sigh of relief.

Still my world, she thought.

~~~

Reaching the main shopping district, the witch squinted at all the strange signs and bizarro fashions laid out as a dystopian postcard before her.

‘Vietnamese noodle,’ she muttered, reading the English from one of the signs. ‘Was that a textile? A food?’

Feeling dizzy and a little bit alien, she sat down on a bench and closed her eyes...until a man with a large stick hit her legs and yelled, ‘no sitting.’

‘I’m adapting,’ she barked back, putting her hands into a magic-conducting pose.

‘This bench is a memorial to the founders of this town. If you wish to sit, go to one of the benches outside the fast food restaurants.’

‘Doesn’t look like a memorial to me. Doesn’t even have any names.’

The policeman hit her legs again. ‘This is your last warning, crone. Move on.’

‘What did you call me?’

‘Now.’

After getting hit three more times and failing to conjure up any magical curse in response, the witch growled and moved on. Focus on something you know, she told herself. Something familiar.

Ah, over there...finally. An old friend.

~~~

Entering the pawn shop with the *NO REFUND* sign in the window, she skipped the pleasantries and dumped all her belongings on the counter.

The owner of the shop glanced at the witch then at the stuff, and said in a snobby voice, ‘five marks.’

‘Five marks? That won’t even get me dinner.’

‘Four marks.’

‘What? Where did five go?’

‘I don’t like people who complain. Four marks, take it or leave it.’

The witch thought it over, but there was nothing really to think about. She knew this was the best offer she would get and she really needed to eat soon, so she mumbled a quiet ‘yes’ and took the money.

‘You should be grateful, no one else would’ve taken this stuff from you,’ said the owner, smirking.

‘You should be grateful that I don’t have my book of spells or I’d...’

She walked out of the shop with her four marks and looked for somewhere to eat. In the distance, she could see a hill with a castle on top, but that was not for someone like her. Instead, she chose a burger bar called *McDonaldo* and sat down near the window.

Twenty minutes drifted by before she noticed that all the other customers were ordering at the counter, so she got up, queued for a few minutes then ordered a cheeseburger. After being stared at for two and a half minutes, she was told that she needed to pay.

‘For what?’

‘The burger.’

‘This?’

‘Two marks ninety.’

‘But it looks like it’s been fished out of the bin.’

‘Pay or leave.’

‘Mama fucking Voodoo...fine, how much?’

‘Two marks ninety.’

‘I’ll give you one.’

‘Plus one mark ninety.’

The witch glared as fiercely as she could, but the staff was implacable. Possibly some kind of magical influence by the management.'

'Two marks ninety,' the staff repeated, gesturing at the counter surface.

'Fine, fine, don't hector me. Here's your two marks ninety,' said the witch, handing over three marks.

The staff took it and put it in a draw.

'Where's the change?'

'Sorry, there's no coin lower than a mark.'

'You mean, the burger costs three marks.'

'Two marks ninety.'

'But I gave you three marks.'

'Correct.'

'So why not just say the price is three marks?'

'It's psychological.'

'Psycho what?'

'Sorry, madam, but there are seventeen people behind you. Please wait for your burger over there.'

'Actually, I'm quite thirsty. Can I get a glass of water?'

'Certainly. That'll be zero point ten marks.'

‘Ah, forget it.’

‘Have a good day, madam.’

‘Fucking vulture!’

On the wall next to the counter, the witch noticed a piece of paper with the heading *HELP NEEDED*. The staff serving the burgers saw her looking at it and told her she should talk to the manager, though they already had someone to clean the rubbish from the tables.

The witch glared at the young girl with blue hair then, after eating what seemed to be a cheeseburger but tasted more like rice paper that had been licked by a bored cow, she went to talk to the manager.

‘I will demean myself to work here,’ she said, holding in the urge to spit in the man’s face. ‘How much do you pay for one hour?’

‘The monthly salary is amazingly good. You’ll love it. Tell me, do you have a resume I could look at?’

‘A what?’

‘Your resume. The piece of paper with all your information on it.’

‘I have one mark, that’s all.’

‘Okay, maybe you can just tell me then. Where have you worked before?’

‘Nowhere.’

‘You’ve never had a job?’

‘No, I was a witch.’

‘But...how did you make money?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I killed people and took theirs.’

The manager scratched his head and checked to see that there were still people nearby. ‘Okay...well, what school did you go to?’

‘What is a school?’

‘The place where you learn things as a child.’

‘Oh. No, I was never a child.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I appeared one day in the middle of the forest, along with my cottage. Everything I know is from my own study. Actually, I did learn some other things from random people who passed by.’

‘Which people?’

‘The ones I killed and ate.’

The manager turned white. ‘You ate them too?’

‘If they were fat enough. Sometimes I would just put them in the freezer for a while and eat squirrels instead.’

‘Err...this is a very interesting story.’

‘Does that mean I have the job?’

‘Well, normally, I’d call the police, but we are short at the moment, so...’

‘I’ll do anything, as long as you give me money.’

‘Yes, that’s the idea of a job. You work, we pay you money. Now, why don’t you come back tomorrow and I’ll show you what to do for your new job. But I must warn you, no killing, and definitely no eating, or you’ll be fired.’

The witch nodded, stood up then paused. ‘Hang on, do you also provide housing for your workers?’

‘Are you serious?’

‘Why would I be joking? I don’t have anywhere to live. Those two little sh-...little children destroyed my house.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘Not as sorry as they’re gonna be. Hansel and Gretel, if I ever find their skinny, little fuc-...’

‘Sorry, did you say Hansel and Gretel?’

‘Maybe. Why?’

The manager laughed to himself. ‘Nothing. I suppose they are very common names now.’

‘Look, are you giving me somewhere to sleep or not?’

‘Not. But there’s a cheap hotel next door, you can stay there.’

‘Will they give me a room for one mark?’

‘Not a chance.’

‘Then I guess I’m sleeping on that bench outside.’

‘Good luck.’

The witch walked out of the manager’s office and outside. There was someone sitting on the bench, eating a burger, so she lay down on the other side and waited for him to feel uncomfortable enough to get up and move.

It took about forty-two seconds, then he was gone.

The witch closed her eyes and tried to sleep. She pictured Hansel and Gretel hanging upside down next to her oven, and herself nearby sharpening different knives. It was a nice dream, but she couldn’t continue it as the weather around her in the real world was too cold.

She got up and walked around a bit.

One of the staff, a young girl with a green ponytail, came outside and gave her a hot cup of coffee.

‘I only have one mark.’

‘It’s okay, it’s free.’

The witch tried to say the words *thank you* but it was too difficult, so she just nodded instead.

‘You know, it’s pretty cold out here,’ said the girl, rubbing her arms.

‘I hadn’t noticed,’ replied the witch.

‘Do you want to sleep inside? It’s a lot warmer.’

‘The manager wouldn’t let me.’

‘It’s no problem, he’s gone home. As long as you can wake up before he arrives in the morning.’

The witch stared at the young girl, shivering in her uniform.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I was just thinking,’ said the witch. ‘If you’d come to my cottage ten years ago, I would’ve cooked and eaten you. Whereas, I come to your town and you offer me somewhere to sleep. It makes me feel very confused.’

‘My mother always told me to take care of others.’

‘I didn’t have a mother.’

‘That’s sad.’

‘Maybe that’s why I ate people.’

‘Okay, well, err...it’s still pretty cold out here.’

‘Yes, yes, I’m coming inside. Don’t worry, I won’t eat you. I’ll lose my job if I do. Also, I don’t know how to work your oven.’

The girl laughed, nervously, then led the witch back inside. She told her to lie down anywhere in the kitchen, but not the fridge as it was really cold there. The witch nodded and lay down next to the fat fryer.

‘It’s not the founder’s castle, but it’s warmer than outside.’

‘The founders of this town?’

‘Not just this town, everything. Including this restaurant.’ The girl fished out left-over fries and threw them into a box. ‘If you can call it that.’

‘They own everything?’

‘Ninety percent of it. And the rest is basically leased out.’

‘Incredible. They must be royalty.’

‘Ha, you’d think so from the way Gretel acts. And the amount of food Hansel eats.’

The witch paused from laying out sheets of lettuce on the kitchen floor and looked up. ‘Who and who?’

‘Hansel and Gretel. The town’s founders.’

‘That’s what they’re called?’

‘Yes.’

‘And they’re not royalty?’

‘No, not at all. They came here ten years ago as teenagers and started buying things. It was like they had an unlimited bag of money. They kept buying and buying, and this place was one of the things they bought.’

The witch muttered to herself, ‘my fucking money.’

‘Then they paid to build the castle, and moved in as soon as it was finished. Of course, we don’t see much of them anymore, not since the assassination attempt a few years ago.’

‘The what?’

‘The assassination attempt.’

The witch did her best puzzled expression, which was getting easier and easier the more time she spent in this town.

‘You must’ve heard about it...it was in all the national newspapers.’

‘Imagine I’m a new born baby.’

‘Err...okay. Well, a few years ago, they came to open this *McDonalddo* restaurant and one of the townspeople tried to stab Hansel in the ass. Then a group called the Jacotins publicised the act, the townspeople formed a mob and within an hour they’d constructed a giant stabbing machine. Hansel and Gretel managed to escape, barely, and ever since they’ve been locked up in that castle with a thousand well-paid bodyguards.’

‘So...no one likes them.’

‘Not really. They own everything here, so our salaries are permanently low and they keep all the profit to themselves. This wouldn’t be so bad, but then they started a newspaper and TV network that calls us lazy welfare queens each time we ask for a pay rise.’

The witch muttered some more words to herself then closed her eyes and went to sleep.

The staff girl with the green ponytail - who was called Rosetta - kept talking for another thirteen minutes before realising the witch wasn’t

listening, and then went back out to the counter to work the zombie shift.

~~~

In the morning, the witch was woken by Rosetta right as the manager was arriving, giving her just enough time to sneak outside and lay on the bench. The manager passed by and said, ‘morning,’ and the witch stretched and pretended to yawn, then followed him in.

The job was somehow tougher than she’d expected.

There were a hundred things she had to remember and no time to think as customers came in and ordered, and those orders were shouted out, and she had to put the food on the trays, and there was no time to have a break, no moments when the customers stopped coming, it was constant, like the whole of the town had nowhere else to eat except this one *McDonaldo*.

Finally, in the middle of the afternoon, the witch was given a ten-minute break. She used the time to go outside and stare at the castle on the hill, thinking of ways she could sneak inside and gain her revenge.

But the ten minutes were soon up, and then she had to work again and, when her shift was over, she was too exhausted to do anything except fall on the kitchen floor and sleep.

The next week followed a similar routine - all work, few breaks – and by the time Friday arrived, the witch was starting to lose hope. The only thing that kept her going was the other staff, especially the night shift crew, as they were quite funny and, more importantly, they all hated

Hansel and Gretel as much as she did. In fact, after one week of getting to know them, she trusted each one enough to reveal her plan of retribution.

‘Wah, that’s not bad,’ said Billy, after the witch had finished explaining.

‘I’m in,’ added Green Gren.

‘The stabbing part seems exciting,’ said Sally Field.

However, Rosetta was quiet, so the witch asked her what was wrong. After saying, ‘nothing,’ a few times, she finally opened up.

‘If we kill them, someone else will take their place. Nothing will change.’

‘Then we kill the people who replace them too.’

‘No...they’ll get more guards. Or worse, they’ll trick us. They’ll pretend to be our friends and then make us turn on each other. It’s an old trick of the ruling class. Divide and rule.’

‘Damn, you’re not as dumb as you were a week ago.’

‘My mother was a teacher.’

‘And you ended up at *McDonaldo*?’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘Tell me another time, when I have the energy to feign interest.’

‘Okay.’

‘Now, let’s add some more flesh to my plan. I think, if we’re lucky, we can make our move by the end of the month. All we need to do is get a closer look at that castle and conduct some rudimentary surveillance.’

Billy’s hand shot up.

‘Are you volunteering?’

Billy paused, looking in confusion at his own hand.

‘What?’ asked the witch, annoyed.

‘Ignore him,’ said Rosetta. ‘He signed up for experimental robotic surgery last year, and his limbs have been erratic ever since.’

‘Oh. Who was behind that?’

‘Gretel & Co Industries.’

‘*The* Gretel?’

‘Her or a fan. Doesn’t really matter either way, they’ve stopped now.’

The witch nodded, looking at Billy through the reflection in the oven window. Just like her eating of small children, people never just stopped. She’d have to be a bit more careful from here on in.

~~~

It was another week before the witch had a day off, and, during that time, three of the other *McDonalddo* workers had been up to the castle to check things out.

‘It’s a fortress,’ said Green Glen.

‘Guards everywhere,’ added Billy, making a mysterious buzzing noise at the end of his sentence.

‘I even saw one pretending to be a bush,’ said Sally Field.

‘If that’s true, we’ll never get in,’ said Rosetta, wiping some mould off one of the burger buns.

The witch slammed the mop she was holding on the floor. ‘You people give up so easily. Seriously, did you expect the castle not to have guards?’

‘Not that many,’ said Green Glen.

‘They’re everywhere,’ repeated Billy.

‘Probably in the grass too,’ said Sally Field.

‘Stop, stop, fucking stop.’ The witch put on the jacket she’d bought from *Uniqlo* the week before and headed for the door. ‘I’ll decide if it’s impossible or not.’

When she arrived at the top of the path that led to the castle, a nearby bush suddenly moved closer and grew bigger and became more human-like until it stopped altogether and asked her why she was there.

‘Jesus...is that you?’ the witch asked, misremembering a page from an old horror novel called *Bible*.

Two pairs of arms came out of the bush, along with a sword. ‘What are you doing here, crone?’

The witch held up her camera and pointed at the castle. 'I'm a tourist. Just came to take some pictures of the castle.'

'Why?'

'I like old things.'

The guard whistled and fifty guards rose up from the castle walls, some of them disguised as bricks. The witch was so shocked she almost dropped her camera. 'What's going on?' she said, nervously.

'Don't move or you die.'

The guard who was pretending to be a bush came forward, took the camera away then hit her on the back of the head with his sword handle.

'Fuuuuuck,' screamed the witch, rubbing her head furiously. 'That hurt.'

'It was supposed to knock you out.'

'Well, it fucking didn't, did it?'

The guard shrugged and hit her again. This time the witch fell on the ground, groaned a bit then pretended to sleep.

'I knew it would work,' said the guard, patting his sword like a proud father.

Six guards came down from the castle wall and helped to carry the witch inside the gates. Of course, the witch remained conscious, and was almost tempted to say, 'six guards? I'm not that fucking fat,' but she knew if she did, they would hit her again and she didn't want that.

After carrying her for a good twenty minutes through the bowels of the castle, the guards finally placed her on the cold, stone floor of a large hall. The witch knew it was a large hall as she kept on opening one eye as she was carried around, and finally, when the guards fell quiet, she opened both eyes and got a better look at her surroundings.

Yup, it was definitely a large hall, with over-stacked torches hanging on the walls and a giant beanbag next to the fireplace.

‘Wah, I thought you were bringing her here,’ said a man’s voice from somewhere near the beanbag.

‘We have, your highness, Lord Hansel. She is here now, on the floor.’

‘I’m too tired to turn my head,’ he said, holding up his right hand. ‘Bring her next to the beanbag.’

‘But, Lord Hansel, she may attack.’

‘Ha. If she does, I’ll body slam the old bat back to Russia.’

The guards didn’t know how to respond, so they did nothing. That was the wrong choice.

‘Bring her here, you fools!’ Hansel shouted, voice trembling with rage.

The guards quickly dragged the witch across the floor all the way to the beanbag. When they turned to go back to their positions, Hansel raised a hand again and said, ‘bring me a piece of coal.’

‘Yes, Lord Hansel,’ said the lead guard, bending over by the coal bucket.

‘No, not from there.’ Hansel raised a fat finger and pointed at the fire. ‘From there.’

The guard hesitated a moment, forcing Hansel to lean over the beanbag and pick up a dagger. ‘Stop making me wait.’

‘Sorry, Lord Hansel.’

The guard bent down next to the fire, took a deep breath then reached for one of the burning hot pieces of coal. He tried not to scream as he picked it up, but the pain was too intense, so he let out a short squeal, like a chicken accidentally wandering into the kitchen of *KFC*.

‘You scream like a little girl,’ said Hansel, laughing.

‘What are you doing, brother?’ said a female voice, from the other side of the hall.

‘Nothing.’

‘It looks like you’re playing with the guards again.’

‘Am not.’

The tall, lithe figure of Gretel walked across the hall and stopped next to the bean bag, telling the guard to put the coal down and return to his position. Breathing out in clear relief, he dropped the coal back on the fire and hurried away.

‘Now, what have we here,’ said Gretel, glancing at the witch and immediately freezing in shock. ‘Fuck. Me. It can’t be...’

‘What can’t be?’ asked Hansel.

‘Can I help you, my lady?’ said the witch, trying to disguise her voice with a foreign accent.

‘You fool, it’s her, the witch!’ shouted Gretel, pulling out the hilt of the dagger tucked in her belt. ‘You’ve brought her into our home.’

‘Calm down, calm down,’ said Hansel. ‘A] the witch is dead, b] this old crone is unarmed, and c] even if it is the witch, good, we can kill her again.’

Gretel ignored her brother, took the dagger fully out of her belt and leaned down to the witch. ‘It is you, isn’t it?’

‘I’m a tourist, my lady. I’ve never seen you before in my life.’

‘Tourist, ha,’ said Hansel, laughing. ‘She’s the one in *McDonalds* trying to get the staff to murder us. That’s why I had her brought here.’

Gretel held the dagger to the witch’s throat. ‘Admit it. You are the witch.’

‘How could I be? She was in the oven, I’m not.’

‘So, you know we put her in the oven.’

The witch blinked, realising she’d messed up. Wow, she thought, that’s embarrassing, she only asked me two questions.

‘I knew you were not really dead!’ shouted Gretel. ‘All these years, I knew it.’

Hansel finally pulled himself off the beanbag and stood up. It was incredible, he was almost as wide as he was tall. ‘Wait, you mean this is really her?’

‘I told you she wasn’t dead.’

‘This is the witch?’

‘And I told you she’d come back to get revenge on us for taking all her gold.’

‘The witch who tried to eat us?’

‘Yes, Hansel. It’s the witch. Stop being so dense.’

‘Okay then. No problem. Let’s just put her on the fire.’

‘Fire clearly doesn’t work.’

‘Sword then.’

Gretel turned back to the witch. ‘Yes, sword should do it. If we chop off the head, and the limbs...’

‘Wait, wait,’ said the witch, raising her arms in surrender.

‘Ah, you wish to beg for your life?’

The witch was about to say *yes, of course I’m going to beg for my life, you stupid bint*, but then she stopped and thought about her life and realised that it was not that great at all. She worked in *McDonalds*, had no money, no house, no magic, bad hair, and her new jacket now had holes all over

it due to the guards dragging her across the floor. Dropping her arms, she said in a dolorous voice, 'I've changed my mind. I won't beg for anything. My life is worthless. Just kill me and end this misery.'

Gretel raised her sword to stab, then hesitated.

'What are you waiting for?' asked Hansel. 'Kill the wretch.'

'No,' said Gretel, lowering her sword.

'Okay, I'll do it.' Hansel reached for his own dagger, but before he could connect with the witch's neck, Gretel put out a hand to stop him. 'Sister, what are you doing?'

'We're not going to kill her.'

'Come on, it's the witch. She's tried to eat us.'

'I'd still be eating you now if you looked like that back then,' said the witch, staring at the fat hanging off Hansel's arms.

'Hey, don't fat shame me, crone. It's your fault I'm like this.' Hansel tried to lunge at the witch again, but Gretel again stopped him, and this time took his dagger away.

'Stop, Hansel.'

'What's wrong with you? We're not letting her go, we can't. She'll come back and kill us.'

'I am letting her go. I'm letting her go back to her job at *McDonalds*. I'm letting her go back to mopping floors. I'm letting her know that she'll never get inside this castle again. I'm letting her know that we

forgive her. I'm letting her know that we care about her so much that we're raising her salary to one mark more than her co-workers.'

'Five marks? That's insane. We won't have enough to pay for the golden ladder to the moon I've been planning.'

'You're free to go, witch,' said Gretel, laying a gentle hand on the witch's shoulder. 'Think of us when you're working hard down there, on the piss-covered floor.'

The witch got to her feet and said, 'you have a beautiful heart. I hope one day I can repay your kindness.' She tried to smile too, but it hurt to stretch her mouth that far so she just bowed instead and then quickly left.

'I can't believe you let our mortal enemy go,' moaned Hansel, taking his dagger back and collapsing on the beanbag.

'Yes, I let her go,' replied Gretel. 'Let her go back to Hell.'

'Mopping floors?'

'You'll see,' said Gretel, turning and walking out of the hall.

Hansel didn't like the way Gretel walked out of the hall so confidently, so he called over one of the guards and told him to put on some peasant clothes and follow that witch back to the town.

The guard nodded, turned to leave then paused. 'What are peasant's clothes exactly?'

'The stuff you wear when you're not guarding,' Hansel replied.

‘Jeans and t-shirt?’

‘If that is what you wear then yes.’

‘Baseball cap?’

‘Just go, or you’ll lose her. And you don’t want to fail me, do you?’

The guard shook his head, thinking of himself inside an oven, then hurried out of the room.

~~~

It took an hour for the witch to get back to *McDonaldo*, and another thirty minutes for her to get all her colleagues into the back kitchen alone. She stood in front of them, holding a mop.

‘Listen up everyone, one of us is a traitor.’

Everyone looked confused, everyone except Green Glen, whose face turned a deathly shade of white.

‘That was easy,’ said the witch, swinging the mop at Green Glen’s head and knocking him out with one strike.

‘What are you doing?’ shouted Billy, making his usual electronic buzzing noises.

‘Getting rid of the enemy.’

‘But that’s Green Glen, our friend.’

‘He was no friend. He’s been sending messages to the castle secretly, telling them everything we’ve done.’



Billy and Sally Field turned white now, their respective paranoias sensing they were also in big trouble. Only Rosetta kept her calm, asking the witch, 'how did you know it was him?'

'He knew the word *traitor*.'

'I know the word traitor too,' said Rosetta.

'So do I,' added Billy.

'Me too,' said Sally Field.

'You do?'

They all nodded.

'Then why did you look like gormless fucking idiots when I said it?'

'I just didn't know why you were saying it,' said Rosetta.

'Me neither,' said Sally Field.

'I was just trying to hide my cybernetic abilities,' added Billy.

'Now that you mention it,' said the witch, gripping the mop tighter. 'What exactly are these upgrades you got?'

'Experimental.'

'Designed to spy on us?'

'I don't know.'

The witch raised the mop, poised to strike.

'Don't,' Rosetta interrupted, stepping in front of Billy. 'He hasn't done anything wrong.'

‘Sorry, but I like to err on the side of authoritarianism.’

‘We’ve been slandering Hansel and Gretel for the whole year. If he really were a spy, we would’ve been taken to the castle months ago.’

‘Perhaps they’re playing a long game.’

‘Impossible, their pettiness is legendary. They wouldn’t be able to last a minute with all the things we’ve said. Please, put down the mop.’

The witch shrugged, lowering the mop to half-mast. ‘Okay, little one. We’ll go with Green Glen for the time being. But from this point on, we use a code when we talk, okay?’

The *McDonaldo* crew nodded, along with some buzzing noises from Billy.

‘Now, Billy, Rosetta, help me put this turncoat in the oven.’

‘What?’

‘Come on, there’s not much time. He’ll wake up soon.’

‘We can’t put him in the oven.’

‘You want to eat him raw instead?’

‘No, no eating at all.’

‘Bury him in the park?’

‘What? He’s still alive, we can’t do any of that. It’s immoral.’

The witch held the mop tight and prodded Rosetta in the waist. ‘Listen, Miss Goody Fucking McGood Face, if we don’t get rid of him, he’s gonna wake up and tell everyone.’

‘You said he’d already told everyone.’

‘He might tell them even more...like, that I just hit him with a fucking mop. That could be enough to put me in prison.’

‘She’s right,’ said Billy.

‘And he did betray us,’ added Sally Field.

Rosetta nodded and thought for a while. The witch quickly got irritated and asked her why she had statue face.

‘I’m thinking.’

‘Of what?’

‘A plan.’

‘Waste of fucking time! I told you the plan, stick him in the oven, turn up the heat and we don’t have to worry about anything.’

Rosetta held up her finger.

‘That means okay?’ asked the witch.

‘No, it means I have a plan. But we have to hurry.’

The others didn’t move, so Rosetta was forced to tell them the plan first, then tell them to hurry.

~~~

‘That’s not a bad plan,’ said the witch, after Rosetta had explained it three times.

‘Thank you.’

‘Not as good as my oven idea, but it might work.’

Two hours later, the manager arrived for the morning shift and, when he opened the door to the main restaurant area, froze in shock.

‘Whaaaaa...’

He was right to say *whaaaaa...* too. The walls were covered in milkshake, there were fries and bits of burger meat all over the floor and one of the tills was hanging wide open.

The manager called for help, and heard a shout from the kitchen. As he ran towards the back of the restaurant, Rosetta nodded at the witch, who gave Green Glen another whack on the head with the mop. He woke up, muttering something about *beach rats*.

‘What happened?’ shouted the manager, reaching the kitchen where all the staff were. ‘Who made this mess?’

Everyone pointed at Green Glen, who looked at the manager with a confused face.

‘That’s it, you’re fired!’ screamed the manager, and before Green Glen could say anything in his defence, he was dragged across the floor and thrown out of the main door.

Fortunately, the door was closed, so Green Glen smashed through the glass and landed unconscious on the street outside.

‘Fuck’s sake,’ said the manager, turning red.

‘He just went crazy,’ said the witch, standing behind him. ‘Not our fault.’

‘We couldn’t stop him,’ added Rosetta.

‘He betrayed us,’ said Sally Field, before being jabbed in the leg with the mop. ‘I mean, he betrayed *McDonaldo*.’

The manager folded his arms and glared at everyone. ‘I don’t care if he painted you gold and sold you to the fucking Aztecs. He trashed my restaurant, that’s why he’s fired.’

‘Restaurant,’ mumbled the witch, giggling.

The other three giggled too.

‘Quiet, all of you,’ shouted the manager. ‘I want this place clean and tidy within the hour. That means clearing up this glass too. If it’s not done on time, I’ll get rid of all of you.’

‘Technically, we’re off work now, so...’ started the witch.

‘Don’t talk back to me, crone. Get cleaning.’

‘Will we get overtime pay?’

‘Overtime pay? What do you think this is? Sweden? Get back to work now.’

The others quickly went to the kitchen and grabbed some cleaning equipment, while the witch started mopping up the glass. When Rosetta came over to help, she whispered to her, ‘this job is fucking evil.’

Rosetta checked to see if the manager was around then whispered back, ‘agreed. Very fucking evil.’

~~~

One week later, the witch and Rosetta sat at one of the tables, reluctantly eating a burger and savouring their break.

On the next table, the guard from the castle, who was dressed in white t-shirt, jeans and a back to front baseball cap, tried to listen in to their conversation, but it was weird, all they seemed to be talking about was organising a party.

‘Tomorrow at 9am,’ the witch said, looking out of the window. ‘Make sure the others bring the presents.’

‘And the wrapping paper.’

‘I’ve talked to some of our friends, the ones who are married to the clowns, and they said we should have enough clowns to make the party work.’

‘And I’ve contacted the balloon makers. They are very excited about this too. They said there hasn’t been a party this big in the history of the town.’

‘Yes, this will be a party that will be remembered forever. Or for at least a year. Assuming there are no disasters or wars.’

‘I’m still a bit worried though.’

‘About what?’

‘The cake man, Green Glen...no one’s seen him for days.’

‘So?’

‘He might tell people about the party.’

‘He won’t.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I just know.’

Rosetta glared at the witch, and was about to ask if she’d put Green Glen in the oven, when she remembered the guard sitting behind her, pretending to be a normal customer.

‘Okay, let’s get back to work,’ said the witch.

Rosetta nodded and followed the witch back to the kitchen. When they were gone, the guard got up and hurried back to the castle. He told Hansel what he’d heard, but Hansel didn’t seem interested. He was too busy shooting arrows at one of the servants.

‘Should I tell Lady Gretel?’ asked the guard.

‘Why?’

‘She might think it’s important.’

Hansel lowered his bow and arrow and frowned. ‘Are you saying she can think of things that I can’t?’

‘No, Lord Hansel, of course not, I was just-’

‘It sounded like it.’

‘I wasn’t, I swear.’

‘Servant,’ shouted Hansel, gesturing for the man with an arrow in his leg to come over. ‘Quickly.’

The servant hobbled over and Hansel told him to relax, the guard had volunteered to take his place.

‘Lord Hansel, please,’ said the guard. ‘I have three kids.’

‘Too late.’ Hansel took the arrow from the servant’s leg, and put it in his bow. ‘Go stand by the wall.’

The guard gulped, then walked with trembling limbs over to the wall.

‘And make yourself big. I don’t like it when I miss.’

~~~

The next day, at 9am on the dot, all the staff at *McDonaldo* put down their working tools and walked outside. They closed the door behind them and picked up their banners and signs.

‘More money, less work.’

‘Hansel and Gretel, get your hands off my soul.’

‘Workers not slaves!’

The witch climbed up onto a high wall outside *McDonaldo* and started shouting slogans borrowed from other revolutions. Soon a large crowd had gathered, all of them cheering in support.

‘First they pay you almost nothing. Then they make you work longer hours. Then they shorten your breaks. Then they make you piss in a bottle. Then they arbitrarily raise prices all over town, in all the shops, and call it inflation. Then they take most of the money for

themselves. I've seen it all with my own eyes, the decadence of that castle, the cruelty of those two scoundrels. Hansel can barely stand up, he just sits on a beanbag, torturing people for his own amusement. And Gretel, she just...actually, I don't know what she does, I only saw her for five minutes, and she was quite slim, quite pretty...in another universe I may have groomed her instead of using the oven...but, in this universe, she's nothing but a monster. Still taking all the money, exploiting us. In fact, yeah, she's the real monster because she's the clever one. She likes having power and controlling us. It's fun for her. It's fun for both of them. But, today it stops. We've had enough. I'm tired of mopping the floor and not getting the money I deserve. I'm sick of eating burgers all the time. I'm sick of all of it. So, today is the day we fight back. All of us. Using my ingenious plan.'

The crowd cheered again, mostly because the witch sounded so angry, and they felt angry too.

A little while later, the balloon makers arrived. Of course, they weren't really making balloons, they were the town newspaper reporters, and they started taking photos of all the *McDonaldo* workers and their various signs.

Then they asked questions, like, 'what are you going to do when Hansel And Gretel turn up?'

'We'll put them in the oven and cook them,' shouted the witch.

The reporters and the crowd cheered for about two seconds before they realised what the witch had actually said. Then fell silent.

‘She’s joking,’ said Rosetta, quickly standing in front of the witch. ‘We’ll tell Hansel and Gretel to raise our salaries and pay us for all the overtime work we do. And to give us two days holiday every week instead of one every two months.’

‘And when they say no?’

‘Then they will have no one to work for them.’

‘In *McDonaldo*?’

‘Everywhere. We are not the only ones angry about our jobs. Everyone in the town feels the same, that’s why we’re all cheering and shouting. Right?’

Everyone cheered and started chanting for Hansel and Gretel to show up.

~~~

Two hours later, they got their wish.

A carriage with darkened windows, surrounded by twenty guards armed with swords, sticks and pepper spray, pulled up in front of *McDonaldo* and both Hansel and Gretel stepped out.

Their faces looked like they’d been painted bone white as they faced the crowd, and when they spotted the witch, Hansel turned to Gretel and whispered in her ear, ‘nice plan, sis.’

‘Shut up,’ Gretel hissed back.

The reporters quickly approached the brother and sister and shoved microphones in their faces, losing all previous fear. ‘Gretel, your workers want more money and holiday time, what do you say?’

‘Hey, why are you asking her and not me?’ said Hansel, looking annoyed.

‘Quiet, Hansel.’ Gretel looked at the witch and continued speaking. ‘Of course, we respect our workers, but this little strike is not a natural event. It has been organised by an evil woman, a witch who used to eat children.’

Everyone turned quickly to face the witch, who shouted, ‘that’s a lie. I lived peacefully in my house until these two came along, tried to eat my house, and when I said, ‘hey, don’t eat my house,’ they pushed me into an oven and stole all my money.’

‘They ate your house?’ asked the reporters, confused.

‘Tried to. It was made of candy. Took me years to build. Anyway, the important part is they tried to cook me in an oven. That’s pretty bad, right?’

The crowd nodded and mumbled, ‘yeah, that’s bad.’

‘She’s lying to you,’ shouted Gretel. ‘She locked us in cages and tried to make Hansel fat enough to eat.’

‘Come on,’ replied the witch, talking directly to the crowd. ‘Who are you going to believe? The dictator making your lives miserable, or the old woman who mops the floors at *McDonalds*?’

The crowd pointed at the witch and shouted, ‘you, you, you.’

‘Time for plan b,’ whispered Hansel into Gretel’s ear.

‘Fine.’

‘Okay, people, we’ve all had our fun,’ said Hansel, standing up on a nearby rock to appear taller. ‘But now it’s time to go home.’

‘We’re not going anywhere,’ shouted the witch.

‘She’s right,’ said Rosetta. ‘You can’t scare us anymore. We’re united.’

‘Oh, united, are you?’ Hansel looked at the twenty guards and then back at the crowd. ‘All of you have two minutes to leave and go back to your pathetic little lives or my guards here will start maiming people.’

The crowd mumbled to each other, communal nerves growing.

But none of the *McDonaldo* workers moved an inch. Hansel waited a minute and a half before losing patience. ‘Guards, move forward, maim the witch and her little gang first, then move on to the others.’

The guards didn’t move.

‘Guards!’

The guards scratched their necks and kicked little stones on the ground.

‘What are you waiting for you fools? Kill them!’

The guards yawned.

‘Time for plan c,’ said Gretel, pushing Hansel out of the way and speaking to the witch directly. ‘Forgive my brother, he is impulsive and a bit dumb. Of course, we are reasonable and, actually, we had been planning to pay you more money for a long time, but we never got around to it. So, now, we will double your salaries.’

‘And give us two days of holiday every week,’ said Rosetta, raising her voice for the crowd.

‘Yes, that too. Now, let’s get back to work, shall we?’

‘What about the rest of the town?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘We want you to double their salaries and give them two days of holiday every week too.’

‘The whole town?’

‘Why not? We are all equal, aren’t we?’

Gretel swallowed some bile which had come up from her stomach then nodded and said, ‘fine, the whole town.’

Hansel grabbed Gretel by the sleeve and whispered in her ear, ‘if we give them that much money, we’ll have almost nothing left.’

‘Quiet, fool,’ said Gretel calmly. ‘We’ll say what they want to hear then go back to the castle and make a new plan.’

‘It had better be a good one,’ said Hansel, returning to the carriage.

Gretel turned back to the crowd. 'You have what you want. Now, if you would be so kind, please return to work.'

The crowd cheered and started to disperse, all the people chatting to each other about what they would do with all their new money. However, the witch watched the carriage head back to the castle with an irritated expression on her face.

'What's wrong with you?' asked Rosetta.

'We should've killed them while we had the chance,' replied the witch.

'Don't be silly, there's no need to do that.'

'Nonsense. They'll probably go back to their castle and think of a way to cheat everyone again.'

'With what army? The guards won't listen to them anymore.'

'They'll find new guards. Scarier ones.'

'With what money?'

'The gold in their castle. Did you forget? They're rich, they own the whole town.'

Rosetta smiled.

'What are you smiling about?'

'I made a small addition to your plan,' she said.

'What addition?'

'You'll see.'

~~~

Back at the castle, Hansel and Gretel stood in front of the secret basement chamber they'd built under the castle four years earlier with their mouths wide open in shock.

'Fuck me...'

'It can't be real...'

'All of it...'

'How?'

'Nothing left. Not even one coin.' Gretel looked down at the floor and spotted a small piece of gold. 'Not even two coins,' she added, correcting herself.

Hansel collapsed on the floor next to her, holding his chest. 'I think I'm having a heart attack.'

'We're ruined,' said Gretel, stepping out of her brother's way. 'Without the gold, we can't pay the guards. Without the guards, we can't control the town.' She put her finger on her chin and thought a little bit. Then a smirk appeared. 'Wait...we still own all the shops. That means we can use some of the money from them to pay the guards for...how long? Three months. Ah, it's not perfect, but it gives us time to think of a way out of this.'

There was a cough behind them. Gretel turned and saw the guard Hansel had tortured with hot coal the week before. 'What do you want?'

'I was just passing by and overheard what you were saying.'

‘And?’

‘Well, it seems that you haven’t heard the news.’

‘What news?’

‘All the shops have been given to new owners, due to the fact that you don’t have enough gold to keep them running.’

‘What? That’s illegal...we have contracts.’

‘I think you’ll find those contracts have expired. Also, this castle is no longer yours.’

‘What?’

‘It belongs to the town’s new mayor.’

‘And who’s that?’

‘Well, we don’t know yet, but the election will be held tomorrow, so we need time to clean the place up and prepare it for its new owner.’

‘Election,’ muttered Gretel, vaguely aware of the word. ‘Who are the candidates?’

‘So far, there are three. Rosetta. The old lady mopping the floor in *McDonaldo*. And Mad Ken.’

Gretel put her finger on her chin again, going into a deep, deep thinking mode. The guard turned to go, then stopped and looked down at the floor. ‘Is he dead?’

‘He’s faking,’ said Gretel, not bothering to look.

‘Are you sure? He’s not moving.’

Gretel glanced down and realised the guard was right, Hansel wasn't moving and his face had turned blue. 'Okay, he might be dead. Bury him in the forest when you have time.'

'Sure, if you pay me.'

Gretel held out the single gold coin she had left, stared at its lovely golden goldness then quickly pulled it back and dropped it in her pocket. 'Never mind, I'll do it myself.'

~~~

The next day, the whole town gathered in the main square to vote for the new mayor. The three candidates stood on a makeshift platform, each waiting for their turn to speak. Mad Ken was first, telling the people that if they voted for him, he would make sure that each person could marry a duck if they wanted to, and that the town square would be turned into a giant hole with a *hole museum* in the middle of it.

The crowd booed and told him to get off the stage.

Next was Rosetta, who said she would build schools and libraries that everyone could use, and would make sure that people had a salary they could live off, and would let others stay in the castle with her as it was too big for just one person to live in.

The crowd cheered and shouted, 'mayor, mayor, mayor.'

Finally, the witch stepped up, took the microphone and said, 'hey guys, I'm the one who organised this whole revolution. I'm the one who got rid of Hansel and Gretel. I'm the one who deserves to live in the

castle.’ The witch pointed at Rosetta. ‘This one just followed me like a sheep.’

The crowd murmured, not sure what to think.

Suddenly, a new voice shouted out, ‘she’s right, the other one is weak. She cannot lead you.’

Everyone turned to see Gretel climbing up onto the stage. She grabbed the microphone from the witch and continued her rhetoric. ‘I am not the same person I was yesterday. I’ve changed. I will make sure you are safe from now on, and you will be given fair salaries. However, I will also not lose my strength. This town is surrounded by many enemies. They want to come here and take our jobs, eat our children, walk around with giant headphones on their heads. Only I can protect you from these barbarians. These monsters. This woman is weak, she will try to make friends with them and we will all die. And this old hag here...’ Gretel pointed at the witch. ‘She eats children and mops the floor for a living. That’s no leader.’

The crowd fell silent. Gretel added, ‘trust me,’ then stared out hopefully at all the faces.

‘I migrated here from the nearest town,’ shouted someone near the back.

‘Me too.’

‘I came from Romania.’

‘I came from Sudan.’

‘I’m not human.’

‘I’m wearing someone else’s skin.’

‘My mum’s from the Helix Nebula.’

More and more voices started shouting out, louder and more enraged, until the volume became so loud that Gretel dropped the microphone and looked for a safe way off the stage.

‘Looks like you were in that castle too long, dear,’ whispered a familiar voice, followed by a mop hit to the back of her head.

The witch picked the microphone up and shouted, ‘I hit her, I hit the evil dictator on the head. Pick me for mayor, I don’t eat children.’

The crowd filled in their papers and the votes were quickly added up. The announcer came onto the stage and cleared his throat. ‘And the new mayor is...’

‘Me, me, me, me,’ mumbled the witch.

‘Duck, duck, duck,’ said Mad Ken.

‘...Rosetta.’

The crowd cheered and Rosetta quickly grabbed the microphone. ‘Thanks everyone. I promise not to treat you like slaves. Who wants to come and live in the castle with me?’

A hundred hands shot up into the air.

‘Okay, that’s a lot. Maybe we’ll deal with that tomorrow.’ She gave the microphone back to the announcer and walked towards the carriage waiting to take her back to the castle.

The witch followed her and opened the door. ‘Can’t believe you beat me.’

‘Don’t be angry. You are now my deputy mayor.’

‘What? I’m your political rival.’

‘That was five minutes ago. Now you’re my friend again.’

‘Friend...’ The word sounded strange to the witch, so strange it made her instinctively shiver.

Thinking the witch was cold, Rosetta took off her jacket and draped it round her shoulders. ‘Come on, let’s go back to the castle and settle in. Maybe find someone to make *us* some burgers for a change.’

The witch shrugged and looked back at Gretel, still lying unconscious on the platform.

‘Not Gretel burgers,’ said Rosetta, pulling the witch inside the carriage.

‘But she’ll escape and try to get revenge.’

‘Not here, she won’t.’

The witch nodded and slumped down on the carriage seat. ‘At least I don’t have to go back to *McDonaldo* again.’

‘It’s great, isn’t it?’

‘It is. Mopping those fucking toilets...’

‘It’s over now.’

The witch looked out of the window, spotting the castle in the distance. Rosetta was right, it was over. No more ovens, no more *McDonalds*, no more Hansel and Gretel.

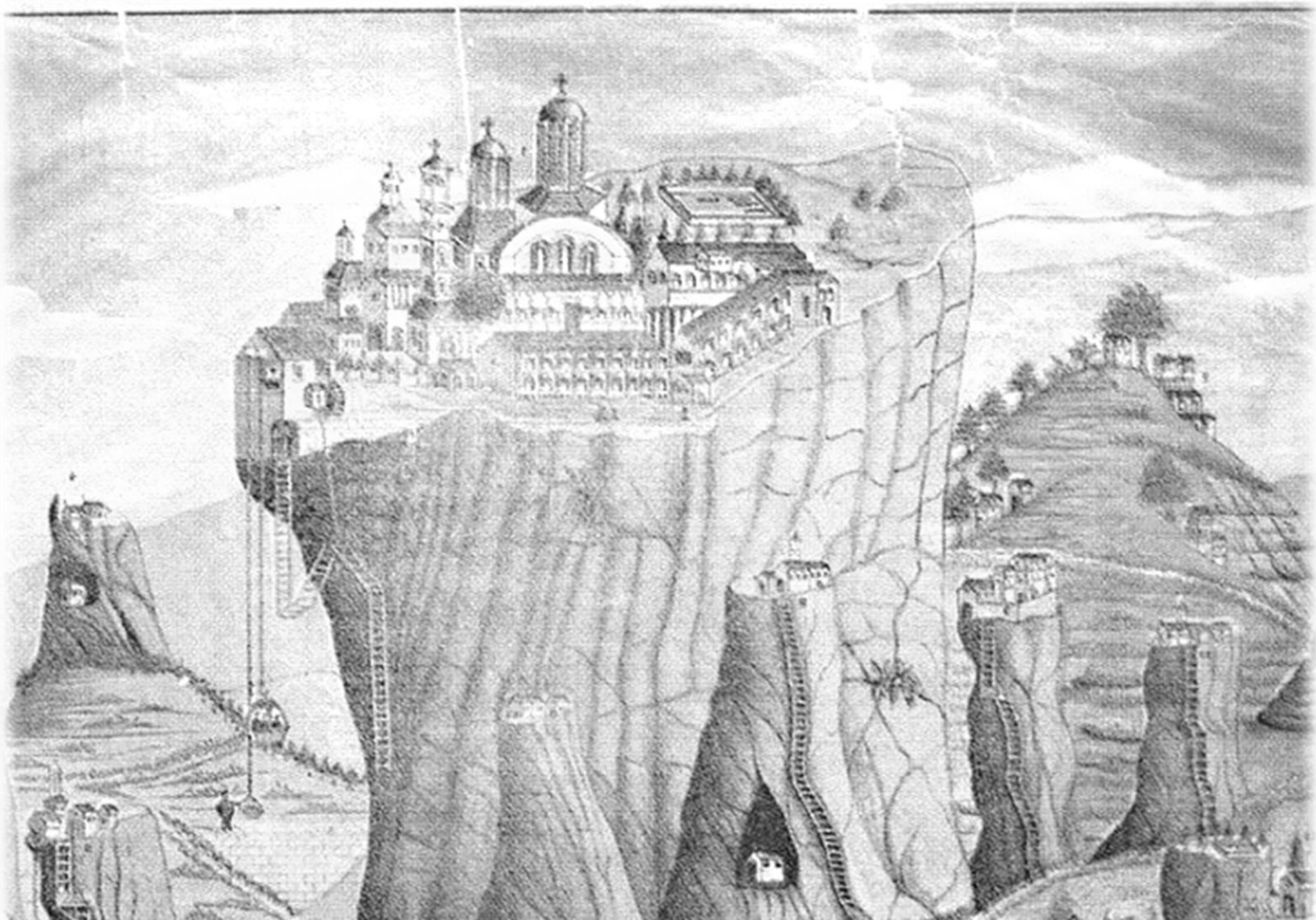
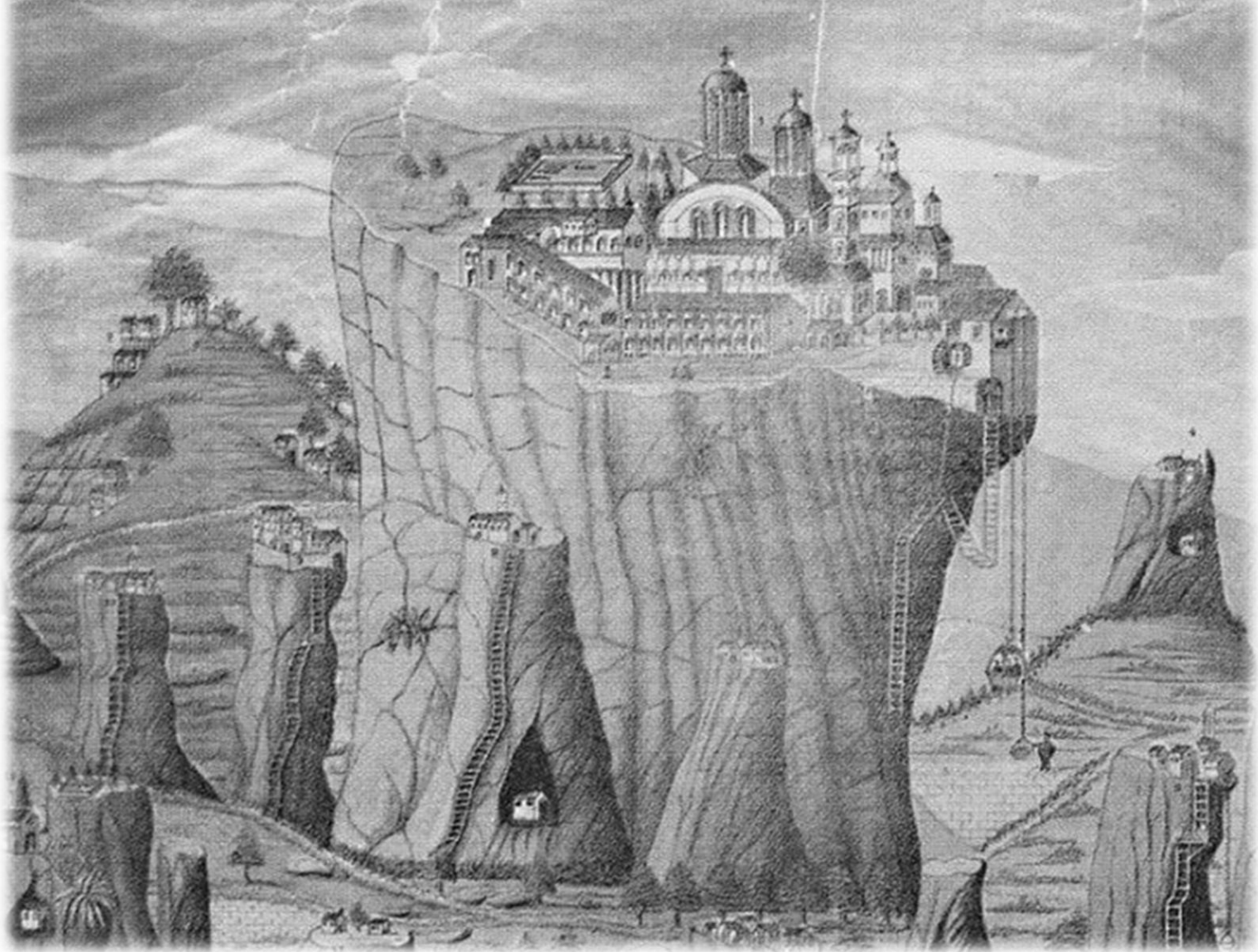
She mumbled the word *Gretel* quietly, thinking of going back and picking up her body.

‘What did you say?’ asked Rosetta.

‘Gretel,’ replied the witch.

‘Why?’

‘No reason.’



## **King Nobody**

Centuries ago, during one of the many periods when the whole of Europe was losing its collective mind and warring with each other, a tired, starving soldier wandered around the rural parts of Wallachia searching for food, shelter and perhaps a decent-looking woman to wed/bed.

He was not an aggressive man yet, at every village he visited, the people would see the rifle on his shoulder, and the length of his beard, and quickly lock their doors.

‘Please, I won’t shoot you, I just need some food,’ begged the soldier, pulling his best sad proboscis face.

‘And if we don’t give you enough of it?’ each villager would ask through the door.

‘Then I’ll move on somewhere else.’

‘After shooting us and taking everything we own?’

‘No, no...I am not a villain. I would not do that.’

Although he said it every time, and never displaced the gun from his shoulder, no one believed him, and, as a result, he received very little charity from anyone.

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One evening, as he was walking down from the Carpathian Mountains, he felt incredibly tired and decided to sit on a tree stump to rest.

As soon as he was seated, a dense blanket of fog appeared, drifting down from the slopes ahead of him.

‘What is this?’ he said out loud, accustomed to talking to himself. ‘A storm?’

The soldier was so exhausted that he couldn’t move even if he wanted to, so he pulled his jacket tight and waited for the fog to pass. Soon, he fell asleep and had a strange dream.

In this dream, he was living in a castle on a hill, surrounded by a small village, and in every street and every house, people cheered his name. Apparently, he’d done many great things for the village, though, in his dream, he didn’t know what these acts were. But the people loved him and it seemed that he was a king of some kind.

When he awoke, the fog was still dense and invasive, forcing him to stand up and try to walk through it until he reached clear air again. Unfortunately, after walking for over an hour, he still couldn’t find a way out.

‘Maybe if I walk in a westerly direction,’ he said to himself, and immediately turned left and continued walking.

Another hour later, he remained coated in fog, and said to himself, ‘maybe it’s better to go south. Self-agreeing, he turned left again and carried on walking.

Finally, he came to a clearing where the fog was not so dense. In the middle of the clearing, next to a rocky path, was a sign.

The soldier walked closer and tilted his head at the words.

Many People Village - 2km.

Well, thought the soldier, stroking his ear, assuming I can find this village, it can’t be any worse than this fog.

So off he went, along the rocky path.

Half an hour later, the fog became thinner and another sign appeared. This one said: *Many People Village – Population 1999.*

Behind the sign, the soldier could see a path leading ahead that split into three paths after one hundred metres. Beyond that was a hill, and on top of the hill was a small castle, just like the one from his dream.

‘Ah, it wasn’t a dream, it was a prophecy,’ he whispered, afraid to believe his own words. If it really were true, if it were the village from his dream then did it mean that he would somehow become king?

The soldier walked into the village, as far as the point where the path split into three. He noticed that none of the houses had people

outside, or lights in the windows, which was strange for a village of 1999 souls, but perhaps they were all at the castle for some special celebration.

He took the path on the left and walked in a curved line past more houses, until the path joined with the other two paths again. Still, he saw no faces.

‘Where is everyone?’ he asked, rubbing his shoulder.

He walked down the path that was on the right-hand side and soon found himself near the entrance of the village again.

‘Okay,’ he said, starting to feel nervous, ‘I’ll take the path in the middle all the way through, then try the castle. If there’s no-one after all that, then I can go ahead and panic.’

He walked down the middle path, past the re-joining point with the other paths, and soon came to a bridge and a town square. It wasn’t very large, but it was quite pretty, so much so that he stayed on the bridge for a few minutes, admiring the view before continuing on towards the castle.

After he’d reached the end of the path, struggled up the hill and arrived at the castle gate, he stopped and waited for the guards to call to him.

But no call came.

Half-relieved, half-scared, he pushed open the gate and advanced into a small courtyard. Just as in the village, it was empty, though there

were some archery targets leaning against the walls, which suggested that someone was living there.

Feeling a little braver, he proceeded inside the castle.

Each room was as clean as a hotel, the kitchen was stocked full of food, and the main hall had an impressively large, roaring fire. However, there was still no sign of anyone.

The soldier sat down in front of the flames and tried to think. Where had the people gone? Who'd lit the fire? Why was there so much food in the kitchen?

He could answer none of these questions and the continued attempts to do so only made him more exhausted, and, before long, he was stretched out in the coffin pose and fast asleep.

~~~

When he awoke, it was morning, and the fire was still going.

'What? That's impossible,' he mumbled, stretching out his limbs.

He quickly walked around the castle again, searching every room for whoever it was who'd kept the fire alive, but found no one. Returning to the main hall, he discovered food laid out on the long, wooden table.

'Someone cooked breakfast?'

He sat down and examined the food. He picked it up, smelt it, licked it and, finally, when he believed it was not poisoned, ate it. The food was so filling that he soon felt sleepy again, and started to nap.

A short while later, there was a loud knock on the main door.

The soldier sprang up, reaching for his gun. 'Who's there?' he asked in a shaky voice.

But the main door was too far away for his voice to be heard, so when there was another loud knock, he stood up and marched to the front of the castle.

As he opened the door, he saw an old woman standing there. She was dressed in the most elegant clothing, with dazzling gold jewellery around her neck, and a bag that had been fashioned from bearskin.

The soldier liked bears, which made the bag hard to stomach, yet, despite her decadent façade, the old woman didn't look particularly healthy so he said, 'come in, sit down, I'll get you something to eat.'

The old woman said a simple, 'thank you,' then passed out on the doorstep.

'Is this a trick?' the soldier wondered, looking around, but he quickly scolded himself for being so suspicious and carried the old woman into the main hall. He laid her down on the rug in front of the fire and went to fetch some medicine.

~~~

That night, after taking medicine and eating a plain meal of bread and soup, the old woman got her strength back and asked the soldier, 'are you the master of this place?'

'You mean the castle?'

‘The castle, the village...are you the king of it all?’

The soldier thought about saying *yes*, but didn’t like to lie so he told her the truth. ‘No, madam, I am a simple traveller, who came across this place by chance, just like you.’

‘Then you do not mind if I stay the night?’ asked the old woman.

‘No, of course not, you may sleep in any room you like.’

The old woman thanked the soldier, took off her jewellery, laid it on the wooden table then headed up to one of the rooms.

The soldier stayed by the fire, glancing at the jewellery occasionally and imagining all the things he could buy if he sold it. However, he was again so tired that he soon fell asleep.

The next morning, when the soldier opened his eyes, the jewellery was gone.

‘Oh no,’ he cried, jumping up and reaching for his rifle.

He explored the rooms of the castle, looking for the old woman, but she was gone too.

Strangely, none of the beds looked like they had been slept in, but the soldier quickly forgot about this as he returned to the fire in the main hall, certain that she had just left early.

That afternoon, he walked up to the castle roof and looked out onto the village below. He could see the bridge in the middle, the three paths beyond it, the roofs of the houses, and even the village entrance, yet still no people.

‘Could they all be on holiday at the same time?’ he asked himself. ‘Or had something happened here that had driven them all away? A plague perhaps?’

He wouldn’t be able to find answers just by looking, so he left the castle and explored some of the houses in the village.

It was very strange. They were all decorated and fully furnished, and each one of them had a fire going, which meant someone was keeping this place running, but who? And how could they light all these fires without being seen?

The soldier sat in one of the houses for a long time until finally he saw it was getting dark outside. He got up and started walking back up the path to the castle.

Suddenly, there was a cry up ahead.

He ran forward quickly, reaching the castle door in less than a minute, and immediately saw a figure lying on the steps outside.

Without thinking, he rushed forward and shouted to the figure, ‘hey there, are you hurt? Do you need help?’

The figure turned over and looked up at him. ‘Get away from me, dog.’

‘What? I’m offering help,’ the soldier replied, reaching down and pulling away the figure’s hood.

When he did so, he saw that the figure was a beautiful, young woman with long, black hair and perfectly smooth, dark skin.

‘What are you staring at, dog?’ the woman said angrily, pushing him away.

The soldier didn’t raise a hand to defend himself, even when she stood up and started hitting him. In fact, he couldn’t make any kind of movement, his eyes were too fixed on how beautiful she was. It was like a princess had escaped from a painting and come here personally to harass him at the castle steps.

‘Open the door, dog, and show me to your finest room. I am tired and hungry and in no mood for idle chat.’

The soldier could only nod, and follow her orders. He showed her to a room, brought her some bread and soup, then took the tray back to the kitchen afterwards and did the washing up.

‘Don’t get any ideas about coming back in here,’ the woman said as he left. ‘I would never allow myself to be touched by a low-level dog like you.’

The soldier had recovered a little, and was a bit annoyed that she kept on insulting him, but he’d been called worse names before, so he said, ‘goodnight,’ and returned to the main hall, where he once again fell asleep in front of the fire.

The next day, the woman was still there, and still quite rude. She announced that she was tired and hungry and would need breakfast, lunch and dinner and another night’s rest before leaving.

‘Very well,’ said the soldier, again obeying her commands.

The next day, it was the same. And the day after that, and the week after that, and the month after that.

Soon, three months had passed, and the woman was still camped inside the same room of the castle, demanding meals every day and insulting the soldier whenever he came to the room.

One night, as the soldier was washing up, a dark thought crossed his mind. There were only the two of them there, and the woman was neither strong nor skilled at fighting, so...if he really wanted to, he could go up to her room and force her to be nice to him.

As soon as he thought it, the soldier felt ashamed, and when he sat down in the main hall to sleep, he told himself that the following morning he would leave, so that he could ensure the woman's safety.

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Early the next morning, the soldier packed his bags, brought the woman breakfast, ignored her insults, washed the dishes in the kitchen then prepared to leave.

As he opened the front door, he was greeted by an incredible sight. The courtyard in front of him was full of people. Some were practising archery, others were selling things from market stalls, and a few with heavy-looking sacks were walking out of the front gate and heading down to the village.

The soldier was so shocked that he dropped his rifle and ran down the path after those people. He ran all the way to the village square, stopping on the bridge to ask a young couple what was happening.



‘What do you mean, Sire?’

‘Sire?’

‘Err...’

‘Why do you call me Sire? Where did all these people come from?’

The boy and girl looked at each other, shrugging. ‘We’ve always been here, Sire.’

‘And,’ added the girl, smiling, ‘we chose you to be our king, that is why we call you sire. Sire.’

The soldier looked around and saw all the people grinning and waving at him. It was a dream, it had to be. He turned back to the couple. ‘If I am a king, why can I just walk around without any guards?’

‘You always do this, Sire.’

‘It’s true, you’ve done it every day for the last three months.’

‘What?’

‘You usually don’t talk to anyone, but that’s okay. We sometimes don’t feel like talking in the morning either.’

The soldier shook his head and hurried back to the castle. He shuffled past the people in the courtyard, all of whom waved at him and said, ‘hi, king,’ and finally made it back into the main hall, locking the door behind him.

‘Ah, there you are...’

The soldier looked over at the fire and saw the beautiful woman sitting on the rug. She was smiling and stroking a baby bear.

‘You’re not in your room?’

‘I feel better today.’

‘You need something?’

‘No, no. You’ve done more than enough for me.’

‘I have?’

‘Yes, you’ve brought me food for three months, you took care of me when I was an old woman, and you never tried to force yourself onto me.’

The soldier couldn’t believe what he was hearing, but at the same time, he also remembered the previous night when he’d had a dark thought in the kitchen.

He sat down at the table and said, with both eyes on the floor, ‘you think too highly of me. I am not a good man.’

‘You are wrong. I know you very well.’

‘You don’t understand. Last night, I thought about coming into your room, and doing a bad thing. I don’t deserve any of this.’

‘You are still wrong. No man or woman has ever thought only good things. But you did not act on your bad thought. In fact, you even decided to leave to protect me.’

‘But I didn’t leave...I might’ve come back. A good man would never have thought such a bad thing.’

‘I don’t want to speak the same thing twice. I will simply say, if you were truly a bad man, the people of this village would not have chosen you to be king. And I would not have chosen to stay here with you.’

‘You are staying here with me?’

‘Yes.’

‘You mean we are to be married?’

‘Hey, slow down. I don’t know you that well. We’ll live together for a while, see if we’re a good match, then we’ll see.’

The soldier nodded and asked if she wanted anything.

‘No, dog.’

The soldier nodded, looking down at the floor again.

‘Okay, look. If someone calls you a dog, it’s okay to fight back a little. Just don’t go crazy and shoot me, okay?’

The soldier smirked, unsure what to say.

‘You may now laugh...dog,’ said the woman, turning her frown into a smile and laughing loudly.

The soldier followed her lead, laughing for at least ten seconds before nudging her on the knee and replying, ‘okay, wench.’

The woman stopped laughing immediately and glared at him. ‘What did you just call me?’



## **Assassins of Alamut**

Near the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, somewhere in Northern Iran, the mountain fortress of Alamut was established. This wouldn't have been an unusual act at that time as many fortresses were established and destroyed, but this one was a little bit different, as it was a fortress with no army to protect it. Instead, they relied upon assassins.

At first, no one paid much attention to them, but that all changed when they started to enact their war policy: that is, to send out their assassins to murder rival leaders.

One particular rival was a harsh yet cunning sultan called Amir. His kingdom was not too far from Alamut – about a week's ride on camel - and he'd tried to invade them many years earlier, but failed as the mountain was too high to climb up and attack, and the cable car was never working, even in the summer.

Being a clever man, he knew that, eventually, Alamut would seek revenge for this half-assed invasion i.e. to kill him through one of their

assassins, so he decided to ignore the counsel of his annoyingly laidback advisors and follow his own list of precautions.

The first was to post spies among his own people, enabling him to be informed about any new people entering the kingdom.

The second was to renovate his palace, adding fake doors and confusing corridors in case an assassin made it inside.

The third was to build a well-protected section of the palace where his wife and son could live safely, without fear of being kidnapped and used against him.

And the final one was to attach a poisoned dart to a device on his wrist so that, if the assassin did manage to reach him, he could kill the fiend with a single, swift movement of his hand.

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For two years, everything ran smoothly.

His kingdom was a relatively prosperous trading hub and, as a result, had many merchants and travellers passing through. Ordinarily, this would've made security difficult to maintain, however, thanks to his precautions, he could stay on top of things. The system was simple: if a merchant or traveller stayed longer than two weeks then a permanent spy would be assigned to conduct covert surveillance on them. If that merchant or traveller left and returned frequently, the same spy would be aware of it. If they tried to access the palace, or even asked questions about it, they would be arrested and dealt with.

The palace itself was, in effect, off limits.

No one was allowed to enter except the palace guards and the sultan's closest advisors, all of whom he'd known since he was a child.

The sultan himself kept four guards around him at all times, and four more dressed as gardeners close by.

When he bathed, he used his female guards, three to keep watch around the tub, one to service him.

When he took a shit, he dropped boiling hot oil down the chute first.

When he ate, he used a taster.

As for the sultan's wife and son, they spent most of their days in the specially built family wing, sitting on the couch, playing hot garbage on *Mario Maker 2*.

Concealed in each wall of that wing was a secret compartment with one guard, eyelids clipped open to prevent them from nodding off.

All in all, if an assassin did want to kill him, they'd have to work inhumanly hard to do it.

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One day, the sultan received a note. It said: 'Beware, the assassins of Alamut have poisoned the Sultan of Dalit. No arrests. No leads.'

Amir read the note twice then stroked his beard. He stroked it for a long time, only stopping when his wife came to him and asked what was wrong.

‘The Sultan of Dalit was well-known for being cautious,’ Amir said, ‘yet now he is dead.’

‘Who?’

‘The Sultan of Dalit...he’s dead.’

‘Isn’t he the one who locked his wife in a tower?’

‘Yes, the same one.’

‘And he’s dead?’

‘Poisoned by the assassins of Alamut.’

‘And you’re scared they’re coming here next?’

Amir looked at the floor, unable to say that he was scared. His wife seemed to understand and said, ‘don’t worry, my husband, there is not a chance he’ll get inside here. And even if he did, the palace is like a maze, he’d get lost within minutes...and if he tried to ask for directions, the guards would just pretend they didn’t speak Arabic.’

‘You’re right, he’ll never get me,’ said Amir, nodding and rubbing the dart strapped to his wrist. He was careful not to show his wife as she would be upset if she knew he slept with a deadly weapon on him.

Another month passed, all in Amir’s kingdom continued peacefully [apart from the arrest and execution of random homeless people, which



wasn't a very Muslim thing to do, but as was mentioned earlier, Amir was a harsh ruler], until one morning he received another note.

He read it again and again, his face turning a little bit pale. When his wife entered the room and saw the lack of colour on his skin, she asked him what had happened [while dabbing on some of her imported Korean face cream].

'The Sultan of Bitsu is dead.'

'Bitsu...but that's only a day's ride by camel to the south.'

'Tis true.'

'How did he die?'

'Wetly.'

'What do you mean? In the shower?'

'No, no. He was drowned in the river behind his castle. They don't know why he was there.'

'I thought he never left his castle.'

'As did I.'

'Then how-'

'The assassins of Alamut, they are good at this kind of thing. And now I fear the next target on their list will be me.'

'You don't know that for sure.'

‘I don’t, but I am not a naïve man. The Sultan of Bitsu attacked the fortress of Alamut alongside me, now he is dead. The Sultan of Dalit tried to invade them over twelve years ago, now he is dead.’

‘That doesn’t mean that-’

Amir raised his hand to silence her. ‘They are the masters of the long game vendetta. It is almost certain that I am next.’

His wife stroked the back of Amir’s head and tried to comfort him again, saying, ‘don’t worry, my husband, your spies are well-trained, as are your guards. No assassin could make it past them.’

Amir didn’t say anything, just shrugged, but the next day his fears were realised as he received another note.

When his wife came into the room, he put it on the table in front of her, and she read it out loud. ‘Your Excellence, we have word that an assassin from Alamut is already inside the walls of your city. He is in disguise and has been there for several weeks. Please, protect yourself.’

His wife put the note down and asked if the person who wrote it could be trusted.

‘As much as I trust myself.’

‘Then the assassin is here, in this city.’

Amir stood up and threw a cup across the room, making his wife jump a little. ‘How could this happen? I put spies everywhere, and he still got in.’

‘Don’t worry, he will not make it inside the castle. I’m sure of it.’

Amir threw another cup at the wall, this time smashing it into pieces. 'One of the spies must himself be a spy for Alamut. But which one? Argh, I'll have to arrest them all, torture them until one of them speaks.'

'Husband, please, do not be so impulsive. We must focus on securing the palace, not punishing people.'

'I will do both.'

'But husband, if we-'

'We? We? I'm the one who's going to die...not you.'

His wife stared at her husband, hoping he would calm down and offer an apology, but he didn't. Instead, he threw another cup and stormed out of the room.

~~~

The next day, two of the guards by the east tower were found dead, their faces badly beaten.

Amir didn't talk about it to his wife, and when she asked him about it, he just said, 'don't worry, it's not important.'

His wife later asked one of the guards what happened, and he told her the sultan himself had beaten the guards when he found them napping at their posts.

'What was he doing at the east tower?' she asked.

'I don't know.'

‘Did he go anywhere else?’

‘I also do not know.’

The wife returned to Amir, who was pacing up and down the room he’d had built for himself and his family, occasionally glancing over with a suspicious eye at the bricks in the wall. She told him that, if they were to beat this assassin, they would have to do two things.

‘What would that be?’ Amir asked, impatient.

‘One, you need to stay in this section of the palace.’

‘I am staying here. I’m here right now, aren’t I?’

‘Yes, but last night you went outside. You can’t do this again.’

Amir looked away from his wife, either ashamed or angry that she’d found out about what he’d done the previous night.

‘Two, we need help. There is a man in the city, he has been here for a few years, and he is well-known to be a fine detective. If we ask him to, I’m sure he can find this assassin for us.’

‘I do not know this man. Who is it?’

‘His name is Ismail. I also do not know him well, but I have heard he has caught many criminals using his skills.’

‘You’ve heard? Tell me, has this Ismail ever been to Alamut?’

‘Husband, I understand your doubt, but I’m certain he is not an assassin. He has lived in this city for a long time, whereas the note you

received said the assassin has recently arrived. And, besides, this Ismail will report everything he finds out to the head guard, not to you.'

'I still do not trust this man.'

'Neither do I, but...as long as we take precautions, there is nothing he can do to harm us.'

'Us...' Amir muttered, sitting down and rubbing his head.

~~~

That afternoon, the wife called Ismail to the main gate and gave him his mission.

'You have one week,' she said. 'Any longer and you will not be paid.'

'I will need only three days,' Ismail, replied with a smirk.

'Good.'

'But there is one condition.'

'What's that?'

'I must be paid by the sultan directly.'

'Impossible.'

'Then there is no deal.'

'You don't understand, the sultan will not see you because he believes you may be the assassin.'

Ismail smiled. 'He's right, I could be.'

The wife trembled a little bit, checking the guards around her to make sure they looked ready.

‘But I’m not. And if it pleases him, he may have a hundred guards in the room with us, I do not care.’

‘I still cannot do what you ask.’

‘Then a compromise perhaps. I will wait outside the sultan’s room and deal with you.’

‘With as many guards as I think necessary.’

‘Yes, yes, I agreed to that part already. Now, do you accept or not?’

The wife nodded and then returned inside the palace, while Ismail turned and walked back into the city.

~~~

Over the next few days, Amir stayed inside the family section of the palace and spent most of his time checking the walls for secret doors. His wife tried to assuage his fears and get him to eat something, but he was too nervous to eat or sleep.

‘It’s okay, husband, we have the best detective working on it.’

‘Working on helping the assassin to murder me.’

‘I have made sure that will not happen.’

Amir muttered to himself, something his wife couldn’t hear, but she knew it was probably not praise.

On the night of the third day, the head guard brought word that Ismail had arrived at the main gate, holding a prisoner.

‘The assassin?’ Amir asked, jumping up from his chair.

‘He says it is, your Excellence. But we have no way to confirm it.’

‘Then take them both to the dungeons.’

‘But-’

‘Don’t say *but*, just do it.’

Amir threw another cup at the wall, breaking it. His wife followed the guard out and told him to bring Ismail and the prisoner to the main door outside the family room. ‘Also, hide fifty guards behind the curtains there, there and there. Make sure they can’t be seen.’

When the guard had gone, Amir’s wife hurried back into the family room and told Amir not to worry, everything would soon be resolved.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I will talk to Ismail and this prisoner outside,’ she replied.

‘Outside where?’

‘This room.’

Amir stroked his beard for a while then spoke again to his wife. ‘Okay, you shall meet them. But make sure there are guards hidden behind the curtains.’

‘It’s already taken care of.’

The wife went back outside into the corridor and stood with her arms behind her back, waiting for Ismail and the prisoner to arrive. When they came, she saw that the man with the sack over his head was in chains and Ismail had an inappropriately confident smile on his face.

‘As promised, here is the assassin,’ said Ismail, glancing at the curtains at both sides.

‘How can you be sure it is him?’ asked the sultan’s wife.

‘I do not usually reveal my methods, but in this case I will tell you, as I hope you will be impressed enough to increase my reward.’

‘I may do that. Tell me.’

‘It’s quite simple. I looked at all the people in the city and thought, who would be best placed to attack the sultan, and how would they do that? Then I found this man hanging around the sewers outside the palace, pretending to be a beggar, and I knew it was him.’

‘The sewers is the best place to attack the sultan?’

‘Obviously.’

The wife didn’t know where to look or what to say. The only word she could get out was *what?*

‘With a sufficient amount of determination, and purpose...as an assassin of Alamut may be assumed to have...a person could crawl through the sewers and gain access to the sultan’s inner chambers. Tell me, how many guards are there outside the sultan’s bathing room?’

‘Okay, I’ll grant you that. But that is not equivalent to proof.’

‘Of course not. That’s why I tested the suspect first, to confirm my suspicions.’

‘What kind of test?’

‘As I walked past him with a friend, I casually mentioned the sultan’s name, and out of the corner of my eye, I noticed him move not a single inch.’

‘That seems normal enough to me.’

‘I’m sure it does, the sultan is your husband, but to a common man, any mention of the sultan’s name automatically makes him look up and listen to who’s talking. Any man who doesn’t is...’

‘...not a common man.’

‘Exactly. Now, as we are so near to the sultan’s room, why don’t we go in and get my reward?’

‘I told you that is impossible.’

Ismail nodded and looked at the door to the sultan’s room. ‘Then you will bring my reward to me?’

‘I have it in this bag here.’ The wife held up a small bag of gold coins.

Ismail stepped forward and pulled a small jewel out of his jacket. ‘And this is a small gift for the sultan. Please give it to him, with my love and respect.’

‘I cannot do that.’

‘At least let him see it and decide for himself.’

‘I will not do that either.’

‘Very well...then at least inspect it with your own eyes.’

‘I can see it from here.’

‘With your own hands then.’

‘Why?’

‘To admire its beauty.’

‘I still cannot give it to the sultan. What’s more, he would not accept it even if I did.’

‘Then keep it for yourself. Or give it to a beggar as an act of charity.’

The wife glanced over at the curtains, comforted by the feet sticking out at the bottom. If it was a trick, it was a futile one. And by the looks of it, the jewel could feed the whole city slum for a month. Making up her mind and stamping it with a visible nod, she glided forward and was about to touch the jewel when Ismail suddenly grabbed her arm and put a knife to her throat.

‘Call off the guards!’ he shouted as the fifty hidden men leapt out from behind the curtains, swords drawn.

‘They won’t listen to me.’

‘Then I’ll talk to the sultan directly.’ Ismail raised his voice, shouting at the door of the sultan’s room. ‘Come out, sultan, or I shall cut your wife’s throat.’

The door did not open.

‘I know you can hear me. Come out now, or she will die.’

The door still did not open.

The fifty guards started to move forward, losing their fear. Ismail pulled the wife closer to his body and whispered into her ear, ‘looks like your husband values his own life over yours.’

‘You won’t escape,’ the wife replied.

‘Won’t I? You think I didn’t have a plan before I came in. I know this palace better than the sultan himself.’

Just as he’d finished speaking, and before he could smirk, a knife went through his back and deep into his heart. He dropped his own knife and fell to the ground, dead.

Behind him, the prisoner stood with chains broken and the bag off his head.

‘You may breathe now,’ he said to the sultan’s wife, ‘the beast is dead.’

‘You are not the assassin?’

‘No.’

‘Then who are you?’

The door opened and the sultan came strolling out, a huge smile plastered on his face. 'He is with me.'

'What?'

The sultan walked forward a few steps, kicked Ismail in the head to make sure he was really dead then stepped back again, remaining near the door. 'When you came to me and talked about this genius detective, I suspected immediately that something was amiss. Think about it, a man so brilliant at solving crimes, in my city, who else would I go to for help if not him?'

'You knew he was the true assassin?'

'I did not know for certain, but I strongly suspected it, so before you hired him, I hired my own detective.'

'This man is a detective?'

'Not a great one, obviously, but he followed my instructions well. I knew this Ismail would bring someone in as a decoy, and it would need to be convincing, so I gave him someone.'

'But how could you know Ismail would choose your man?'

'How? Do you not know me at all, my love? I've read Jung, I understand how people think, even assassins. They wanted to kill me, so I simply imagined I was an assassin and asked myself, how would I kill me? How would I get close to me? And the answer came easily after that. To get close to me, they would first need to make me scared. Then, they'd have to give me what I needed most: a brilliant detective.'

‘Sorry, my love, but this doesn’t answer my question.’

‘Patience, woman...I’m getting there.’ The sultan glanced at some of the guards and shook his head. Fearing execution, they shook their heads too. ‘Now, a brilliant detective would need to find someone unusual as his patsy...someone other detectives may have overlooked. A man hanging around the sewers perhaps. A man who didn’t react when hearing the sultan’s name. A man who looked like a beggar.’

The wife stopped nodding along, realising the sultan was sailing off on a tangent of bullshit. He’d clearly got lucky to some degree, either due to random chance or his man’s instinctive acting skills. But she couldn’t tell him that. Not with his level of ego.

‘...fortunately, this brilliant detective of yours fell right into my trap...though fortune is a poor choice of words when you possess the keen grasp of psychology that I do.’

The wife came out of her internal dialectic, smiled loyally and said, ‘when you say it out loud like this, my love, it all seems to make sense.’

‘Yes, well, it’s quite cold in this corridor, I’ll explain in more detail later. First, let me take this fine man into my room and give him his gold.’

Amir gestured at the man with chains still hanging off his arms to follow him into the room, but the man did not move. He simply looked down at the floor.

‘What is it? Are you deaf?’

‘Forgive me, your excellence, that is your private room. I would prefer to wait out here and take the gold from your guards.’

‘Nonsense, you deserve to get it from my hand. Come.’

‘Your excellence, please...I would prefer to wait out here.’

‘Okay, this is becoming irritating. You can either come in this room and get your gold, or I can cut your head off tomorrow morning. It’s your choice.’

The man looked at the sultan’s wife, and then the guards. All of them shrugged, basically saying, you better go in there, he’s crazy.

Walking nervously forward, the man disappeared into the room along with the sultan, the door closing behind them both.

The sultan’s wife told the guards to clear up Ismail’s dead body before the sultan came back out, then walked towards the door. As she got close, there was a loud crashing noise from inside the room, followed by a piercing scream.

She rushed in, along with the guards, and was relieved when she saw the sultan standing over the body of the man in chains.

‘What happened?’ she cried.

‘It was him, he was the assassin.’

‘But...how did you know?’

Amir looked down at the dart in the man’s neck. ‘He was in my room.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You can forget everything I just said outside. The only thing I knew for sure, the only thing that mattered was...the assassin would be the person standing alone with me in this room. And it happened to be him.’

His wife walked forward and stroked her husband’s hand, then told the guards to clear away the new body. When they were done, the sultan and his wife walked into their bedroom and played with their son.

That night, when the son was asleep, they both lay on the bed and talked about everything that had happened. The sultan elaborated on what he’d done, how he’d faked being scared for the last few weeks, and how he’d finally figured out the methods of the Assassins of Alamut.

‘You see, it was all a game of costume and shadows, with all ruminations, all calculations, all suspicions overruled in favour of one singular truth: the assassin, at the end of it all, must be the one standing in front of me. Everything else would be theatre.’

‘You really are a clever man,’ she said, getting up and brushing her hair.

Amir smiled. ‘Cleverer than those Alamut fools at least.’

‘Some of them.’

‘What’s that?’

The wife put the brush down and slammed her face into the table mirror.

‘What are you doing? Are you mad?’

Amir tried to jump up to stop his wife hurting herself more, but his legs wouldn’t move. He tried to lift them using his arms, but they were paralysed too. ‘What is this?’ he shouted.

His wife walked over and sat next to him on the bed. ‘You never asked me much about my history...my life before we met.’

‘What history? Why aren’t my legs moving?’

‘You see, I come from a unique city. A place of great discipline. Unimaginable discipline. When I was a child, I witnessed it first-hand. Our city leader would order men to jump from the fortress walls, to the rocks below, and they would do it, each man, without question.’

‘Alamut...’

‘That was the fire within Ismail, and the other man you killed. And within me too. Yes, I’m from Alamut. More than that, I am *of* Alamut.’

‘Impossible...you set all this up?’

‘Sadly, no. In fact, I didn’t recognise Ismail or the other man, even when they were standing right next to me. But I remember my part now. My duty.’

‘Duty...you’re my wife! We’ve been married for over ten years...we have a son.’

His wife looked at him, pulling out a tiny blade from her hair.

‘You couldn’t have pretended all this time.’

‘To a certain degree, yes.’

‘Since the village just outside Alamut...our first date?’

‘Date is a strange choice of words. As I recall, you threw three gold coins at my feet and then jumped on me.’

‘Don’t be fake-outraged, you laughed about it. You enjoyed it. Our courtship...our wedding.’

‘I played my part, waiting for the orders to come. Tolerated your ego and your paranoia. But after a while, I don’t know when or why, I truly did start to develop feelings for you. And the closer we became, the more I forgot about why I was here...about Alamut...until one day it was gone completely. From that moment on, I decided that I was truly your wife and, even if the order did come, I would not act upon it.’

‘No. No. It doesn’t make sense. They’ve done something to your brain. You’re my wife, the mother of my children. You can’t kill me.’

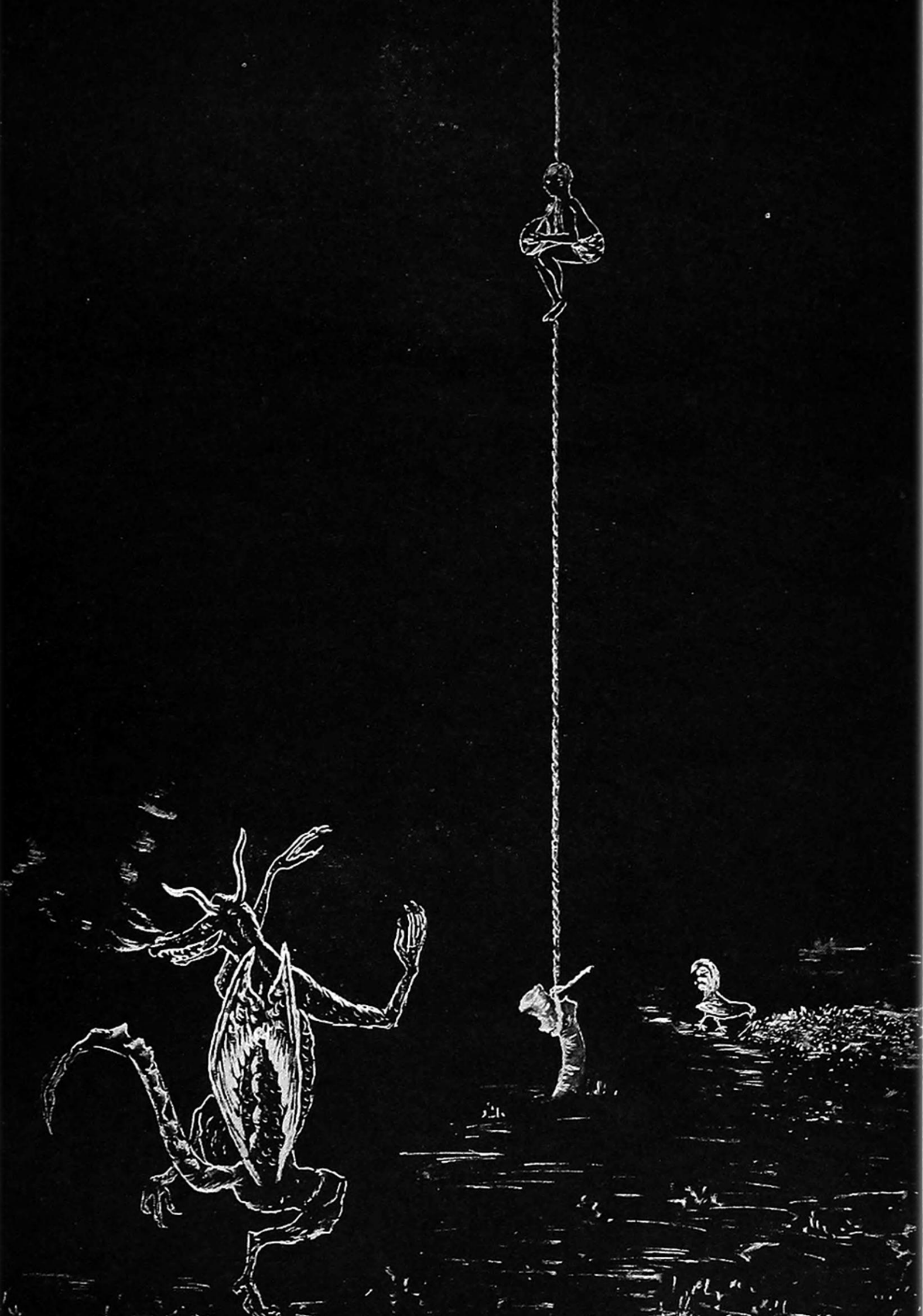
‘It’s true, I never could...’ His wife slipped the blade into Amir’s neck and pulled it out again, all in one flash-like movement. ‘...but then you let Ismail put a knife to my throat.’

‘Traitor...monster...’ muttered the sultan, spitting out huge globs of blood.

‘...loving wife,’ she finished, covering his wound as he faded away.

A few moments later, the guards rushed in and saw the body of Amir on the bed, and his wife pointing at the window.

‘That way, go, go,’ she screamed, and when the guards had left the room, she stroked her husband’s hair and told him, bitterly, ‘from the walls of Alamut...you bastard fool.’



The Curse of the Hyena-Lady

At least seven centuries ago, on the east coast of Africa, there stood several wealthy and populous city-states. Each one was situated at the ocean's edge as they were part of a huge trading network, with ships sailing in from the Middle East, the Delhi Sultanate, South East Asia and even the distant kingdom of China.

Where were the Europeans at this time?

Well, they were mostly toiling away on farms and murdering each other in pointless wars, as well as being oppressed by generic kings, queens, nobles and *men of God*.

They called this time the Dark Ages in Europe as most countries had lost interest in arts, culture, reading books etc. Actually, most people couldn't read at all as all the texts were in Latin [the old Greek language where all the words ended in *um* and *nostrus*].

Anyway, back on the east coast of Africa, in the city-state of Mombasa [it's still active today, the second largest city in Kenya], a young woman named Songhai walked back to her home in the Central Quarter. She was quite nervous as that day was the day she'd decided to ask her father for permission to get on a ship and sail to China.

Or, at the very least, Persia.

Of course, he would probably say no, he was a very protective parent, and everyone in the city had heard the stories of waking up with your kidneys removed in foreign countries, but, another part of her said, 'don't worry, he let you study at the university, he might let you go out to explore the world, too.'

~~~

When she arrived home, Songhai noticed that the side quarters to the left of the courtyard was occupied. Was it the Pandyan trader again? Or someone new? A Chinese merchant perhaps?

She took a few steps towards the building before remembering basic manners. It's rude to invade a guest's privacy, just as it's rude for them to invade yours. She repeated the line in her head, turned back and headed inside her own house. Her father didn't look up when she entered, he was too busy reading a book. She glanced at the front cover, reading the Chinese title [*When Women Rule: The Rollercoaster Reign of Sociopathic Sexpot Empress Wu*] and wincing.

'Father, I need to ask you something.'

'Wait.'

She waited, watching her father scan the page of the book he was on very slowly. It was true, he wasn't the best reader, but he'd only started learning the Chinese language a year before whereas she'd been studying it since she was fourteen. She, too, was not perfect, there was no way she could possibly understand the idioms, but she knew enough to get through most books.

Her father finally stopped reading and put the book down flat on his thighs. His face looked as white as a Norwegian hacker. Well, it would've if he'd had light-coloured skin. 'She murdered her own son,' he muttered.

'What did you say, father?'

'This Empress Wu...was so hungry for power that she had her own child poisoned.'

Songhai was a little annoyed but managed to bite her tongue.

'What is it you wanted to ask?' said her father, finally returning to a normal colour.

Songhai cleared her throat.

'Is your voice okay?' asked her father.

'I'm fine.'

'You seem nervous.'

'I'm not. I'm just preparing my question.'

'No,' replied her father quickly.

‘What do you mean? No to what?’

‘If you’re too scared to spit out your question then it must be something ridiculous you’re about to ask. Probably a request to move out with one of your friends or visit Kilwa or Pemba or some such thing...well, the answer is a definitive no.’

‘Not Kilwa or Pemba. China. I want to go to China. Persia too. Maybe Junagadh, if the ships stop there.’

Her father clutched his chest, looking pained.

‘Don’t pretend to have a heart attack, father. It’s not an unreasonable request.’

Her father took the hand off his chest and said, ‘no,’ again.

‘Really, I can look after myself. I speak intermediate Arabic and Middle Chinese, a little bit of Hindi, I won’t get into any trouble. I just want to see the world.’

‘No.’

‘Please...’

Her father looked at his daughter’s pleading face and remembered her mother. They really did look quite similar, which was both touching and a little creepy at the same time. ‘No,’ he said, firmly, ‘and that’s final.’

Songhai folded her arms and slumped onto one of the chairs.

‘And don’t try to sneak off onto one of those merchant ships by yourself. Understand?’

‘Yes, father.’

‘And don’t pretend to agree but secretly make a plan to do it anyway. Understand?’

Songhai jumped out of the chair and ran outside, eventually sitting on the niche dug into the wall of the courtyard.

A short while later, the door to the side quarters opened and a Chinese man walked out. He was dressed in fine silk robes and looked like he didn’t have a worry in the world.

He came over to her and asked if she was feeling okay, as she looked a bit glum.

Songhai looked towards the window of her own house, looking to see if her father was watching. ‘Nothing,’ she replied, in Middle Chinese.

‘Your father doesn’t want you to go out,’ the man said, switching to Swahili.

Songhai stared at him in surprise. ‘You speak my language?’

‘Sorry?’

‘You speak Swahili.’

‘Speak Swahili...ah, okay...no, not really. I can say basic sentences, but I cannot listen well to your answers.’

‘At least you tried,’ she said. ‘It’s a good thing to be curious.’



‘Yes, it is good, though I should learn more. I plan to come here many more times in the future, and it is hard sometimes to communicate with your father in Chinese. For example, yesterday, I asked if he could understand my instructions and he brought me a plate of cheese.’

‘He’s still learning.’

‘Yes, I know. It is my lack not his. Now, tell me, what’s wrong?’

Songhai looked down at her feet and asked them subconsciously if she should tell this stranger about her problems. Both told her no, but she didn’t like that answer.

‘Are your feet okay?’ the Chinese man asked, smirking.

Songhai looked up at the man again. ‘My father won’t let me travel to your country.’

‘My country?’

‘I want to go to China, and Persia, maybe India too, but he won’t let me go.’

‘Did he say it was too dangerous?’

‘Nope. He just said no.’

The man nodded. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Are you leaving soon, on your ship?’

‘Yes, I go tomorrow.’

Songhai checked the window of her house again, but there was no sign of anyone listening in. ‘Can you take me with you?’

‘On my ship?’

She nodded.

‘I’m sorry again, I cannot. Your father is an important trading partner, it would be unforgiveable if I were to take you against his wishes.’

‘You could say I sneaked onto your ship without you realising?’

‘That would be a lie. And not a convincing one. No, I’m sorry, I must say no to your request.’ He bowed low, almost touching her head, which must’ve been difficult for him as he was quite tall. ‘Though I will say...if you were my daughter, I would say yes.’

Songhai smiled, watching the Chinese man put on his shoes and leave through the main gate. Wow, were all people in China that enlightened? Or was it just him?

She shook her head. No, she thought, that’s unfair. Every country has its caveman bigots and batshit nationalists. And father himself is not a bad man, he would not say no to other women going, only me. Which is sweet and lovely...kind of...but doesn’t help me much.

No, I’m just going to have to help myself.

~~~

Despite her father’s wishes, Songhai sneaked out of the house before sunrise and hurried down to the docks, where some of the ships were already sailing out to sea.

She searched around a bit, asking sailors whose ship was whose and which ship was going where, until finally she found the ship belonging to the Chinese man.

It was fairly large, and had a beautiful red sail already being stretched out by the crew, and more importantly, the Chinese man staying at her house was nowhere to be seen.

‘If I can find a good hiding place,’ she whispered to herself.

A sailor walked past her from behind and shouted something to one of his shipmates, making her jump.

‘Stop trembling and move, go, go , go,’ she urged herself.

Songhai hurried forward, grabbed a hat from the top of a random barrel, covered her hair and started walking up the plank. She got halfway before looking up and seeing both the Chinese man and her father standing on the deck, staring directly at her.

‘Fuck me,’ she mumbled in Swahili, covering her face with the hat, then dropping it when it didn’t make her invisible.

‘Songhai....’

‘I know, father.’

~~~

By the time the red-faced patriarch got her back home, she was too tired to try sneaking out again so she just went to her room and collapsed on the bed. After a few hours of rest, her father came in.

‘I’ve told everyone down at the docks to watch out for you. And I’ve sent word to all the ship captains, so don’t think of trying that again, understand?’

Songhai didn’t say a word.

‘Okay, fine, you may stay and sulk for a while, but not forever. I expect you to start helping me with the accounts soon, learn the family business. Understand?’

Songhai grunted.

‘I’ll take that as a yes.’

Her father left the room, and as soon as the door was closed, Songhai leapt up and threw on fresh attire. She ignored the silk her father had bought her and selected only the clothes that would make her look like a common townspeople. Then she sneaked through the house, climbed onto the roof from the courtyard and headed north.

Her plan was quite simple: if she couldn’t leave by ship from Mombasa then she would pass as a sailor and set sail from one of the other city-states farther up the coast. Malindi was the nearest, but she’d only ever seen it on a map, so she wasn’t sure how long it would take to get there. Hopefully, just a day or two as she didn’t have much food with her.

~~~

On the road to Malindi, she was passed by many merchants, as well as men carrying boats made from mangrove trees. Songhai knew the

basic process of how the boats were made, but still felt a sense of awe when seeing how fine and resplendent they looked.

One of the men carrying a particularly beautiful boat saw her walking alone and asked where she was going.

‘Malindi.’

‘Aha, us too. But isn’t it a bit far for a young girl to travel by herself?’

‘No.’

‘It’s another day at least. Are you sure you can make it?’

‘I have a better chance than you,’ replied the girl, annoyed that the man was questioning her stamina.

‘How so?’

‘I’m not carrying a boat.’

The man laughed, and so did a few of the others. A short while later, they lowered the boat and sat down to have lunch. Songhai had stayed behind them and, when she saw they’d stopped, did the same, sitting down in the shade of a mangrove tree.

‘You want some nuts?’ the same man as before asked.

‘I have bread.’

The man shrugged. ‘So, why are you going to Malindi anyway? Did you have a fight with your family?’

‘I’m going to join the crew of one of the merchant ships.’

‘Ha, very funny.’

‘I’m serious. I’m gonna find a ship heading to China, or Persia, or Junagadh, and I’m going to see the world.’

‘I admit, you speak well. In fact, you almost make me wish I could go too. But there’s one problem.’

‘What’s that?’

‘You’re still a girl, and girls can’t join crews.’

‘That’s not true!’

‘Is it not? Okay then. Do you know any girls who have joined a ship’s crew?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who?’

‘A neighbour of mine. No, two neighbours.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘Am not.’

‘Definitely lying.’

‘How do you know? Are you inside my brain?’

‘It’s okay, you can keep lying, I don’t care. I’m just trying to do you a favour.’

‘I’m not lying.’”

The man threw her a nut. It landed by her feet and she made no move to pick it up. 'Go back to your family, little one. This is no world for young girls. Nor young boys, if you're anywhere near Malibu.'

'Sorry?'

'Nothing. Just heed my first warning, the *no world for young girls* part. Okay?'

Songhai didn't answer this time, she just waited for the men to leave and get far enough away that she couldn't see them. Then, she followed the same path, slowly.

However, it quickly turned dark and, as her legs grew tired and her stomach became empty, she started to hear animal noises from the jungle at the side of the road. She walked on for another thirty minutes, but the animal noises got louder and creepier, and she didn't know if she had enough energy to fight whatever might jump out of the trees.

She stopped and looked around.

Up ahead, there were two signs. She walked closer and saw that one of them said *Malindi – 41km* while the other claimed *Gede – 1.5km*. There was a third, hidden under canopy, that said *Epstein's Paradise – 4km*, but she didn't know what that meant, and, anyway, she'd already pinned her hopes on Gede.

Okay, she thought, I've never heard of the place, but it's better than being eaten by a surprise animal, so...

Songhai hurried along the path to the left and, after another twenty minutes of animal noises and a growling stomach, arrived in a small town with only four courtyard areas and no mosque.

‘Hey you, stranger,’ said one of the women, standing in the nearest courtyard amongst a crowd of other villagers. ‘Come quickly, do not linger near the trees.’

Songhai nodded and, checking behind her for animals holding newspapers, walked to the courtyard and sat down next to the woman who’d spoken to her.

‘Ah, you are just a child,’ said a different woman in the crowd.

‘What are you doing wandering around so late at night?’ asked another.

Songhai opened her mouth to respond, but the woman, who had a green gown wrapped around her body, beat her to it.

‘Leave her alone, she’s clearly had a long journey, wherever she’s come from.’ The green gown woman looked down at her. ‘Where have you come from?’

‘Mombasa,’ said Songhai softly.

‘Waa, so far!’

‘Not that far.’

‘Yes, I understand now. That’s why you were confident enough to walk near the trees.’

‘What do you mean?’

The green gown woman bent down and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. ‘It is a gruesome story, but you must hear it, or you might walk off alone again.’

‘Story?’

‘Most of the time, our village is a peaceful place, but every year or so, some people disappear. The first time it happened, we did not know anything, but then the Hyena Lady came and told us of the cannibal.’

‘Cannibal...you mean a man who eats other men?’

‘Exactly, but not just men. Women and children too. That’s why we stay in the courtyards, together.’

Songhai looked around at the people in the courtyard and saw that not one of them was smiling. ‘Where is this cannibal now?’ she asked.

‘We do not know,’ answered the green gown woman.

‘That’s why you all look so nervous.’

‘He may be miles away, or he may be behind one of those trees, watching us with a knife and fork in his hands. No one can know for certain.’

‘Okay, then who is this Hyena Lady you mentioned?’

‘She’s our saviour,’ shouted someone in the crowd.

‘Sent from heaven itself,’ said another.

‘Quiet, quiet,’ said the green gown woman, looking slightly annoyed. ‘Honestly, we do not know who she is, not really. The only thing we do know is that without her, many more would be dead.’

‘She helps you?’

‘Not help, protects. Only she can keep the cannibal away, though he always comes back eventually.’

‘How does she keep him away?’

‘Magic.’

‘She knows magic?’

‘Of course! How else could she drive the cannibal away?’ shouted one of the other women.

‘She has magic from heaven itself!’ cried another.

‘Heaven bless the Hyena Lady!’

Everyone repeated the phrase and cheered.

‘Okay, calm down everyone,’ said the green gown woman. ‘It’s getting late. We’d better go inside and try to get some rest. We’ll talk again in the morning.’

‘Maybe it’ll be over by then,’ said someone.

‘With a bit of luck.’

The crowd dispersed, everyone heading back to their own stone houses. Songhai looked at her feet, wondering where she would sleep for the night.

‘Come on, little one, you can stay with me.’

‘What about your family? Won’t they mind?’

The green gown woman stared out towards the trees. ‘Let’s go quickly. I’ll make you some dinner, you must be starving.’

‘A little bit.’

‘Then maybe you can tell me your own story.’

Songhai nodded.

‘I’m Fatima, by the way.’

‘A Muslim name.’

‘Well, I am a Muslim woman, so, yes.’

‘But I didn’t see a mosque in the village.’

‘Not anymore, no.’

‘The cannibal?’

Fatima shook her head. ‘The Hyena Lady ordered it destroyed a few years ago.’

‘Why?’

‘I do not know.’

‘And you agreed to it?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘They agreed to it?’

Fatima didn't answer. Instead, she patted Songhai on the shoulder again and told her to follow her back to her home.

'Okay, but only until sunrise. Then I must leave.'

'As you wish.'

~~~

After eating a surprisingly large dinner, Songhai relaxed on a cushion and told Fatima how she'd come to be in the village of Gede at such a late hour. Of course, she told the version of the story that made her look like a put-upon hero and her father a stubborn monster, and when she was done speaking, Fatima nodded like a sage monk with tired neck muscles.

'Well?' asked Songhai, getting impatient.

'You wish to hear my opinion?'

'It's better than silence and nodding.'

Fatima briefly smiled then grew solemn again. 'You are very brave, travelling so far by yourself...'

'Not that brave.'

'...but your father must be very worried about you.'

'Him? He wants to keep me locked up in his house forever.'

'I'm sure that's not true.'

'It is, he never lets me go anywhere.'

‘I’m sure he loves you very much. Perhaps that makes him over-protective, I do not know, but still...he is your father.’

‘Doesn’t act like it.’

‘You should go back and see him. Talk to him. ’

‘I will not.’

‘At least send him a note.’

Songhai folded her arms. ‘I thought you would understand, being a woman yourself. Didn’t you ever have a father?’

‘I did, of course.’

‘Was he not over-protective too?’

‘He was.’

‘You see.’

Fatima sighed and wiped a tear from her eye.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing. Something in my eye.’

Songhai watched Fatima wipe her eyes more thoroughly and felt a pang of guilt. She’d obviously said something wrong, probably about her father, and now she was crying.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, patting Fatima awkwardly on the back as if she were choking on some food. ‘I didn’t mean to make you sad.’

‘It’s not your fault, dear.’

‘I just get angry when I have to defend myself. I know I shouldn’t, but it just happens. I don’t know how to stop it.’

‘It’s okay, everyone has a temper on at least one topic.’

‘Tis true. I’m still sorry though.’ Songhai stopped patting Fatima’s back. ‘You won’t make me go back, will you?’

‘Of course not.’

Songhai smiled and gave Fatima a hug. It was a bit weird as she was eighteen years old and not usually so emotional, but there was a sadness about Fatima that made her unavoidably huggable.

~~~

A little while later, the two of them lay on some cushions on the floor and drank *tangawizi* tea.

‘Fatima...’

‘Yes.’

‘This Hyena Lady...where exactly does she live?’

‘Live? No one knows. Somewhere in the jungle, I suppose.’

‘You’ve never tried to find her?’

‘We don’t need to. She comes to us when the cannibal has been stopped. Then disappears again.’

‘No one follows her?’

‘Why would they wish to do that?’

‘To talk to her.’

‘Oh, little one. You don’t want to talk to people like that. What if you were to make them angry?’

Songhai nodded, took one final sip of her *tangawizi* tea, lay flat on the cushions and soon fell asleep. Fatima cleared up the dishes and bowls and then went into her room and lit two candles: one for her husband, one for her son.

~~~

The next morning, there was a lot of commotion coming from the courtyard, so much so that Songhai was forced off the floor cushions and over to the window to see what was going on.

‘It’s the Hyena Lady,’ someone shouted, ‘she’s only gone and done it.’

‘Already?’

‘Woman’s a machine!’

‘A heavenly machine!’

‘Let’s go see what she says.’

Fatima came into the room and asked Songhai if she wanted to go and see the Hyena Lady with her own eyes.

‘She’s really there, right now?’

‘Seems like it.’

Songhai said, ‘yes, of course, let’s go,’ and the two of them rushed out of the stone house so fast that Fatima didn’t even have a chance to lock the door behind her.

~~~

In the centre of the courtyard closest to the jungle, there stood a tall lady with small twigs sticking out of her hair and blood-red lines drawn wildly on her arms and face.

A large crowd was listening to her talk. In fact, everyone was so quiet that Songhai thought maybe they’d had their tongues removed. She whispered to Fatima, asking, ‘why is no one saying anything?’

Fatima didn’t answer, she just looked down and put a finger to her lips.

Songhai turned back to the Hyena Lady, who was now holding something in her hand.

‘This,’ the Hyena Lady shouted, ‘is the face of the cannibal. I took it from him, with magic vapour from my tongue.’

Songhai looked at the face, but it was too far to see clearly. Was that really human? If it was, who was the cannibal? How could he come back if he didn’t have a face?

‘Eventually, the cannibal will grow a new face and return, but, for now, you are safe.’

The Hyena Lady put the face inside her jacket, which seemed to be made of leather.

Hang on, thought Songhai, she's not going to leave the face for us to inspect?

'Go back to your homes now. Praise me when you rise and praise me again before you sleep. Praise me on your lunch breaks, too, if you have time. Without this, I am nothing and the cannibal will thrive.'

The Hyena Lady said the last word in a hissing voice, which made everyone in the crowd tremble a little. But not Songhai, she was too curious.

'Excuse me,' she said, raising her hand, 'Miss Hyena Lady.'

The Hyena Lady froze, almost as shocked as the crowd in front of her. She scanned the faces for the one who'd spoken and quickly found Songhai.

'You dare speak to me?' she asked.

'Err...yes. I just wanted to ask about the-'

'Ask?'

Fatima stood on Songhai's foot and whispered for her to shut up, but Songhai was not in the habit of following orders. She continued, saying, 'how exactly did you defeat this cannibal?'

'What?'

'Also, how did you get his face? And why can't we examine it?'

The Hyena Lady glared at Songhai but did not answer. The whole crowd acted like a bunch of corpses propped up on poles, holding their breath, too terrified to move.

Eventually, the Hyena Lady raised a stick in the air and mumbled something in a strange voice. As she spoke the words, the stick glowed purple and so did the Hyena Lady's eyes.

'Shit,' muttered Songhai, momentarily awed.

Then the purple vanished. The Hyena Lady lowered the stick, turned and walked off into the jungle.

'What were you thinking?' asked Fatima, grabbing Songhai and shaking her arms. 'She could've used her magic on you.'

'Why? All I did was ask a few questions.'

'No one's ever done that before. You risk making her angry.'

'I had to. There were too many things that didn't make sense.'

'Forget about sense, she's not human. Did you hear her speak? Words like a snake. It's dangerous to get on the wrong side of her.'

'I'm not scared.'

'Luckily, she's gone now, and the cannibal won't be back for a while. But you should learn from this. Don't be so impertinent. And at least act like you're scared even if you're not.'

'But there are so many unanswered questions. Like, how did she do that thing with her eyes? The glowing purple effect...'

‘That’s none of our concern. And certainly none of yours. Now, come back to the stone house and have some delicious breakfast as punishment.’

Songhai shrugged and let Fatima lead her out of the courtyard. However, she couldn’t get the Hyena Lady out of her mind, especially her glowing purple eyes, so this time she let Fatima walk far ahead before turning back and jogging towards the jungle, into the same place the Hyena Lady had vanished a few minutes before.

Fatima didn’t see her go, and when she got out of the courtyard and turned to ask what kind of fruit she’d like, she panicked. Her anxiety took her back to the edge of the jungle, and she peered through the trees, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but it was too late, Songhai had gone too deep inside.

‘No, child,’ she said, putting one foot into the jungle but going no farther.

~~~

A short while later, about two kilometres from the village, Songhai came to a clearing with a giant rock in the middle. It was shaped almost like a seat so she sat down on it and looked around.

There was a path on the left-hand side, but no sign to say where it would lead.

Everywhere else, there was nothing but trees and an immense, unbroken sheaf of canopy, enough to provide some shade from the sun.

Songhai thought for a minute, guessing that the Hyena Lady had taken the path to the left and that it would eventually lead to her home, but when she stood up to start walking again, she heard a noise from the right.

She turned and walked forward, moving aside some of the branches. The noise was definitely not that of an animal, it was more like a rock tumbling down a hill, and when she walked a little farther she saw that she was right.

In front of her, just beyond a small river, was a rocky hill. And at the top, the Hyena Lady entering some kind of cave.

Songhai quickly and stealthily crossed the river, found the path leading up the slope and hiked with teenage energy all the way to the top. Outside the cave, she stopped, caught her breath and tried to peer inside.

‘Too dark,’ she muttered, moving forward a few steps.

Actually, it seemed more like a bear’s home than a human’s, but appearances could be deceptive so Songhai took a fairly deep batch of air and entered.

The first ten metres or so were uneventful as it was still very dark, but then, after bumping into a wall directly in front of her, Songhai turned right into a corridor full of pale-green and dark-purple candles. They were all lit, yet when she went close to inspect them, it was very strange, there was no residue dripping from the top.

‘A new kind of wax,’ she whispered to herself. ‘Or perhaps witchcraft?’

Whatever the cause, she didn’t care as she was far too curious to stop now. She continued on, following the corridor through the cave until it grew out into a large hall.

Songhai tried to comprehend what she was seeing, but it was hard. This kind of hall shouldn’t be in a cave, it was more suited to a Persian fun palace. But here it was, in the middle of the jungle.

She took another step forward, glancing left and right and up and down to try to catch sight of the Hyena Lady, but, before she could really get a good look at anything, she had been flipped upside down and was rising rapidly towards the ceiling.

She tried to scream, but no sound came out, and the ceiling of the giant hall got closer and closer until...

...she stopped.

At some point, she’d closed her eyes, so when she opened them again she could see that the ceiling was about an inch from her nose.

‘I had a feeling you’d follow me,’ said a clear, authoritative voice down below, ‘though I never imagined you’d be bold enough to enter my cave.’

Songhai rotated her head and saw the Hyena Lady walking calmly and casually and impossibly down the side of the wall. She was dressed

differently now, actually looking quite spectacular in a crimson red dress with a sinisterly high neck collar.

‘Let me down,’ shouted Songhai.

‘No need to shout, sapling.’

‘Please, let me down,’ said Songhai, in a softer tone.

‘I’ll think about it.’ The Hyena lady made it to the floor, resumed a relationship with normal physics, and walked across to a sofa that Songhai couldn’t remember seeing when she’d first come in. ‘Though I’ll probably slit your throat afterwards.’

‘Wha...’

‘You’ve seen too much, sapling. Much too much.’

‘No, no...I haven’t seen anything.’

‘That’s a stupid sentence.’

‘I swear, I won’t tell anyone. I don’t even know what to tell. This place...it’s crazy.’

‘Not crazy, sapling. Merely different.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean anything bad. I just-’

‘Silence.’

Songhai tried to say *sorry* again, but no sound came out from her mouth. She tried shouting, but nothing changed. The Hyena lady watched her, smirking, then put a dark hand on her own forehead and

started to give herself a massage. After doing this for around ten minutes, she sighed, swished her hand from right to left and said, ‘drop.’

Right on cue, Songhai dropped.

She closed her eyes again as the floor came closer but didn’t bother to scream. If this was the end, so be it [though she really hoped it wasn’t].

Luckily, it wasn’t the end. She opened her eyes and saw that she was standing next to the sofa.

‘Sit.’

‘You can use magic to move my body?’

‘Sit.’

Songhai sat, her body controlled again by the Hyena Lady’s magic.

‘How are you doing that?’

‘Too much to explain. Let’s just say magic. Any other questions?’

‘Are you a witch?’

‘Any non-boring questions?’

‘Why do you keep calling me sapling?’

‘Boring.’

Songhai saw the impatient look in the Hyena Lady’s eyes and quickly tried to think of an interesting question. Logically, what would a witch find interesting? What would she not expect to hear?

Songhai coughed and asked, ‘can you help me go to China?’

The Hyena Lady didn’t attach *boring* to this one. Instead, she stared at Songhai for an uncomfortably long time. Then grabbed the young intruder’s hand and studied her palm. She didn’t explain anything, and Songhai didn’t ask as she didn’t want to go up to the ceiling again.

Finally, the Hyena Lady took out a twig and cut a line on Songhai’s palm.

‘Ow, fuck...’

‘Don’t be a baby, it’s just a scratch.’

‘Why did you do that?’

‘You want to go to China, don’t you?’

‘Yes, but-’

‘There you go then, now you can.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Argh, humans. You may think there have been smarter people in this world than me, but there really haven’t. I am universally unique.’

‘I don’t...understand.’

The Hyena Lady muttered something inaudible then continued. ‘I know you, sapling. You wish to sail the seas, to converse in other tongues, to run your fingers over foreign abs. As well as other more mundane desires. But you are prohibited. Or you *were* prohibited. Now you are not.’



‘Sorry, I still don’t understand.’

‘Oh, you do, you’re just being tedious.’

‘I’m not, I swear.’

‘Silly sapling. I know what was blocking your way, and I removed it.’

‘By cutting my hand?’

‘That is the symbol, the price will come later.’

‘Err...I don’t understand. Sorry.’

The Hyena Lady gripped the twig tightly and cleared her throat. ‘You couldn’t go to China because you were a woman. Now, you’re a man.’

‘What?’ Songhai looked down at her body, panicked. ‘I can’t be. That’s-’

‘Relax, you’re not actually a man. You’ll just look like one to all those sailors and merchants you’re so keen on hanging out with. That way, you’ll be able to get on a ship, and then you can go anywhere.’

Songhai nodded, though she couldn’t really believe what the Hyena Lady was saying. A man? How could that be true?

While she was thinking, the Hyena Lady clicked her fingers and a pot appeared in front of them, along with two cups.

‘Yes, it’s true, I’ve been very rude,’ said the Hyena Lady, taking one of the cups and dipping it into the pot. Despite the steam rising out, she

held the cup down for a moment then brought it back up and handed it to Songhai. 'It's been a long time since I've had guests. See, after I scare them with the ceiling trick, I usually share a cup of purple tea with them, but with you, I almost forgot.'

'What is purple tea?'

'... ..'

'Sorry?'

'That's a secret,' the Hyena Lady repeated, a slight look of annoyance crossing her face.

'Is it poisonous?'

'Don't be silly.'

'How can I be sure?'

'Sapling, if I wanted you dead, you'd be splattered across the floor already.'

Songhai shivered and tried a sip of the purple liquid. It didn't taste too bad, kind of like mango. She drank some more, relaxing a little.

'Now, obviously your next question is going to be about money, so here's another little gift for you.'

The Hyena Lady reached down and picked up a small purse. She opened it up and showed five gold coins inside.

'I'd forgotten about money,' said Songhai.

'Of course you had, you're a rich kid. Here, take it.'

Songhai took the purse and looked to see if there were any more coins inside. 'I don't want to seem ungrateful, but five coins probably won't be enough to get me on a ship.'

'Ah, but that's no ordinary purse, is it?'

'It isn't?'

'Whenever you take out a gold coin, another one will take its place. Basically, it's an infinite money bag.'

The Hyena Lady laughed and drank some of her own purple tea. Songhai put the purse on the sofa next to her and looked at her body again.

'Here, try this.'

Songhai looked up and saw the Hyena Lady holding a mirror. She took it and looked at her reflection.

'Wha...'

It was true, she did look like a man. Quite a good-looking man too. Cocoa dark skin, cocoa dark eyes, hair tied in four locks and parted to one side.

'This is what people will see when they look at you.'

'My hair looks weird.'

'It's an old style that I feel deserves a comeback.'

'I've never seen anyone with this hairstyle before.'

'Of course not, you're a baby.'

‘But...what if-’

‘Don’t fret, sapling. No one in China will know the difference. They might even take you for a prince. Or a Dalston hipster.’

‘Sorry?’

‘That last one was after your time. Forget it. The point is you’re all set for your trip. Time to get excited, right, sapling?’

Songhai put the mirror down. ‘Why are you doing all this? What do you expect in return?’

‘Ah, human nature. No free infinite money bags in this world.’ The Hyena Lady drank some more tea then wiped her lips. ‘Well, I don’t expect anything in return. The magic, however, does.’

‘The magic?’

‘I am just a conduit, a user of the magic. And for every act I do, there is a price to be paid.’

‘For you, or me?’

‘Common magic, like lifting you up to the ceiling, creating this sofa, this hall, that is my price to pay. And I’ve already paid it, a hundred thousand times over. However, the magic I’ve used for your benefit, this is something you must repay.’

‘How?’

‘A logical question. I must warn you though, you will not like the answer.’

‘Tell me.’

‘It’s simple. You may travel and spend as you wish for ten years. But, after that, you must return here and be my slave forever.’

‘And if I don’t return?’

‘You will.’

‘But if I don’t, for some reason?’

‘You will.’

Songhai opened her mouth to ask more questions, but as soon as she blinked, she saw that she wasn’t in the cave anymore, she was standing by the docks of Mombasa.

‘Are you coming or not?’ asked a man nearby, who seemed to be wearing the costume of a ship captain.

Songhai blinked a few more times, and then replied, ‘yes.’

As she walked onto the ship, she passed a piece of glass shining in the sun. Just as in the cave, her reflection was that of a man. She checked her jacket for the infinite money purse and was relieved to find it was there.

Okay, she thought. Ten years, starting now. And after that...well, she had a decade to think of a way out of that problem. And besides, if she happened to be in China when the ten years were up, what would the Hyena Lady be able to do about it?

Nothing.

How could she?

It was half a world away.

~~~

Over the next ten years, Songhai did exactly what she'd told her father she would do if he gave her the chance. Disguised continuously as a man, yet functioning as a woman, she travelled first to Persia, then north to Turkmen, then quickly back South again after the first Turkmenis she met tried to hang her for being *human coal*.

After that, she went across the Delhi Sultanate, through the Kingdom of Dali, and into the promised land of Song Dynasty China. It turned out that a lot of Chinese people didn't actually speak the Chinese she'd studied, so she learnt the basics of two of the most common dialects and, added to her Middle Chinese, it was enough for her to communicate with people.

After five years in China, things started to get scary as the Mongolians were getting closer and closer, so she moved South into the Guangdong region, and met a young man studying for the Government exams. Of course, she thought that he would see a man when he looked at her, but for some reason he didn't, he saw her as she really was, a woman.

Despite being from two very different cultures, or maybe because of it, they quickly started having a lot of sex and, within three months, had moved in together.

~~~

Another five years passed quickly, and then one day, Songhai woke up from a particularly unnerving dream.

She had been wandering around the local gardens of Guangzhou when she walked a little bit too far and the trees turned to mangrove trees and her old family house appeared. In the blink of an eye, she was inside and her father was scolding her, but there was something strange about his skin, and when she moved closer, it started to slip off, until it shed itself completely and it wasn't her father standing there at all, it was the Hyena Lady.

Controlling her breaths, she started to count backwards and, after an hour of checking and double-checking, realised that ten years was almost up.

'What's wrong?' asked the Chinese man, who was now her husband, though they'd never been able to have it officially confirmed.

'Nothing.'

'Is it about the Hyena Lady?'

'Wha-...how did you know about her?'

'You say her name in your sleep sometimes. Who is she?'

Songhai was a stubborn woman and really didn't want to tell him anything, but it was a heavy secret to carry alone, so eventually she relented and told him the whole story.

'She turned you into a man?'

'Just my appearance.'

‘But-’

‘It only works on other people, not you.’

Her husband nodded, still confused. ‘Hang on...that’s why everyone looks at us funny when I stroke your head?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s why you never hold my hand or kiss me in public?’

‘Yes.’

The husband frowned, then slowly turned it into a grin. ‘I never told you this, but I’m actually bi-sexual. This news is kind of exciting. Apart from the sociopathic witch aspect, of course. What are we gonna do about her?’

‘We?’

‘It is our problem, is it not?’

Songhai smiled and stroked her husband’s hand. ‘Whatever I do, I won’t go back to her.’

‘Agreed.’

‘She’ll have to come and find me...’

‘Impossible.’

‘...and I’ll be ready for her.’

That night, Songhai had another strange dream. She was sitting by the river, looking up at the crescent moon when, from out of nowhere, a giant hand sailed down from the sky, snatched up her tiny form and



carried her at imperceptible speed across the ocean. She tried to bite the skin of the giant hand to get loose, but it was as hard as leather so all she could do was float across the sky and wait to see where she ended up.

The next morning, her husband awoke to an empty bed. There was no sign of Songhai, and no trace that she'd ever been there. No clothes, no bags, no toothbrush, nothing.

He ran outside into the street and screamed her name, but she did not respond. When he asked his neighbours if they'd seen her, they looked at him strangely and said, '*her?*'

'Him. Have you seen him, my good friend, Songhai?'

'He's your friend?'

'Yes, yes, have you seen him?'

'I thought he was your boyfriend.'

'Have you seen him or not?'

'Not.'

After checking every crack and corner of the town for three days straight, the man returned home and tried to think. He tried to think for the whole night and when it was morning again he got up and packed a large bag, telling his neighbours that he was going on a long journey and may not be back for several years, so, water my plants and feed the cat, thanks.

~~~

Meanwhile, somewhere far across the ocean, Songhai opened her eyes and found herself in a place she couldn't possibly be in. The coloured candles, the decorated walls, the creepy atmosphere.

'Ah, you have returned,' said a familiar voice nearby.

Songhai put her hands up defensively, ready for an attack.

'Calm down, I'm not going to hurt you, sapling,' said the voice. 'You're to be my guest, remember?'

'How did I come here?' asked Songhai, getting to her feet, but not moving towards the sofa where the Hyena Lady was pouring out two cups of purple tea.

'Swiftly.'

'I was in China.'

'Was.'

'Where's my husband?'

'Cup of purple?'

'Where is he? Tell me.'

The Hyena Lady briefly looked annoyed then tapped her stick. There was a moment of complete darkness then light again. Songhai blinked and found herself sitting on the couch.

'Your husband can join you here later, if you wish.'

'How?'

'Magic.'

Songhai looked at the cup of tea on the small table in front of her.

‘Drink up, it’s tasty.’

‘It’s the same one as before?’

‘Of course. My own blend.’

Songhai looked around at the rest of the hall. It was exactly how it had appeared ten years earlier, except for one small difference. In the far corner was an extra door. She stared at it for so long that the Hyena Lady turned and looked too.

‘That is the door to your room.’

‘The basement?’

The Hyena Lady turned back and laughed. ‘It’s much cleaner than a basement, sapling.’

Songhai nodded and looked at the purple tea again. The Hyena Lady took her own cup and drank.

‘You really should drink something.’

Songhai picked up the cup and took a sip. The witch was right, it was good, like raspberries, so she drank more. When the cup was empty, she put it down and slumped back on the sofa.

‘Feeling sleepy?’ asked the Hyena Lady.

‘A little.’

‘Good, good.’

‘I’ve thought about it and...I don’t want you to bring my husband here. He doesn’t deserve to suffer the same fate as me.’

‘Oh, don’t worry about that, sapling,’ said the Hyena Lady, pulling back her lips and revealing two rows of very sharp, very yellow teeth.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have no intention of bringing him here. I just said that so you would calm down and drink the tea.’

‘What...’

‘Now, you should be asleep in a few minutes. After that, it’s through that door you spotted and into my well-furnished kitchen.’

‘Kitchen...’

‘Yes.’

‘Why would you take me to the kitchen?’

‘You really do ask the stupidest of questions.’

‘Why?’

‘To cook you, of course. Cook you and eat your delicious young flesh.’

Songhai almost vomited in her mouth.

‘Don’t worry, you won’t feel much pain. A little, of course. Awake meat is tastier than sleepy meat.’

‘But...you said...’

‘That you would stay here with me forever? I did say that. And it’s true, you will. As a skeleton.’

‘Skeleton...gods of oldness, you’re really going to eat me, aren’t you? But why? Why now? You could’ve done it ten years ago.’

‘Boredom,’ answered the Hyena Lady, again flashing her teeth. ‘When you’ve been alive as long as I have, it’s good to build a sense of anticipation.’

Songhai tried to call her a bad word in Chinese, but her mouth was too heavy and her eyelids were already dropping.

‘Good night, sapling,’ said the Hyena Lady, standing up and stretching out her arms. ‘And the sweetest of dreams.’

~~~

*Bitter moon of all*

*This little*

*In these rags*

*Like this*

*Can’t*

The rasping voice ceased and Songhai opened her eyes, looking up at a white square. She blinked a few times, heard some residue noise nearby then tried moving her limbs.

It worked, she could move.

She looked around and saw that she was in some kind of kitchen, with spotless white walls, a swirly-patterned ceiling and a huge pot hanging above a lit fire on the floor.

Next to her was the Hyena Lady, slumped on the floor, completely and utterly still.

Crawling to her feet, Songhai reached for the knife near the pot and pointed it at the witch's throat. After a slight hesitation, she made a little cut.

No reaction.

She put a finger against the witch's neck and checked for a pulse. Nothing. She checked her heartbeat. Also, nothing.

'You're faking it?' she said, softly.

The witch didn't move.

Songhai focused on the Hyena Lady's lips then said again, louder this time, 'is this an act? Are you still in there?'

The lips didn't twitch.

Songhai lined up the back of her left hand and slapped the witch, lightly the first time then harder the next few.

Still no response.

'It worked,' she mumbled.

Songhai stood back up and took the small glass vial out of her pocket. It was empty except for a few stains of dark green. The same

green stains on her wrist that, luckily, had gone unnoticed after she'd [sloppily] poured the juice into the witch's cup.

*Rare Chinese Poison. Effective on arrogant psychopaths who never leave the comfort of their own caves.*

She looked at it for a minute then coughed, still feeling the after effects of the poison given to her. Luckily, it hadn't been fatal, probably because the Hyena Lady had been intent on eating her alive.

Songhai looked at the pot on the floor, the liquid inside starting to boil over the sides. 'Don't worry, I won't eat you. I'm a good sapling.'

The Hyena Lady didn't answer.

'Though I may stay a while and take a look around. You don't mind, do you?'

~~~

Later that night, as the people of the nearby town of Gede were in the courtyards, discussing when the cannibal might turn up again, a figure appeared from the edge of the jungle.

No one recognised who it was, though they suspected it was someone connected to the Hyena Lady.

The figure walked forward and when the moonlight struck her face, one of the older women sprang forward and shouted, 'Songdai!'

'Songhai, actually,' said the figure, who let the woman she'd stayed with ten years earlier run up and hug her.

‘Where have you been? It’s over a decade since-’

‘I know, Fatima. I know. I’ll tell you everything, don’t worry.’

‘Were you with her? The Hyena Lady? Did she take you under her wing? Did she teach you her magic?’

‘Not exactly.’ Songhai pointed to a nearby bench and they both sat down. ‘The truth is...’

Songhai paused, giving the rest of the townspeople the chance to get a good position for the story she was about to tell.

‘Go on, speak, what happened, tell us.’

‘Okay, relax, I’m just waiting for everyone to get comfortable.’

‘They’re comfortable,’ said Fatima without looking back at the people behind her, ‘now speak, tell us everything.’

Songhai cleared her throat and spoke. ‘Well, as you may remember I left this town and went into the jungle...that was ten years ago. Now, that day, I followed the Hyena Lady all the way back to her home, which turned out to be some kind of weird cave that was small on the outside and big on the-...’ Songhai glanced at Fatima’s face and the other faces in the crowd and realised they were getting confused. ‘It was a cave, a regular, kind of dark, kind of boring cave. Anyway, the Hyena Lady attacked me at first, she was really mad, but for some reason she eventually spared my life and, these last ten years, taught me her magic.’

The crowd around Songhai gasped.

‘What did she teach you?’ asked Fatima.

‘Many things. And not just magic, social theory too.’

‘Social theory?’

‘Yes, she taught me that, if you really want to keep the cannibal away forever, you must make certain changes in the town. Obviously, she passed on some ideas to me, but she also said it was important for all of you to decide on how the town should be run.’

‘Wait, where is she now? Are you her messenger?’

‘Is she dead?’ asked another voice.

‘Well, it’s a bit awkward. And sad. I guess.’

‘What happened?’

‘This morning, as she was preparing breakfast in the kitchen...her kitchen is quite beautiful, very spacious...but the floor is very slippery and this morning she was careless, so much so that she slipped and fell into the cooking pot. I tried to save her, of course, but I was asleep at the time, and when I got to the kitchen she’d already been in the pot for twenty-five minutes.’

‘Was she okay?’

‘She was well-cooked. That’s all I can say.’

‘You mean, she’s dead?’

‘Err...yes. Cooked and dead.’

The crowd gasped again, this time out of fear, not surprise.

‘This is a disaster,’ shouted one of the crowd.

‘The end of us all!’

‘Who will protect us from the cannibal now?’

‘I just told you, me. You. All of us. We will make some changes to the town, and that dirty cannibal will be scared away forever.’

The crowd in the courtyard mumbled to each other, confused. ‘What changes?’ one of them finally said.

‘Well, as I said, we should all have a say, so I’ll go first with my idea then everyone else can say theirs. We’ll all decide, together.’

The crowd was silent, still confused.

‘Okay, my idea first. We should build a school for everyone, boys and girls. Attendance will be five days a week and mandatory. Six lessons a day, focusing on literature, history and science.’

Someone coughed.

‘Okay, your turn...what idea do you have?’

‘We should choose the strongest man to be our leader, and the ten most beautiful women to be his wives.’

‘Anyone else?’ asked Songhai, slightly annoyed.

‘We should build a shrine to the Hyena Lady and pray to it five times a day. Then she will continue to keep us safe.’

‘Err...’

‘We should choose a boy and a girl each year to sacrifice to her.’

‘Anything a little more thoughtful?’ asked Songhai, digging fingernails under other fingernails.

No one else raised their hands.

‘What about my idea to build a school?’

The crowd murmured but no one spoke loud enough to hear.

‘It’s the future, don’t you see? Boys and girls learning science, the same as the Persians and the Chinese...look how strong they are. Or our own City States, they’re not far off that ideal either. Though we, of course, can be even better. Less misogynist.’

‘I’ve never been to any of those places.’

‘Me neither.’

‘I can’t stand city-state people, they’re so arrogant.’

‘Forget the city-states then. Look at other tribes, the ones near Kilwa. They understand the importance of equality and they prosper because of it.’

‘They’re weird.’

‘They don’t have a cannibal stalking them.’

‘Very weird.’

‘Okay, okay. Forget all examples.’ Songhai raised both arms, symbolically calling for silence. ‘What about schools in general? Done in our own Gede-like way.’

The crowd murmured, most people not even bothering to form words [murmuring was safer].

‘Girls can learn, of course, but their primary concerns should be to cook and have babies,’ said one of the men, a warrior-looking type with huge pecs. ‘And service the men after a hard day’s hunting.’

‘Says who?’ said one young woman, which briefly made Songhai optimistic, but that woman was soon shouted down by the other villagers.

‘I agree with pec-man. Girls don’t belong in schools.’

‘We don’t even have any schools.’

‘And boys should focus on sports and hunting.’

‘That’s what other towns do.’

‘So, you have no interest in learning?’ asked Songhai.

‘Sure, but how will that help us keep the cannibal away?’ said Fatima, ‘we need strength to beat him, and men are the strongest of us all.’

‘They weren’t strong enough to stop him before.’

The crowd murmured.

‘We will make them even stronger.’

‘How?’

‘More push-ups, more meat, more sex.’

‘This is really depressing,’ muttered Songhai, letting her head sag.

‘It can work! If we build up our men, cup their-’

Songhai shook her head, stood on the bench and held up the stick she’d taken from the Hyena Lady’s cave. ‘There’s something I forgot to tell you.’

She closed her eyes and started muttering in Chinese.

‘What’s she doing?’

‘Is this some of the magic?’

Songhai opened her eyes again and, when the villagers looked upon her, they all started to back off.

‘I, the Hyena Lady may be dead, but I still communicate with this body from the land beyond death,’ said Songhai, eyes glowing lava red. ‘And I command you to do something or the cannibal will come tomorrow.’

‘It’s her!’

‘The Hyena Lady!’

‘She can even defy death, I told you.’

‘What is it? What do you want us to do?’ asked Fatima, getting down onto both knees.

‘You must build a school, just like I said.’ Songhai coughed. ‘Like this vassal said. Work through the night if you have to, but the foundation must be laid as soon as possible.’

‘It will be done,’ the villagers shouted, terrified.

‘And when it is finished, you must teach boys and girls about science. This vassal will be the teacher.’

‘Which vassal?’

‘The vassal with glowing red eyes that is talking to you right now, you idiot,’ said Songhai, raising her voice to almost shouting level.

‘It will be done.’

‘Good, good. I will return in one year to check on your progress. Remember, the girls must be taught too. And this vassal, the teacher, must be treated the same way you have treated me. Listen to her words. Follow her commands for they will be mine. Do not fail me.’

‘We will not.’

Songhai closed her eyes again, mumbled a little more in Chinese, lowered the stick then re-opened her eyes and said, ‘what happened?’

‘You were possessed by the Hyena Lady.’

‘I was?’

‘She said you were a vassal and we should follow your orders.’

‘Oh, okay. That’s weird, but okay.’ Songhai looked around at the villagers, some of whom were already picking up stones to use as the school foundation. ‘I feel tired. I must go.’

‘Will you not stay with me again?’ asked Fatima, returning to her feet.

‘Sorry. I live elsewhere now.’

‘Where?’

‘I’ll see you tomorrow, Fatima.’

Songhai turned and walked back towards the jungle, gripping the stick tight in her hand in case anyone tried to spring forward and grab it. When she was fully immersed in the trees, she breathed out and stopped for a moment. It isn’t a good thing to lie to them, she thought, but it is necessary.

She resumed walking, going past the clearing and up to the cave at the top of the hill. As she climbed, she wondered if the spell to bring her husband to her had worked or if she’d have to re-read the how-to book and try it again.

It didn’t really matter either way. If he didn’t come, she’d leave again and find him herself. And if he did come, they could re-shape the village together. At least until the next generation had better ideas than, ‘let the strongest man have ten wives.’

She almost laughed.

Behind her, at the foot of the hill, there was a noise. Songhai turned quickly and caught sight of a face hiding badly behind a tree. It was a girl from the village, twelve or thirteen years old.

Songhai stared around the jungle, being careful not to look directly at the girl behind the tree. After pretending to be satisfied, she spun on her feet and walked into the cave.

‘Just a sapling,’ she said softly as she walked past the pale green candles, deeper into her new home. ‘She won’t dare enter.’



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