

CHAPTER II

Foulweather Friends



Dozens and dozens of meticulous busts and statues guarded the hallway.

A sour smile crept across Laurelle's face as she remembered hiding from their gazes as a child; as if these pieces of marble and quartz could tell on her being disobedient to her father. She tiptoed down the corridor. For days on end, she had been placed under house arrest for being near the *Old Man* the night it burned down. As if she could be locked away like the dogs they kept in the manor's kennels.

Her eyes wandered from the petrified parade to the wine bottle in her hand. Refilled a dozen times with wines double and triple the merit of its original contents, and yet she craved nothing more than to taste its original cheapness, for its memories dwarfed all her father's fine reds in bitterness. Her heart had dropped to her stomach that night and had not yet found its way back. But as her father was so accustomed to say: *a rising tide lifts all ships*. She took another swig. The wine bubbled in her stomach. It was only a matter of time. She burped. The voices grew louder and clearer towards the other end of the hallway. Laurelle pressed against the wall and peeked through the milky windows into the lavish backyard gardens to see with whom her father was consorting.

Dozens and dozens of colourful patches adorned dozens of armours. No wonder people called them the *Stitchers*. It was said they cut a piece of

garment from every man, woman, and child they've ever stitched up and wore them as trophies on their chests, cloaks, hoods, and gauntlets. From the look of it, these ones had acquired quite the collection of scraps for their cloaks and scars for their faces—especially the one her father was talking to. She took a closer look. No, no it seemed this one had an entire dried ear attached to his tunic. Behind him, a young boy clung to the skirts of one of the bounty hunters—a woman by the looks of it, though his clothes were stitched out of necessity and not fashion choice. One of their bounties, most likely.

Remnants of the negotiations going on downstairs penetrated the painted walls; something about old women, horned monsters and cats. Laurelle looked at the wine bottle in her hand and took another swig. It was almost empty again. As if her father were interesting enough for monsters or patient enough for cats—so they were talking about old women; here she had hoped for something interesting.

Even eavesdropping on secret backyard conversations had paled of charm. The motley parade had promised to be a speck of colour in the constant greyness since the *Old Man* had burned down. The sun hid beyond thick grey clouds and her happiness hid somewhere at the bottom of this bottle. She lifted it to her lips and let its contents gurgle into her mouth. The Alchemist's face still haunted the inside of her lids. His ugly, bloodshot eyes, the untrimmed stubble on his cheeks, the greasy hair. She clenched her fist around the wine bottle. Oh, what she would give to have him kneeling here before her now. It wasn't fair. It wasn't just. Someday he is going to face a headsman, she will make sure of that; neigh, she would be his headsman. Deliver justice upon him before hundreds of witnesses for the crimes he'd committed, for the pain he'd caused, for the foulness in his heart. She needed something to say for when the moment would come. Something clever. And righteous. To make the crowd cheer and to make things right.

Demon of the sea, I judge thee for the lives taken, the spirits drowned. Never

again shall I suffer thy kind upon my lands! In the name of justice, I sentence you to death. I am the golden mistress and I bow to none!

Her imaginary sword struck down from the heavens on the Alchemist's head. The bottle in her hand shattered, spilling wine and tiny glass shards against her face. A piercing pain flashed in her wrist. When she opened her eyes again, the hall was transformed into a murder scene; splashes of red across the floor and walls. The bust in front of her caved in and shattered, drenched in red. Laurelle grinned. And then the screaming started downstairs. She pressed against the wine-stained wall under the windowsill and the dread crawled up her spine anew.

Through the milky glass, her father's voice screamed something about better making sure the young lady was confined to her room and that she better not hurt herself again. *As if he cared.* She looked at the green and yellow bruises around her wrists where the pirates had restrained her. The remnants of her other injuries were hidden well enough under her garments and Laurelle was glad for it. Though none of them had hurt even close as much as being forced to witness it all. Forced to witness the kind shy stranger and her being torn apart; forced to relive the ship taking her mother to see, never to return. Forced to sit and watch. *So helpless.* She *had* gotten hurt. But not in a way her father saw, not in a way he cared for. She smashed the stump of the wine bottle next to her into the floorboards. This time, the pain was more than just a pinch. Thick crimson dropped from her fingers. But she did not scream. Or whimper. Or flinch. She was not as weak and frail as everyone thought. She could handle a little pain. And yet—for some godforsaken reason—what she was not strong enough to handle was effectively nought for anyone else—everyone else—everyone except the stranger on the pier. A little overconfident at first, a little shy after that, but nice, maybe even a little cute. He had cared for her. He had believed that she was strong. And he had allowed her to be weak. And then the sea had taken him all the same. *The stranger on the pier.* She hadn't even gotten to ask him for his name. He'd just left her there alone, with

bruises all over, a bleeding heart, an empty bottle, and a bag of sweets. Helpless to protect what she actually cared for. Now her heart was dripping from cuts on her hands over the bruises and the refilled bottle lied there spread across the floor in pieces. What was left of that night were the bag of overly sweet pastries in her pocket and a burning desire in her heart to stake the Alchemist alive. This whole reminiscing gave her conniptions; she needed some quiet, some peace, some fresh air or she'd wither away in here.

As she darted down the stairs, startled servants reminded her again and again of what her name was and how she had to feel. When she finally reached the front yard, she slammed the door shut behind her but the noise still persisted. Just a little peace and quiet. That's all she wanted.

"*Laurelle!* Where do you think you are going? You are to stay in your room until you've thought about what you've done, *young lady!*"

Her father towered over her against the pale grey sky.

"Do you hear me? *Laurelle!* Look at me when I am talking to you!"

"Screaming at me..."

"So you still elect to chose to show your gratitude by talking back at me? Still acting like a child while pretending to be an adult, while lacking even an ounce of respect. Where did I go wrong, tell me?"

He grabbed her by the arm. She tried to wriggle free, but his grip only tightened.

"Look at yourself! You don't get attention and supervision for two minutes and you've already bloodied yourself. Show me your hand. Show it to me!"

Reluctantly, she reached out her hand. It was not as unbearable when she didn't look him straight into the eye.

"You were lucky like you always are; it's just a shallow cut. Now stop making such a fuss about it and go back to your room to get this bandaged and...Hey! What did I tell you about looking at me when I talk to you? Would you mind to remember your manners as I can recall teaching you

some quite clearly? And wipe that brash look off your face, I did not raise you to be an arrogant brat. Someday you are going to learn that the world does not revolve around you and you'll wish you'd listened any of the twenty times I'd told you already."

Laurelle stared back into her father's eyes. So near and yet so distant. *How can you not see how hurt I am? That all I want is not be screamed at; is this truly too much to expect? I don't want to hate you, but you just make it impossible. I never want to see you again. I never want you to see me cry again and not care. Never. Never again.*

"I hate you. And mum would hate you too."

He looked at her in disbelief.

"I will grant you a moment to reconsider what you've just dared say to me—your father—and to apologize right this moment, lest you'd prefer to regret this transgression dearly. I am your father—your father—and you will not disrespect me like this!"

The storm raging in his eyes scared her almost as much as the composed demeanour hiding it away. She pried her arm from his grip, looked him into his unloving eyes one last time and darted for the garden gate.

"That's what I thought, run away like you always do! Run away from your problems! Run away from the only people who still care for you! Run away to your dead mother who apparently cares more for you than I do, you ungrateful brat!"

Her father screamed after her, as ran past apricot trees and through tightly trimmed shrubberies; screamed after her, as the first stray raindrops hit her cheeks; screamed after her, as the army of marble statues passed by her. *The Collector*. That's why they called her father. She was no goddamn piece to be collected, to be shouted into submission like some kennel-bitch. She wanted to scream sense into him, but she was tired of trying to scream some gust of empathy into these limp sails again. By not screaming she could at least hope to prove that she was not as weak as he was.

"Lady Laurelle, return home with us to your father! It is cold and crap

outside! He'll calm down eventually. *Lady Laurelle!*"

Unperturbed, she trotted down the winding alleys towards the harbour and tried to clench a fist, though her fingers only trembled and the cut ached and burned. Just a moment ago, she had felt so proud and mighty, now she only felt pathetic and alone. *Alone*. From up here on the hill, she could see the waves glistening through the mist. Waving, wavering, without regard for the pain they've caused. If only she could punch the sea. She looked at her bleeding hand. What a dumb, foolish idea. But something had to give. Something. *Anything*. To make things right. Be it impotent blows against the waves.

Thick fingers of mist crawled like hundreds of fat worms through empty streets. Through walls of haze, masts of ships were the only sign of the pier, sticking out like ribs of a rotting carcass. The stench of rotted wood and fish crept up the serpentine alleyways. Faint thunder rolled over mountain tops and cold wind cut against her skin like a thousand frozen knives. Her stomach turned at the thought of returning there. She wasn't ready to meet death again so soon; she just wanted a little quiet. There was enough time to punch the sea another time. Her eyes wandered up to the hills, the mountains adorning the horizon.

No human walked the *Bog of Nooks and Crannies* in this weather, where the cliffs were steep and willows old. That's where she would hide and wait out the storm.

That's where she would find peace to be weak again.



The *Rainbow Serpent* had put out to the Scyllic Sea. Cramped into a tiny cage of rusted iron, drenched by caustic sea waters, his fingers trembled, his stomach rumbled and cramped. With a soft *clank*, the lock on his cage opened but slipped his gaunt fingers and fell to the floor with a heavy *thud*. The ringing of rusted iron on sodden wood echoed through the ship's hold. He reached for the heavy metal lock through the bars of his cage as far as his bound hands allowed, though he could but scratch it with his fingertips. He pushed the now unlocked door of his cage open. First, it did not move at all, then it swung open and whatever had been stacked on top of his cage came crashing down in a thunderous rain of wood and metal. A cabin door opened, heavy footsteps fell in the darkness outside his cage; faint lantern light crept into his world. He snatched the lock and fumbled to reattach it whence it had just fallen. The metal was heavy in his meek hands and the iron was slimy and slippery. The lantern crept closer, threatening to burn his plans to cinder should he be caught now; red-handed. There was a soft *click* as he fiddled the lock to a close just in time as a bloody meat cleaver lifted the thick cloth covering his prison and revealed a bearded face illuminated by flickering lantern light. The face looked at him and then the door. A meaty hand reached for the iron door and rattled it a few times, though the lock was in place and the door did not move. The beard grunted.

"Hush."

The light burned in his eyes and the man's delicious stench of charred meat and spices turned his empty stomach into knots, but he kept his composure and played the part of the dumb prisoner and simply nodded.

"Y...yes, Sir."

The hairy man's eyes twinkled under his bushy eyebrows. Whatever sick pleasure the beard got from being addressed as *Sir*, it was bitter poison on his famished tongue. Oh, what he would give for some actual poison; for the bearded man and his entire goddamned crew. Especially for that fucking Alchemist, whose face burned whenever he closed his eyes, ready to be cut and choked.

"Caught another rat?"

He presented the beard what he wanted: a tiny rodent almost as bony as he was, though unlike the rat's head, his was thankfully unsquished.

"Here, Sir."

"Hm, this one's a little small."

"There was a bigger one just now, giant. Almost caught it but it escaped. Not much room on here to move, Sir."

The hairy man rummaged in his pockets and produced a few bits of bread.

"If you catch the big one, I'll might have some chicken for ya again."

The beard eyed him suspiciously.

"If there exists such a giant rat, that is."

Idiot. Idiot, I am such an idiot. The dirty curtain over his cage draped him again in darkness, as the beard piled the fallen crates back on his cage. *The door had been booby-trapped and I was too damn big an idiot to notice.* And now he was all out of goddamn bargaining rats, too.

"The Queen's finally ready to meet ya, boy, so best be quiet and behave until she graces ya with her presence. Unless ya're not that fond of yer digits after all. Best be quiet altogether, the Queen's not as lenient as I."

"Aye, Sir."

The Queen of the *Rainbow Serpent*; either a clueless madwoman, or a resourceful megalomaniac—though mad however he looked at it. Any and everyone on this ship was mad, no matter if they still possessed their tongues or had them cut out. They not only obeyed, they loved. Hell, she was a captain of a ship and they called her *Queen*. Whatever gratification she got from being obeyed was apparently shared by everyone else on this ship to obey—everyone except for him. He had not yet made up his mind if his chances of survival were better swimming against the metaphorical tide on deck...or against the actual tide surrounding it. Whatever game the Queen was playing, if he was to join in, then not as the pawn he had been designated to be. Though, whatever he bet he'd chose, he'd wager his life.

Win, or die.

Asphyxiating darkness embraced him again as the beard stomped back to his kitchen; the bright lantern light faded through the linen cloth like a distant memory of how nice it was to stretch his legs. Stale and filthy seawater drenched him to the bone and every wave crashing against the encrusted hull rattled his rusty cage, rattled his bones in his gaunt limbs. No matter how tiny his cell was, whenever he closed his eyes, it was tinier when he opened them again. He had seldom enough space to breath; suffocating for days on end. With every passing day the cage turned on the waves more and more; sailing the nausea. He would have his vengeance for this. On the crew. On the Queen. And on the goddamn fucking Alchemist. He wretched what little innards he had left onto the planks. His head pounded as he heaved, holding as tight as he could to consciousness.

The face of the woman on the pier circled his mind. *Laurelle*. How she had ever managed to sow doubt in his heart was beyond him. Some vile witchcraft most likely. Vile witchcraft to sow doubt within his head. *Sow hope within his heart*. No! What a bunch of meandering horseshit. This brain-dead *hope* was the only reason he was subject to this agony. He would not let it get the better of him again. He would have his vengeance; on the crew, the Queen, the Alchemist, and the goddamn woman on the pier.

The rumbling of his stomach drowned out the waves crashing against the hull. He felt like giving up, surrendering his dignity for a decent meal—for just one deep breath, but that way lay only subjugation and captivity. To regain his freedom he had to endure this; endure captivity again, to earn his honey. This time he would take what was rightfully his and not surrender to false promises of *hope*. He was still owed honey for the pier after it was withheld from him. But no, not this time, this time he would dine as much from the Queen's sweet honey as his heart desired—bring her down with her goddamn pirate ship.

He pulled out the chicken bone from his shaggy beard and clutched the thin bone in his scraggy fist. The word *Sir* still burned on his tongue. All this humiliation for this tiny thing. *His way out*. Out of this cell. And into the Queen's mind. Or to his death. No, not to his death. He was beyond doubt now. He was beyond *hope*. It was time to face the Queen in her stupid game.

With his bony fingers, he picked the lock on his cell again and this time—this time—he caught it before it hit the floor.

He was ready now, ready for the most important performance of his life.



Waves were breaking on the cliff beneath, her feet dangling over the edge.

The air smelled of salt, dirt, and the sweet anticipation of rain. A flash of lightning on the horizon over the ocean. When the thunder finally rolled over the shore, Laurelle had already given up counting. This spot was quiet and safe for now. It was hers and hers alone. Here, beneath the ancient willow trees, in the hills, the cliffs to the Scyllic Sea. It was peaceful here. Only the birds in the willows and the crashing waves beneath. They could not hurt her here, only tingle her feet. No one could hurt her here. In the distance, the city huddled against the shoreline, but out here, no one in the city could see her. She could scream and no one would notice; she could exist and no one would try to subdue her into marble.

She pressed her clenched fist into the mud beside her, but it buried not even half an inch deep into the dirt. The cut ached again. So weak. The earth would not make way. She kicked the air in front of her and her shoe flew in a high arc into the approaching rain, tumbling and turning like a dead bird before it vanished in the swirling mist of crashing waves. A clump of moss followed the shoe into the sea shortly after. She kicked her other leg as hard as she could, but the leftover shoe refused to follow. It clung to her foot, even when she kicked again, again and again. She took a

shallow breath and let out a harrowing scream against the onsetting rain. Even her scream was meek and feeble, unlike the waves beneath, ferocious, captivating, and sourly uncaring. They crashed and raged against the cliffs, their watery innards sprayed towards the heavens and drenched her in a cold, salty shower of sea guts. First, Laurelle shrieked, then she laughed.

"You want to take me, as well? Then come get me! I've had baths more dangerous than this!"

She jumped to her feet and assumed a sloppy boxing stance.

"You won't get anything but wet shoe leather, foul sea monster!"

Another wave crashed against the cliff and exploded into the air. This time, Laurelle braced herself and threw a misdirected punch into the rain of foam and salt.

"You cannot drown me when I am on top of the world! I am the golden mistress and I bow to none!"

She spat into the water and left out a chuckle that faded into a sigh. At least she could still find some joy in her little acts of defiance, even when plagued by a sour mood. Though now she was drenched and cold and the rain had started falling in big droplets from the bellies of thick, grey clouds pregnant with a livid summer storm. She took a deep breath. The air smelled of damp moss, wet leaves, rot, and earth. Under the old willow trees, she found some cover from the onsetting rain, though the wind still bit into her wet garments and chilled her to the bone, so she pressed on deeper into the *Bog of Nooks and Crannies*. The rain pattered against the leaves and the wind raged against the cliffs and bent the ancient trees but could not reach her here, in the heart of the swamp. Laurelle slumped with her back against a willow thicker than she was tall with small, red leaves. The bag of sweets was still in her pocket. She took one of the pastries and let it melt in her mouth. Her teeth tingled from the sweetness and her nose itched, but it was an almost pleasant sensation. She closed her eyes to finally enjoy her moment of peace and quiet. Only the pelting of the rain, howling of the wind, chirping of the birds, croaking of the toads, and the

occasional thunder. This was nice. Just...this. She hugged her knees and finally let the tears flow which had been building up for days on end. And she sat there, sobbing softly. Until something furry brushed against her leg and meowed.

A cat as black as night licked the sugary remnants off her fingers, its rough tongue tingled against her skin. It was scrawny and limped slightly, but in this cold storm, it was warm and dry. When it had licked the last bits of sugar from her hands, it carefully jumped onto her knees, sat on its hind legs and meowed expectantly, its deep orange eyes scrutinizing her every move.

Laurelle blinked in disbelief. A cat—a black cat right in front of her eyes. She looked around, in search of a swamp witch to whom the cat belonged, but there was no one else, only the croaking of frogs and the ghosts of the wind, so she snatched the black cat from her lap before it could run away. A black cat! It meowed in her arms but she did not let it go. Truly, a black cat! What magic this one wielded—what magic only waited to be wielded by a witch...a black cat in her very arms! She made a little leap and rejoiced, seeing herself again in front of the crowd; the Alchemist in front of her on his knees, the black cat at her side and she passed her judgement again, only this time there was no need for a clunky sword. She pressed a smooch on the cat's forehead and it hissed in response. Never again would she be helpless. Never again would she run away in fear. Never again.

"Stop fidgeting so much, you little demon, you. You're mine now. I will care for you and you'll make me a witch. A witch!"

She danced from leg to leg and kissed the cat all over its shiny, black fur, but it would not stop fidgeting until it wriggled itself free from her grip, darted around her feet and fled up the big willow's stump into its sea of red leaves where it perched itself on a thick branch high above the ground.

"No, bad kitty, come down from that branch. You came to me, you are mine now! Kitty...why?"

She took a deep breath and sighed. The air smelled of damp moss, wet

leaves, rot, earth, honey, and sweet pepper—and disappointment. Before she could call herself a witch, she would need to learn to control this little beast. But after that, nothing would be able to stand in her way. Nothing!

"Come down, kitty, come on. What do I need to do to get you down from there?"

The cat only hissed from its branch, its back arched in anticipation, deep orange eyes fixed like fiery gemstones in the dark.

"What do you want?"

"More."

The stench of dried blood and rancid sweat drowned out the scent of salt and rain. Rattling, wheezing and startled hissing joined the crashing waves and distant thunder.

"Give. More."

From the undergrowth, a hulking, towering creature emerged and approached the ancient willow. It limped on one leg, a crust of blood on its chin, arms, and horns sprouting from a thick mane of maroon hair. Its freckled face resembled that of a woman, were it not for those dark, hateful eyes. The cat hissed from the height of the willow branch, embers sparking from its pitch black fur. The horned beast flinched at the sight of the black ball of fur in the treetop. It was ugly, deformed, and its bloodshot gaze froze the blood the blood in her veins.

"I...I don't have anything to give."

"Give. Me. More."

Laurelle slowly backed away and found herself cornered between the wheezing creature and the ancient willow tree. Sparks jumped from the fur of the black cat and hissed as they extinguished in the heavy rain.

"I...I have a spare shoe I don't need anymore. You can have it...if you want."

The horned beast took a heavy step closer, breaking branches and rotten wood, its foul breath stank of honey and sweet pepper; uninterested in solitary shoes. The cat had long since jumped to another branch when the

creature clutched the tree limb it had been sitting on and ripped it off with a frustrated, bellowing howl. Laurelle flinched and retreated the only way she still could; down—down down down, into a small ball with her hands over her head. The stench of blood and sweat and mud drowned out everything but the fear. *The fear*. The creature lifted one of its giant paws to strike. When it threw the weight of its hunched form against the willow, the wood groaned and creaked. The cat cried out loud as it held on for its tiny, little life. The second time the horned beast crashed into the tree, moist dirt exploded from the ground, as the willow uprooted by the impact. The cat hissed one last time, sparks erupting from its fanged mouth and then it vanished in the blink of an eye. Blinded by rage, the horned beast punched the tree so hard, wood splintered and with a horrendous crack, the battered tree snapped in half like brittle bone. Laurelle dared not think about what these enormous hands might do with her spine when she was so thin and small. The hateful eyes turned from the wooden corpse to her. The rumbling thunder drowned out by the pounding of her heart. The creature reached with its mighty paw for her tiny, little head. She didn't want to die. Not now. Not ever. She had yet to become a witch. Make things right.

"I am the golden mistress and bow to none and you will KNEEL!"

Thunder cracked over the cliffs like a whip and the horned creature dropped to its knees, screaming, roaring. Bloody spit ran down its chin and its eyes filled with even more hate than before. Fear still held Laurelle in a tight grip. Until she wriggled free and crawled as fast as she could away from the willow tree and the awful creature.

"Don't you dare touch me! I said kneel! KNEEL!"

But the creature did not heed her this time and rose again to its towering height. Laurelle crawled as fast as she could, her eyes fixed on the approaching creature, but she was not fast enough. With every heavy step, it drew closer. Her hands grabbed for anything they could find. She ripped out moss and stones from the ground and mud from the earth and threw at

the creature, but it flinched not once.

"Please. Please. Let me live. Kneel..."

But the creature did not care for her grovelling and grabbed for her leg. She kicked and screamed and spit and cursed but the meaty fingers still dragged her closer to the creature, its nails scratching into her flesh. The stench of sweat and blood and honey and sweet pepper clouded her senses again. Laurelle clawed for the bag in her pockets and presented it to the hateful eyes.

"I have...sweets...sweets to eat. Please. Let me go...*please*."

She threw the soggy bag at the monster's feet. The creature stared at the small thing. In comparison to its enormous form, it was barely noticeable.

"Please...please let me go...You're hurting me..."

The creature extended its other, mighty hand and picked up the small, linen bag, holding it to its freckled nose. A glimmer in its hateful eyes. It opened the small bag and held one of the sodden pastries between two meaty fingers. A flash of lightning illuminated the bizarre scene, followed by a low, grumbling sound escaping the creature's throat, as the small pastry disappeared in its might jaw. It closed its eyes.

It made a satisfied sound as if it was enjoying some magnificent meal.

Laurelle pried her leg from the creature's grasp and kicked its ugly face as hard as she could.

"You will kneel before me! Do you hear? KNEEL!"

A whip of thunder cracked through the bog and brought the horned woman to her knees, screaming, crying. Laurelle darted for the underbrush, ignoring the stabbing pain in her leg. Run. Run! *RUN!* Running for her tiny, little life.



Right lightning illuminated the deck. The slim silhouette of the Queen of the *Rainbow Serpent* was set against the orange of the sun setting behind thick, black clouds. Her slender arms jingled and rang with golden rings and chains of silver and ambers. Her silk dress seemed almost invisible in the faint evening light. It was finally time to test what this *Queen* was made of. Soft shadows danced across the self-satisfied smirk on her face. A face that seemed eerily familiar in this light, though he could not make out who it reminded him of. "Behold!"

The bearded man repeatedly rattled the cleaver attached to the stump of his left arm against the cage as he bellowed his words.

"Our very own cat Master Adonai was so kind to acquire one for this fine vessel. Now, you might be disappointed, as there were promises of black demons and magic and this one's just a retched mouser. And what a mouser he mouser he is. The stowage has been relieved by *two* whole rats. No wonder our dear Alchemist has had himself captured by those landlubbers; I'd be ashamed just the same. I've almost killed our own Rat more times than that falling drunk out of bed."

The crew surrounding him burst into laughter. The Queen mustered him. Her demeanour, her presence, every single little motion was practised and yet, there was a faint...something souring her smile.

"Tell, Yannis, has the *Rainbow Serpent* not seized carrying slaves for the better? Be they tom-kitten or otherwise?"

The bearded man cleared his throat.

"My Queen, I could never forget and as a matter of course, I paid the kitten for each single rat he caught. A meal for a catch."

The Queen approached his little, rusty prison. Lifting her silken dress as if the deck was swimming with filth in one hand, wielding a slender blade in the other, its keen edge glinting in light of the setting sun.

"Does he speak truth, *kitty*?"

He took a deep breath. The salty air cut through his nausea, though he could still not paint a picture of this...*Queen*. He needed more information. He needed her to talk before he could make his move. So he nodded.

"Pray, Yannis, I do hope the ship's coffers withstood your futile efforts to gild this kitten."

"Oh, he would not have been half as interested in gold. My Queen should have seen how he called me *Sir* and begged for more after I'd that filthy rat with his with some rosemary. He gobbled it up so fast, I had no time to tell him t'was not chicken."

This time, the Queen joined in with the laughter of her crew, though even her chuckling seemed premeditated and controlled. When the laughter had faded and made way for the sloshing of waves and the rumbling of thunder, she turned to his rusty cage. The pirates' eyes were fixed on the little man in the rusty cage and on the lips of the woman towering over him.

For but a moment, it seemed as though she were about to speak. He could almost make out a word forming on her lips. *Who*. And in that moment, he realized *who* he needed to be this time. He doffed the ragged facade of the wretched prisoner, just like he had with a thousand others before. And he became the only one thing could beat this *Queen* at her stupid, little game.

Doubt.

And just like that, her eyes were no longer fixated on him. He followed them wandering across the horizon. First, there was only a hint of

disappointment in her eyes but then it spread, tracing hairline fractures across the facade hiding her face. But still, he could barely catch a glimpse of what was hidden beneath. *It might just be enough.*

"What a shoddy little kitten, indeed. After all this, I had dared hope for...something less ordinary."

"The ordinary always find a home in my kitchens."

"Then the matter is settled. Take this one to your kitchens, Yannis."

She took a step towards him, the sharp point of her blade glistening at her side.

"Have you ever pondered your worth, prisoner? Your place under the stars? Weak men, cowardly men, treacherous men, the sea calls their names ever night for they have no place under the stars. Let your eyes wander and tell me, do they see a weak, cowardly, treacherous man on my ship?"

He could not have asked for a better cue. And with that, the show began.

"I do not see weak men. I do not see cowardly men."

His voice was but a soft croak. Not loud enough to draw attention, though loud enough to not go unnoticed.

"But I see men who would free a prisoner against the will of their Queen."

A defiant murmur answered his fortunately unfounded accusations. There would have been no fun in it, would it have been *that* easy.

"Enlighten me, what promises would seduce the hearts of noble men?"

"Why don't you ask your Alchemist?"

The Queen was about to retort, with something clever no doubt, but then she hesitated, just for a moment. And the seed was planted.

"Our Master Adonai was captured, not so very unlike you. Though so very unlike you, he will return from his captivity, as he is not a treacherous man."

He laughed. Crying, loving, whatever whims of an ordinary heart, he excelled at faking it; except at faking laughter. All the better in his current situation, as his inhuman cackling was more unsettling than any sincere laughter could have been.

"And to think that I mistook him for a noble and honourable man, when he was just as treacherous as I. At the very least, I can call myself honest."

"You watch your tongue, prisoner. No one talks to our Queen like that and lives."

"*Queen?* I see nought but a girl lost at sea."

The girl stood now in front of his cage, her face wrinkled in disgust, the blade drawn as to skewer a pig.

"Your Alchemist wasn't captured. And neither was I."

With a rattling bang, he kicked open the door of his tiny prison, the picked lock skidding across the flooded floor. The hunger had not left much of him but when he stepped out of his cage, he still towered a few inches over her; an impotent sword trembling between the both of them.

Her eyes shimmered right in front of his, blue and cold like frozen lakes. She was a beautiful woman, a marble statue come to life. Not even *he* could deny her beauty. She exuded power. Even now. With her marble visage crumbling revealing cruel eyes. Lonely eyes. *Doubtful eyes.*

"I am famished, my Queen. If my time indeed has come and I am to sully this fine dress of yours tonight, allow me one last meal. For justice's sake."

"*Justice is a matter among equals.*"

These whispered words were the last thing before a storm of curses and calloused fists overtook him and brought him into darkness.



Something poked him in his chest. He was bruised and broken. Everything was dark. Everything hurt. He gasped for air. The air was thin. He gasped again. A burning pain shot through him. Where was the light? He tried to open his eyes. Nothing happened. Everything stayed dark. He tried again. There was nothing to open.

Help.

The faint rattling he mustered scratched in his throat. He coughed. The stench of smoke and blood and vomit bit his nose. There was no one there to help. Sharp rocks pressed against his back. They hurt. But not nearly as bad as the pain in his head. In his chest.

Helpless.

Something poked into his side. There was the pain again. Another poke. What had happened? Was he dead? He remembered standing on the *Rainbow Serpent's* railing. Another poke. He had hoped for death to relieve him of the pain. Another broken promise. Another poke. *Where was the light?* He lashed out at the thing poking him. A frightened squeak answered from the darkness. In his fist: a wooden stick. Squeaking wood. *Marvellous.* He broke the thing in two. No squeak. Only a pain in his chest. He threw the broken pieces away. Another squeak. Another pain in his chest. He gasped for air. This was not death. This could not be death.

This was hell.

What squeaks there in the darkness?

Silence. Then distant thunder. A raindrop on his forehead. *Marvellous.* Rain and squeaky sticks. Was this the gods' punishment for his betrayal? For his dissidence. For his impiety. He had tried. He really did. To be all what they demanded of him. Another drop. And then...then he had given up. Until the news of the black cat. The cat. Memories came back to him. An old woman. A shadow. A beast. Pain. And distant stench of fire. Then only darkness. The cat. He had to find it. *Why?* He was dead. He had no need for rabid cats. No need to get up. *Just lay here.* Await the rain.

He laid a hand on his chest. His fingers pressed into his side. A pleasant pain. Piety was no match for piteousness. Another of the Queen's words. Had she already uncovered his betrayal? Presumably. She was an intelligent woman and he had been many things but not that. He knew she could not forgive him. Even if she wanted. He wondered if she did. He would certainly grant no forgiveness to himself. Yet he feared she might carry it within her heart. Despite this, she would still deliver justice unto him. What admirable strength. He was weak. He betrayed his Queen. And he did not even manage to claim the cat for himself. Her anger would strike him swift and hard. Her disappointment more so. He managed to raise himself from the ground. Merciful justice seemed a much more fitting death than to drown in the rain. Everything still hurt. And everything was still black. But that was fine. Justice was blind and just as painful.

His legs hurt not quite as much as the rest. He rolled on his knees. And lifted his head to the sky. A raindrop landed in the hole where his eye had once been. It was a weird feeling. When he finally stood on his own two feet again, the world was still black. He extended his hands outwards. Trying to feel what was around him. *Nothing.* There was no reason. No meaning. *Lay back down. Go back to sleep. Why even try?* He took a small step. An aching tremor in his chest. He took another painful step. And felt vindicated. There was a reason. His deeds could not go unpunished. His

next painful step slipped on loose gravel. His chest almost burst when he hit the ground. All air escaped his lungs. *Give up. Stay down.* The only thing more painful than lying down was getting up again. So he got up again. It was fair. It was just. It was what he deserved. He took another step.

"*Don't leave me here.*"

There was the squeak again. Farther away this time. He turned his head. Searching for something that might squeak. No matter how hard he tried. There was still no light. No sight. No source of the squeaking. He turned back around. His feet could barely carry himself. He needed no further baggage.

"*Please.*"

His next step hurt even more than the last. He took another one. Slowly. Very Slowly. He could not be far from the harbour. Not far from the *Rainbow Serpent*. He would deliver himself onto the Queen. To face her justice. He would bring his plan to a close. The plan he had finally found the conviction for that day. Before the black cat had interfered with his determination. Before he had held onto false hope. *Again.* He would go to face his Queen. And suffer every step. *Alone.* He took another painful step.

"*Help.*"

The squeak echoed in his head.

Squeak in the darkness, show yourself! There is nought left of sugar. I have nothing left to give but salt.

Silence. Again. Not so distant thunder.

"*Please. Help me.*"

There was no sugar left. No sugar left to give. *Didn't you listen?* The echo in his hurting head. He turned around. He searched for the Squeak in the dark. Found only the echo in his head. He took a step into the void. Another one. Gravel shifted under his boot. He kept his balance. Another one. But his foot found no ground. He tripped into the darkness. The fall was even harder than the first one. His lungs were empty. His chest was screaming. He lied there. Wincing.

"Don't walk into the holes. Follow...my voice. *Please*. I cannot move. My leg is broken. *Help me*."

He got up again. Not for himself. His chest throbbed in agony. Echoes in his head. He followed the Squeak. The ground fell off to his side. He kept his balance. His arms extended. He could barely feel where he was going. Finally, the Squeak was right before him. Right beneath him. His hands searched for the Squeak in the darkness. They found a skinny neck. The Squeak went silent. Memories of a room. A black cat in the woodwork. He could not carry the Squeak by the neck. He could not carry it at all. He could barely carry himself. He dropped to his knees.

Squeak, I am broken, you must climb on my back with might of your own.

The Squeak hesitated. Raindrops fell on his neck.

"*Please*. Don't hurt me."

I won't. There is no need for more pain.

Skinny hands grabbed for his shoulders. He felt a painful tremor as the Squeak lifted itself from the ground. Its wispy arms wrapped around his neck. Thunder grew closer as the raindrops multiplied. He stemmed one foot into the ground. His chest pulsed as her weight pressed against his ribs. He pressed on. When he finally stood somewhat upright again, darkness was still around him.

Where do we go?

"Follow...follow my voice. Be careful. *Please*. Heed my broken leg."

He pressed onwards. Past the sinkholes. Over gravel. Through the rain. He felt the Squeak's little heart pounding against his back. It was afraid. He was not afraid. He was not sure what he was. Barely alive. *Not dead*. The steps did not hurt as much this time. He almost tripped once. But he kept his balance. The Squeak had squeaked. But he did not fall.

"*Thank you*."

The words echoed in his head.



Yolanda's horns were aching. Her blood was boiling, her arms in flame. Heavy was her head, and yet the lightness within blurred the ground beneath her feet. It ripped through her, tearing up and tearing her down down down. A whip of thunder cracked through the bog and brought Yolanda to the ground. She laid there, in the muddy embrace, crying wordless screams.

Not again. Not again. She had been so good.

The scars on her back burned and so did the images in her mind. Through the burning, there was a crack, as another whip thundered over her head. *KNEEL!* It echoed in her head and so she knelt.

Please. *I've been so good.* Please. *Not again.* Take it back. *Take it back...*

Yet the whipping didn't stop and the scars burned on her back all the same. Yolanda shook her head. She wasn't that child anymore, she wasn't there anymore. Another crack, though no whip followed. She wasn't there anymore. She opened her eyes. *Not there anymore.* She was now somewhere else...but where? Raindrops crackled in the willow crowns. The mud smelled rich and warm. The thick, singed hairs on Yolanda's skin stood valiantly against the wind. She struggled to her feet. This was not there. But this also wasn't home. Gnarly trees encircled her and gawked at her through curtains of hanging leaves. Somewhere waves crashed against a cliffside. Towering over the clearing stood a thick, gnarly tree with leaves

of crimson and weeping sap, all splintered and broken. She searched for a peaceful piece in the tattered collage in her head. They smelled of Scintilla bread and tasted of blood. There was a memory in flames. A burning building. Home. *The Old Man*. Yolanda looked at the burnt flesh on her hands. Honey and sweet pepper. She clenched her fingers in an attempt to grasp for the fleeting mists of actions past. Expecting for the pain to set it, she closed her eyes, though the pain she found inside was not her own. The cracking of ribs. The stench of blood. A face. A cat. As black as night.

A sudden bloodcurdling scream eviscerated her efforts to recollect.

From behind a willow tree, a woman sprang forth, a crude branch functioning as a spear in her hands. Her face was painted with mud, and her lips carried a fearsome battlecry through the sombre night as she charged towards Yolanda.

Kneel, it echoed through her head and the taste of blood was in her mouth.

There was something rising inside her. Yolanda looked down, though there was no pot of water, only shallow puddles, too muddy to reveal her reflection. She looked up at the woman. She was still charging at her, limping with one leg, stumbling across the muddy clearance, lifting the stick high up over her shoulders. Her scream grew in intensity with every careless step, until her face was red with blinding rage. It would have made for a terrifying sight, were Yolanda not too confused to be afraid. The reckless charge abruptly and prematurely ended as the limping woman slipped and skittered face-first into the mud. The fierceness in her roar gave way for surprise, though the anger remained.

Yolanda looked down at the woman sprawled at her feet. At her little head. A simple step. She could just take a simple step forward. To crush her tiny skull. End her tiny little life. *She could*.

It was but a thought. There and gone. As quick as lightning. And as the realisation of what the words meant, that had just crossed her mind, rolled over her like thunder.

Yolanda froze in terror when the thought ended and she realised what the words meant. She now realised what was rising within her. No. Not was rising, what was ebbing away. Threatening to rise again. No, no! She had been so good! She was good! I am good! *I am a monster!*

The memories finally painted a coherent image. A horrific, terrifying picture of the *Old Man* up in flames, a black cat conjuring up eldritch flames, rage, horror, and eyes afraid, afraid of her. Afraid of the monster. In that moment Yolanda shared the terror every single soul that had crossed her that night. That had died that night. By the hands of the monster. By her very own hands. By the hands of Yolanda.

At a loss for words, even more than usual, Yolanda only managed a terrified shudder and recoiled from the woman in the mud. She had almost risen to her feet again. Her face was still filled with wrath and coated with even more mud than before. When she saw Yolanda wincing away from her, the rage clenching her muddy lips gave way to a self-satisfied grin.

"Kneel."

Yolanda looked at the ravaged willow. And back at the grinning woman in the mud. Yolanda needed no mirror to see—to feel—the hateful eyes. And so she did the only thing she could to save the muddy woman and her tiny, little life. Yolanda ran, ran until the ground gave way and she could only smell the sea and see the waves, rushing closer. A cool veil of a million shimmering little pieces embraced here. *Peace*. At last. Her thumping heartbeat slowed with the cold. *Weightless*. Her horns seized aching, only a soft tickling remained. Her hair floated around her skull in the soft emptiness; the beast had vanished, now she was a flower in bloom. She closed her eyes.

The water in front of her eyes flickered and shimmered, meek colours and shapes dancing to the breath of the ocean. It almost seemed as if they were forming a picture. A small cottage, three miles high and with a purple roof on top. Through the windows of water, she could see burning stars made of pudding within. The shallow brook embracing the house was

overflowing with the juice of cranberries, the trees in the vibrant forest next to it were crabs with blue shells. As she walked towards the door of solid milk, she passed a ghostly white swan guarding the garden. A moth as wide as a bull and as white as the swan opened the door for her. It was then Yolanda realized this was not just a house, this was a home. *Her home.* She'd never had a home. A little peace on earth just for herself. It was then Yolanda realized she was drowning.

She tried to scream but even down here underwater, her voice failed her. The small bubbles escaping her mouth tickled her nose. The house had vanished into waves, leaving her here, alone. Her horns tickled, her head ached from within. The emptiness pressed against her chest. With each passing moment, the darkness tightened its grip around her. Where there had just been peace, there was now but eternal nothingness. Water pressed against her lips, prying against her chest. *Breathe.* Waves of panic gushed over the calmness. No. *No!* Breathe. *Breathe!* Home. She needed to find a home. *You don't deserve a home.* She heard the crushing of bones and saw eyes bleeding before her. She could not take it back. Breathe. *Breathe.* There had to be some other form of justice than to die here and now. Maybe she could make it good again. She had to make it good again. But not from a watery grave six feet underwater. If only she'd ever learned to swim. She could make it whole again. She had to make it whole again. Her mighty fists threw impotent punches against the darkness, trying to grab onto something, anything, but the simmers escaped her grip. The calmness had vanished, currents were whirling around her, water trespassed her lips. Breathe. *Don't breathe.* She had to get back up. Where was up? Up was nowhere and everywhere. *Breathe.* And there it was again. The cat as black as night. It stared at her with deep orange eyes. *Don't breathe.* It stared at her as everything was consumed by fire. *Breathe.* And so she did. Thick darkness pierced her from within. Yolanda felt the rage rising within her chest and everything went up in flames.



Why did it have to take her here of all places?
Release what is kept inside when you no longer know where to go,
he had said. Until her room had been set on fire, she'd always known where to go, where to stay: *home*. The bottle had been the last gift he'd given her, his last souvenir. All this time, it had remained unbroken and by the looks of it, that had been a wise decision. Now the bottle lay shattered somewhere else and she was back here. Of all places.

The old temple still stood, just as colourful and wind-bent. Sun-bleached ribbons still fluttered against its walls and from the branches of the sparse trees surrounding it. Even the faint scent of thyme and sulphur had not changed from twenty-four years ago. Tears welled in her eyes. For all its beauty, there was no place on earth she detested more.

Her leg throbbed with each of the Alchemist's clumsy steps; her arms slung around the neck she would have had her full right to strangle. Though she didn't. *Because I am such a good person.* Is what she would have liked to tell herself would the temple not stand there, defiantly, a monument to her inadequacies.

"Temple? I study in a temple once."

If ever only the day would come when her thoughts would remain quiet in her head. The Alchemist wheezed and spat, befitting a mount of such squalid calibre. If only his temper had been not as equally as foul. The last

thing she wanted to do now was to descend the mountain on a broken leg; two if the Alchemist made promises of his threats.

"Yes. A temple," she replied feebly.

The rain pelted against her giddy head. Whatever reckless thirst for adventure the black cat had awoken in her, it had long since vanished, together with the little demon. Ramona wanted to be angry with the little creature but she knew it was not to blame; not for her leaving the safety of the Collector's services, not for her disgust for this temple—for herself.

"We will find shelter there from the rain, follow my voice."

She heard herself say and almost fell from the Alchemist's back as she recoiled from her own words. The Alchemist groaned as he leaned forward to prevent her fall. He remained on all fours, trembling. *Get up*. Had it been someone—anyone—else, she might have pitied them, though she felt nothing but indifference for his pain; a mutual feeling, no doubt. He groaned again and resumed stalking like a teetering scarecrow closer into the garden.

"Where this temple is?"

Was there any plausible way she could deny the temple's existence after everything she'd already blurted out? She mulled over what she might say, but the notion of entering the temple fogged her mind and she only gave a little, terrified squeak.

"I walk forward. Bring the mouse back to the temple. Lead me to not fall."

At least that was something she could muster; making sure they did not tumble down a sinkhole. Her heart pounded in her chest and she had to tighten her grip to not slip from the Alchemist's back. Her cheeks were wet. She lifted her face to the heavens. Rain. It was rain. Every time she took a shallow, erratic breath, her leg throbbed and her chest threatened to burst in two. When the wooden ceiling eventually obscured the sky and the clouds, she was finally able to breathe again.

"We are there."

The inside was not quite as splendid as she remembered; dust and

cobwebs embellished the painted walls and the scent of sulphur had grown from a faint notion to a constant companion. At the centre of the hexagonal room, a big brass bell hang a few feet above the floor. The Alchemist dropped to his knees, sending a stabbing pain through her leg. She screamed. He only groaned as he rolled her off his back and curled on the ground.

"Do not mean to hurt the Squeak."

"Well, you did!"

With a pain-stricken face, he lifted his head from the dusty floorboards. His grimace stared past her; one eye only a black hole of nothing, the other a tattered mess of bloody skin. Somewhere in there, one might even find the sorry remnants of an eyeball. She held her breath. Sickening rumbles seized her stomach and terrifying images seized her mind. The bruising on her neck itched and ached. *Break my other leg.*

"The Squeak is in pain. Is that it?"

She recoiled—against the stabbing in her leg—from his gaze until she felt the wall against her back.

"*Tsk.* Lying not what the Squeak do best. Even the silence betray the lie."

He groaned as he placed his head back on the hard ground to continue his dead stare towards the heavens. Did he even remember her? The old woman in the *Old Man by the Sea*? If he did, would he not have strangled her already and asked for her cat? The *bloody* cat.

"How bad is the sight of my face? It must hold the terrors of the burning worlds. When the Squeak cannot muster a word but only squeak."

It did. Ramona remained quiet. There was no purpose in telling him what she thought, less purpose in trying to deny it.

"The silence still betray the Squeak. How far the way to the harbour is? I need return to the ship."

"The...the harbour?"

"Yes. The harbour. Where the ships float on the sea. It must be near."

"It is not—"

"Not? Where is this temple? Are we not near?"

"I...Somewhere in the mountains. Though the sea...it's still down there. I can see it."

"Mountains? *Mountains?* Where do mountains come from to press against my hurting bones? Carry the wind me here to rot and die?"

"No...Yes. Well..."

She decided against explaining the intricacies of how exactly the winds did or did not carry them into the mountains.

"What care the wind for me? The gods still play the game of theirs with me..."

With a strained grunt, he struggled into an upright position. Whatever words she was trying to grasp to calm the man wilted in her throat. He stood and screamed at the painted ceiling concealing the heavens. His mutilated grimace stalked on shaky legs towards her. What was he doing? He most likely knew she had released the wind, that she was to blame for this whole situation. No! *He* was to blame. *He* was the one who had invaded her room. *He* was vile and disgusting. She pressed her back against the wall, her leg protested with violent waves of pain. *Please. Don't.* When he sank to his knees next to her, she could still smell sharp spices on his breath. His arms searched for her, undirected and calloused. They found her shoulder, she suppressed a terrified squeak.

"Squeak, listen to me. I carry harm within my heart. You speak truth. But you have no need of the fear. You are not the one its eye rest upon. What temple is this? Describe. Is there the bell of brass?"

"Y...yes."

His brow furrowed, followed by a wince of pain.

"So it is another of the games...You say your leg is broken. There must be reason the gods sent me. Cursed with the incantation of the wind. I must repent before I perish. I need to reach the harbour. I need eyes. You have need of legs. I may carry you. If the stars align. Maybe more than half the way. This journey is the last I take. That much I know. I might not

make...the way...Is your way down the mountain?"

"I...I want to go home."

"Home. Is that down?"

"Yes..."

"Marvellous. Then we have same goal. Take the way down the mountain."

His ugly holes almost looked at her.

"Is it bad? The pain of the leg?"

She sniffed.

"The Squeak is terrible with the lies. The material pain may be relieved. Though the immaterial will fester. Learn the lesson from me. Endure material pain when the Squeak's heart is not whole. Is it whole?"

"Yes."

"You lie. Yet the Squeak still want ease of pain?"

"Yes."

The holes stared right through her. So ugly. And so sad.

"Be of help to find the things. I have need of them. And sit under the bell of brass. I prepare the ritual."

She followed his arcane instructions, guiding him through the temple as he collected strange herbs, scented wood, foul liquids, and coal. He arranged what he found in small bowls in a circle under the bell with Ramona in its middle. Her leg throbbed and itched with every little inadvertent twitch while a strange, odorous mist filled the bell above her head. The Alchemist shuffled around her, constantly murmuring and groaning to himself.

"Myriad of the change of colour. The elements are where the gods..."

His voice trailed off.

"The Squeak have no need for any of the bullshit. The gods require their dues. From everyone but the ones pure of spirit. As is just. The Squeak is brave. Never again I will sit where the Squeak sit. Wholeness of body is not granted to the ones like me. As is just. There wait the dreams. Strong

dreams. Painful dreams. All I can do I have. Nothing more I can do. For I...see nought. The Squeak is alone now. Prepare."

"...for what?"

"The worst."

He snapped his hands and groaned. The bowls around her erupted in flames and they climbed with fiery hands on misty ladders deeper into the bell above. With each breath, her head became lighter. Her fingers tickled and itched and a painfully familiar melody opened the rusty door to an old, forsaken memory.

"Please. No."

"The sins of the Squeak belong no one else but the Squeak alone."

The vapours from the bowls of fire and smoke around her bit her nose and tore at her mind as the world around her slowly melted away, revealing what was underneath: what had happened in this temple two dozen years ago.

"Please."

All she could do was beg and scream and cry.

"*Help me!*"

In the mist were eyes, a smile, oh his gorgeous smile. She could even make out the lines around his eyes, so vividly did he appear in front of her.

"Don't leave me alone. *Please...*"

She tried to close her eyes but the face in mist remained. Tears welled down her cheeks as the handsome face in the mist began to speak and a calloused hand grabbed her by the arm and yanked her from her place. She reached for the face, to caress it, to hold it.

I am sorry, my love. I will never forgive myself.



Yolanda had never felt this exhausted in her life. When she tried to stand, the ground pulled her back and she managed but a glance before her legs gave in again. Where there had just been an overgrown corner of the Bog of Nooks and Crannies, now a score of confused fish and an indignant squid floundered against drifting further into the trees and at the edge of the cliff. Splintered pieces of wood floated among like little ships.

As she wondered how all this came to be, she dropped into the muddy fish soup inside the cliffside bowl. Before she needed answers, she needed rest, so she closed her eyes. With a little luck, things would have gone back to normal when she woke again. Though she realized quite soon, her luck must have been just as exhausted as she was, as a crude wooden spear poked her in the shoulder. As she tried to rise to face the poker, the tip dug deeper into her sodden clothes.

"Stay down. *Kneel*."

The words still burnt on her back, but not as bad as they had before.

"And don't you get up again. What was...who are you? Do I know you? Look at me!"

Yolanda met the eyes scrutinizing her. They were pretty eyes inlaid in mud. Yolanda tried to recall if she had ever met the woman. If...she had ever hurt her. She needed to know everyone who'd faced her rage if she

wanted to make amends.

"You are the big freak who lives under the *Old Man*, aren't you?"

Freak. That didn't really help Yolanda in deciding if she'd met her before, so she simply nodded.

"I thought something about you seemed familiar. I've heard people talk about you, the hellish big freak...about how you pull entire carts by yourself. Always in the pitch-dark, always all hooded and cloaked. But no one told me you were a girl. Or that you had horns like this. Or what this...what just happened."

Yolanda grasped for her forehead and found her horns, not small and buried in maroon hair, but big and monstrous, looming from her brow. If she had not been so busy trying to decipher if she'd laid hands on this woman, this would have been the perfect time for a panic attack.

"I've asked a question. Answer me."

The woman poked her with the stick. Yolanda had never been here, at least that she knew. The *Old Man* was her home now. Yolanda had a bed there and a meal more often than not. But perhaps...perhaps the monster had come here often. The thought frightened her, more than she was capable to hide, but also a lot less than it would have but a few moments ago. Yolanda couldn't be certain, she'd thought the monster had gone someplace else those many years ago but it had been with her the entire time. Yolanda had been the monster the entire time. It wasn't even a realisation. She'd always known, always known and only lied to herself in hopes of making it real. *I've hurt everyone I've ever met*. Everyone she'd ever met had hurt her. In hindsight, it was only a logical assumption that the monster...she had done the same. *To make amends*. Now she only had to find out how. How? Then the woman started giggling.

"Oh, oh now I get it. Horned monster...my father is searching for you! He even sent Stitchers after you and of all people, it's me who finds you."

She laughed until she abruptly stopped and raised the crude spear to Yolanda's throat.

"They talked of a horned monster, an old woman, and a black cat...as black as night. The cat! It was here, just a moment before. They say they saw a black demon the night the *Old Man* burnt down. My father is searching for you and somehow...you are connected to the cat."

The best of Yolanda's efforts were not enough to hold back the tears at the mention of her old home, as she heard the man screaming in her head as she crushed him in her hands like an overripe fruit. And then it came back to her how she clawed after the muddy woman. Give. *More*. She knew little of apothecary and less of field dressing, how was she to make all those wounds whole again? How could she have been this stupid, this naive? *To make amends*. It had been a foolish idea from the start, nothing but a hollow gesture for...for what?

"I said answer me. Or I will end you. Tell me what you know of the cat."

Yolanda knew the monster deserved to die, but that changed nothing about how Yolanda did not want to die at all. She still had to live a life, not just simply endure existence. Home. She still had to find home, where the crab trees grew and the windows were full of stars. Yolanda opened her mouth and tried as hard as she could to press out a word, though she only wheezed and choked and after that meek attempt, she tried no more.

"I've heard you talk just now, do not take me for a fool. Do I look like a fool to you?"

Yolanda threw her head from side to side. Tears running down her face as the shattering of bones echoed through her head.

"Gods help me. And now the monster is crying. Have the respect to pull yourself together. This is no fun like this, it's like scolding a crying child. Understood?"

Yolanda nodded and wiped away the tears.

"Let's keep the questions simple then. You are the horned monster?"

Yolanda nodded.

"And you know of the black cat?"

Yolanda recoiled from imaginary fire and nodded.

"Do you even know of the old woman?"

Yolanda almost choked on the stench of blood the misty memories carried with them and nodded.

"So everything runs together with you, even the cat. You are responsible for all this...*you*. They blamed the pirates for the arson, they blamed the old hag who brought the cat but all this time it was you. Not to mention, you waylaid me and I almost drowned in that enormous wave."

A fish thrashed around next to her head before it seized to thrash forever. At least it had lasted longer than the false hope she'd found beneath the waves.

"At the very least have the dignity to nod. Silence is a coward's way out."

The contempt in the woman's voice hurt more than the crude spear scratching her throat. Thunder rumbled and Yolanda closed her teary eyes and nodded. There was no other justice for her. A moment passed.

"Do you...are you also connected to that wreathing Alchemist? Bloodshot eyes, stubbled cheek, greasy grey hair, dressed in ragged robes?"

Bloody holes stared at Yolanda's and she nodded.

"What happened to him?"

All Yolanda managed was to lift her arm and point at the ruined willow tree, all splintered and broken. She forced herself to look at the mess she'd made. She, Yolanda the monster.

"You...did that to him. Is this true?"

Yolanda nodded, shame tearing her to tiny little pieces from the inside. Shame and guilt and from deep down rage.

The woman went on her knees and stared Yolanda directly in the eye. Her gaze burned and Yolanda felt like breathing steam, until the woman finally turned around, kicked at the mud and cursed at the sky.

"Gods be damned. He was mine. *Mine!* Do you understand? Oh, why do I bother? What would a creature like you know about justice? What would you know about anything..."

She traced once around Yolanda, twice, and a third time before she came

to a halt. She stared at her, spear in hand and deep furrows across her brow until she finally spoke.

"...except for the black cat. For the sake of mercy, in the name of justice, I shall grant you a trial. You will lead me to the cat—unharmd. If you make me regret this..."

The unspoken words gave the wooden spear at Yolanda's throat a sharpness unbecoming of such a crude instrument. Fire circles engulfed two deep orange eyes, a drop of blood ran down Yolanda's throat, and it took all what was left of her strength to not howl and run. She nodded.

To make amends.



The trail of dried blood on his temple itched like hell. His cheeks itched just the same, as if he had been crudely shaven with a rusty razor. But his hands were tied behind his back; at the other end of the world. And yet, he could not suppress a shit-eating grin.

The Queen's personal chambers were decorated befitting pretentiousness; ornate carpets adorned the walls and floors, busts of the finest wood and rare marble guarded even rarer treasures, stowed and locked away in decorated chests. The ceiling was one enormous painting: a glamorous ship, caught between a raging whirlpool and a frothing multiheaded beast, its harpoon buried in some sort of sea creature with the head of an old man. *Quaint.*

He leaned back in his cushioned chair. Much nicer than the cage below deck, no doubt, but not much more comfortable. At least as long as he was still tied and bound. The rope they had used this time was at least not as dirty and rotten, but it cut into his skin just as deep. The queen meanwhile was seated on the other end of the room, a giant table stacked with the finest treats and delicacies—placed beyond the reach of even his mightiest efforts. Roast meat, figs, dates, grapes, fruits he had never even seen. Honeyed chicken, grilled fish as big as his famished thighs, smoked crab, and bottles full of sweet sweet vine. The water rising in his mouth would have sunk any vessel less hollow than this.

"That is quite an extravagant portion for a lady of your stature. I admire your bravery on display—truly. The pounds on the hip are not an enemy one faces so easily with the sword."

"You are to speak when you are spoken to, prisoner, and keep your tongue in rein when not. You are among the living, as I have granted you life but do not mistake this for mercy."

"If not mercy, then what keeps me alive?"

She inspected her plate as she answered.

"It is beyond me to deny justice. You may yet enjoy a last meal—if you show manners and answer my questions truthfully that is."

"And what if I don't? Will you eat this entire table by yourself just to spite me? I hope your stomach can inflate just like your vocabulary, or I fear you might burst by sunrise. That would show those show that treacherous Alchemist, I'm sure."

She met his eyes with startling intensity but continued chewing her small, yet lavish bite. When she was finally done, she delicately placed the silverware on the table next to her plate and wiped her mouth with a soft, white kerchief, naturally embroidered with needless splendour.

"I am afraid I cannot share the hollow admiration you uphold for yourself. If you cherish your life even half as much as your devious reflection, then will pay close attention now. The question boggling my mind is quite rudimentary in nature, you should have no troubles keeping up and keeping your answers concise and to the point—which might run contrary to the boorish attitude you thought wise to employ thus far. If you require a demonstration of the nature of a point again, few matters would fill my heart with such joy or delight."

She placed a hand on the engraved hilt of the blade on her side and smiled a polite yet cruel smile from ear to ear. He could still feel the throbbing on his chest, where her blade had cut him after his audacious proposal for dinner. *Stupid bitch*. At least she had the decency to dine him first before she skewered him. He retorted with his own, cocky smile.

"So tell me, prisoner, what is this game you are playing? You might think yourself some daring swashbuckler with your petty escape, yet even beyond any benefit of the doubt, you are still a prisoner, a captive—*my* captive. And what you elect to pursue, with your limited freedom, is chewing away at the dwindling rope still holding your neck above the water. Are you so weary of life and its wonders that you would throw it all away for a few words of vitriol, or are you simply that daft and stupid?"

She rose from her throne of oak and velvet and gracefully stalked around the overburdened table to present herself in all her beauty and glory before him. He could make out just about everything beneath the thin silk in the soft candlelight; her slender form, how it curved and breathed—calm and composed, so soft and positively out of reach. He had been locked up for so long in his little cage under deck...*if only he could*—no, he must not fall under her spell. *Resist!* It would be the end of him, he had to rise above his earthly desires, at least for the little time his performance still required to conclude. Boiling blood rushed through his body and pierced every bruised and tired limb. Damned be the gods, this turned out be much harder than he had anticipated. He leaned forward, as far as he could reach. *Speak now or just hand in your tongue on a silver plater yourself!*

"I play a game of life and death. Just like you. And I fear for your life, my Queen."

"Is this meant to feign profundity? Or is my heart still too charitable and kind, perverting what my ears perceived, for it was but a base threat against my life?"

With a shrill scrape, she drew the slender blade at her side. The edge glinted in the candlelight; once more two slender shadows impended over his tied up form. But even through her dazzling confidence, he could make out cautious hesitation, after all, he had already escaped certain imprisonment once before.

"I would not have the decency to veil my threats."

"Then let me just as clear: give me one good reason to not put a halt to

this farce of yours right this very moment."

He cleared his throat, as if he had not thought of a response already.

"One would need to sail a million miles to find a man who could resist your beauty, your grace, your promise, who would not fall for you, and yet here you are, untouchable, unattainable, alone. If there is a thing that breathes, it seeks your gaze upon its humble flesh, it seeks the gift of your love. Yet you cannot grant it, no matter how much you would desire to do yourself, lest it would lose what it so precious to begin with and remain unattainable. No other woman could not strut half-naked across a ship of drunken pirates and call herself *Queen*. You play a cruel game, I can admire that, but it is a dangerous game indeed. And I fear for your life. To speak truthfully—I know nought of the whereabouts of your Alchemist, but you are not fool enough to not have considered that your beauty might not enthrall a man forever. You want a reason to let me live? The fact that I've been brought to your chambers should suffice should it not? That I am still talking? You've had enough reasons to kill me by now but you what you did not have was certainty. Certainty of who I was, of *what* I was capable of, certainty that I could not be more useful alive than dead. You already know that I cannot only be entertaining, I can be of use, I can *help* you. Beauty fades, you need not fade with it. Not to mention the mounts of food which you are served, well—"

"Enough!"

She stared him right in the eye, before she took an sudden step forward. A sweet cloud of bewitching perfume enveloped him. Vanilla. And violets...or some other expensive shit. She stood so close above him. So close, he could see tiny, glistening droplets of sweat through the translucent fabric on her perfect skin. *So close*. The blood rushed even faster, his mind clawing to keep control. Her face hovered over his, so close, her silken hair fell into his face and tickled his cheeks.

"You are quite the talker. Too bad that I remember quit explicitly having requested an answer concise and to the point."

"There...there are matters complex enough in nature their...their description seldom emerge concise when...sharpened to a point."

"Well, well, well. Finally I managed to witness you stumble in this little dance. I had feared I might never see you falter. I will cherish this memory until the last of my days. If the stars align, I might even remember having at least a little fun while it lasted. Save yourself your sorry solace; it might yet keep you afloat after you've been thrown overboard.."

A crooked smile manifested on her luscious lips, though her face hardened again as quickly as the small glimpse of twisted humanity had appeared on its chiselled features.

"So, for the sake of argument, let's suppose someone—anyone really—might play such a game as outlined by this little description of yours. What would you propose? Do you truly have it in your heart to display such arrogance to assume a witless boy such as you could grasp—not to mention understand—even a slight of this...this *game*? You talk big words but deep down you have not a clue of what you speak. Is your heart so arrogant, you could think I would spare you simply for pretending to be reading me like some open book? I have yet to meet the poet impressed by the child for reading her work when *she* was the one who *willed it into existence*. Am I supposed to be impressed by your illusions of empathy? Look...*look* at yourself. Oh, just look at yourself. You do, you really think you understand. You really think you know me...*You*...Even if you understood but a spark of what I endure, what I created, what I sacrifice...*How dare you?* Achieving what I have, *retaining* it through all these years, it takes so much more than *beauty*. You invite yourself into my quarters for...for what? What game do play, prisoner? Answer my question! What do you want from me?"

"How about a date?"

Her face froze to an expressionless facade. For short moment, she remained there, frozen in place. Within the next blink, the edge of the sharpened blade rested against his throat. A final, fatal verdict on her lips,

for no longer than the blink of an eye. Even against the rushing tide of boiling blood in his head, he managed a few extra words.

"A date. Or two. Maybe a fig. Some chicken. I am starving."

Dead thunder cracked over the ship. She held the slender blade under his chin. The cold steel scraped against his scrubby throat leaving scraggy locks of hair trickling down his chest. The sword's point followed the veins in his neck further down, tearing through his tattered rags, dancing around the ropes cutting into his flesh, leaving a tingling trail on his skin. The edge made its way further downwards, across his famished belly, further down still. She raised an eyebrow as she continued to stare him right into the eye. Eyes cold and blue like frozen lakes. Her silken hair caressed his ragged cheeks as she condescended her face even lower. *So much closer.* The blade came to a rest. He was sweating, pulsing, trembling. *Oh so so afraid. Oh so so aroused.* With a swift motion, she drove the blade forwards, he closed his eyes in painful anticipation, as the tightness across his chest released and heavy ropes fell cut to the ground.

"I admire the *stones* on you...Fine. Then we have a deal. A date...for your servitude."

A storm of relief escaped his tensed up lungs and blew her soft, silken hair from his cheeks.

"Would...would you mind cutting these manacles as well? It...it'd be awfully awkward if—"

"Indeed it would. And yes, I would mind I'm afraid. *Eat.* It is a gross offence to refuse a Queen's invitation to dinner. And please, promise you mean to struggle with utmost awkwardness—I intend to watch."

Despite her smug grin, his stomach rumbled louder than the thunder outside. Despite the humiliation, despite the indignity, he ate as much and fast as he could manage, shovelling food with his bare hand into his squalid face, spilling sauce and wine and the lust for life and all its wonders over himself. When he was finally finished he leaned back in the cushioned chair and let his eyes wander over the vast painting adorning

the ceiling. *He did it. He survived.*

Eventually, she broke the silence.

"Marvellous, isn't it?"

"*Mmh...*...does it mean anything or is it just for show?"

"Truth. It means truth. Whoever catches the primordial serpent is granted the answer to the question for which their heart yearns the most. The ultimate truth."

"I had expected something a little more...exciting."

"*More exciting?* What else could there be to be more gripping, more exhilarating, more enticing than truth? To see the world clearly, unveiled."

"And what would you have unveiled?"

"You think this is an appropriate question to ask your Queen? You seem to forget your place."

"My apologies, my Queen. Sometimes I do forget my place. In a way, I am still learning what it means to have *a place*. I've yet to find a place to claim my own. I wonder if I will ever have one or just trail on forever...I think I could learn to live one way or the other. I've survived my share of hardship, malevolence, my share of despair and I've survived them all, alone. It's just the uncertainty that's wearing me down; if I am to die alone, to live alone. If I were to know, at the very least I could stop hoping then, if I knew for certain. It's something that still manages to keep me awake at night; perhaps life would be less painful without hope. It seems less plausible to doubt with each passing day. Yet, without knowing I cannot let hope die, lest the moment comes where I need need it, need to hope to live, to be alive. And so I hold on. Against my better judgement."

The Queen stared at him, her mouth slightly agape.

"I...had anticipated a crude innuendo, a clever retort not...sincerity. And yet here I stand, corrected."

Sincerity. As if. *That's what you would like to believe, wouldn't you?* When he'd done nothing but claimed her unspoken thoughts for his own. They were her words, not his. They could not be. He had already made up his

mind. *Hope was dead.* He had killed it. And he would not—could not—doubt again. *Not again.* A single, soft droplet tickled his cheek as it rushed towards the ground and he staggered to his feet and bolted for the door. When he crashed into the thick oaken cabin door, he found it locked. Trapped, he was trapped. Back in a cage. He gasped for air and found none as the walls around him shrunk until the Queen was next to him again.

"Now was this not exhilarating, to witness the power of *truth*, so intimately and veraciously? This is the promise of the *Rainbow Serpent*. You are caged, nothing, worthless, dust on the canvas of the gods. But truth will set you free. Follow me. Step out of the dark and let me show you *light*. I offer you the chance to carve yourself anew. You consider yourself free, but you have no course, no direction. You are a cynic, free and confused. Ignorant to the fact what you call freedom is nothing but a maelstrom eating away at your soul. What use is freedom when all the choices amount to the same. Freedom means to choose. To choose between good and evil. It means to not do what is easy but to choose what is most excruciatingly difficult for therein lies meaning. Therein lies purpose. Therein lies the place the gods elected for us to pursue—to inhabit. If you want to retort with something clever, now is your chance. Catch your breath and consider to waste it not. Obscenity or reality, you expel it but with the same breath and yet the gods heed one and disregard the other. And so do I."

"Then are you free?"

"I am."

The conviction in her words almost made him doubt their insincerity.

"And what purpose could you possibly offer me? Gold? Glory? What's the thing your people eat up best?"

The Queen only laughed at that.

"Quite simply adorable how base a imagination you possess under all the charade at display. As if a man's heart could be sated by such *base* simplicities."

She returned to the mess he'd made of her dinner table and pointed to the

painted ceiling.

"So you're all just art thieves with an obnoxiously pretentious motto."

At that, the Queen laughed again, in earnest this time.

"You do possess the talent to be quite amusing here it not for all your inadequacies. I assume as such I disappointed you when you expected...*compliments*. They affirm your assumptions about yourself—that you are singular. When you were born, the gods named your sin *Pride*. Well, you are many things but ordinary, though what I can offer you is more than platitudes, it is the truth you've long realised—that you are not as singular as you think you are, that you are not alone as you've always been—I offer you *kinship*."

The walls came closer. This was to be his grave. So close. He had been *so close* to making it out alive, to *winning*. And somehow, he'd managed to fuck it all up again. So what this *choice* she'd offered him now? Servitude or death? He was back where he started, back in a cage. Thoughts vanished from his head as quickly as he breathed and with each lost thought the panic gripped him tighter. Until a thought struck him, bright as lightning, too bright to immediately forget and he croaked the words with the little air he had left.

"And who...would be my *kin*? The cook? Who among you is *many things but ordinary*?"

They stared at each other, he gasping for air, finding ever more to fill his lungs with, she looking more sinister and sinister with each moment he refused to drown or submit. Then her grimace darkened and darkened, deep furrows rupturing the once pretty canvas. She took two determined steps towards him and the blade sprang forth from its scabbard, all he could do was raise his bound hands to protect his face and the next thing he felt was a biting pain as the blade split his skin and buried itself in the bone of his forearm. There was a horrifying cracking sound and blood sprayed into his eyes as he screamed like a skewered pig.

"You dumb fucking bitch! *Truth will set you free*. What a load of fucking

horseshit. Is that what you tell yourself at night while you fuck yourself with that fucking sword? Where are your fucking gods now when *your* sins are on display? *Pride*...what a fucking joke."

His arm cracked and bent when she wrenched the blade from his bone. When it finally broke free, it scraped through the wound and his vision went black .

When he found himself again, he was wreathing and screaming on the floor. Her eyes like frozen likes above him. He bit on his tongue, on his lips, on anything to not cry in front of her; in vain.

"I—"

"You almost cut my fucking arm off, you crazy whore!"

Somewhere people started shouting. The Queen looked onto the mess she'd made and had he not known better, he'd mistaken it for regret, even pity. Then the cabin door swung open and the shouting grew louder. The Queen shouted something in return and left him lying there and then the world blurred into a whirlpool of noise and colour.



The soft chime of tiny bells rang in the air.

Ramona felt like death. The world turned around her and the stench in her nose was so rancid, she almost threw up. And when she opened her eyes to realize her head was resting against the Alchemist's shoulder, she did. He sighed and spilled the puddle in the lap of his disgusting, dirty robe onto the floor.

"I warn the Squeak yet the Squeak do not listen."

His fingers rummaged through the folds of his robes. When they finally returned, he held a thick leaf in his hands where it danced between his fingers. He bit into the leaf and his face contorted in disgust. Then he bit into it again and again and by the third bite, his face was illuminated by a spark of other-worldly bliss.

"Travel await. The Squeak is angry. I see. Well. I do not. The Squeak understand my words. Though trust me. The Squeak be lot more angry if I not pull it out. The Squeak can try the ritual again. And see for itself. Though not with me. No more ritual for me. The mountain await."

Yolanda did not care for travelling, the Alchemist or anything he said. She just wanted to curl into a ball until this was all over. *I am so sorry, my love.*

"I don't wanna go."

"The Squeak do not listen. I tell the Squeak. Warn it. Not a minute and it

complains if it sit under the brass bell for days."

"*Shut up!* Shut up. Damned be you. You are an ugly, vile, wretched man. Just looking at you repulses me. You stink of death and decay and you are hard and cold and unfeeling. I hope the creature followed you and breaks you again and again until you are as ugly to look upon as you are on the inside."

Ramona was no longer afraid of the ugly man, she no longer cared for him and his wretchedness, no longer cared for her broken leg. She curled into a ball and sobbed, partly because of her aching leg, though mostly because of the memories which had returned to haunting her every moment.

"The Squeak is my eyes. Only natural for the Squeak to cry."

"I do not need your approval to cry. Go fall down a cliff for all I care."

"I do not need approval to die."

He laughed a raspy laugh.

"It sound clever in my head. Yet it is of the funny."

Ramona had long since stopped listening to his ramblings. She closed her eyes, trying her best to concentrate on something nice, yet all the nice things had vanished in a wall of mist. She did not look forward to the dreams but she was exhausted to the bone. Her mind had been running in circles before she'd ever set foot under the bell and it's only gotten worse ever since. And slowly, she drifted into a shallow, unpleasant sleep, freezing and snivelling.

When she woke again, the temple was clad in pitch darkness. Only the stars outside veiled the world in a soft sombreness. The Alchemist was still sitting there, leaning against the temple wall and staring into the nothingness with the holes in his head. It had been not nightmare then. If only it had been one. She had yet outlived all immaterial terrors.

"The Squeak awake?"

She sniffed.

"The outside drown it the darkness of the night. Is it not? Too late...too

late we are."

"You are blind. Why would you care? Go on. Stumble down your bloody mountain. I won't go."

"What the Squeak see? Home matter before."

Ramona felt dry, exhausted, but somehow she still had some tears in her to shed. She should have never left home. She should have never left this temple. She should have never let him go. She should have gone with him.

"Why would I care about *home*? Why should I care about anything right now?"

"You kill someone?"

"No!"

"I hear the Squeak apologize."

"I...My husband...he died. And it is all my fault."

"Mh. Sound like killing to me."

The last of the tears had left her body and now she was only heaving. She had wanted to tell him how much she hated him, if only there had not been this biting piece of truth to his words.

"So what happen?"

"As if you cared."

"Night is come. The Squeak no longer want home. I am blind. *Blind*. On the back of *mountains*. My face hurt. My chest hurt. My bones hurt. My spirit is faded. All what remain is salt. I try. And try. Save the Squeak from the rain. Though it hurt. Prepare ritual. Though it hurt. Warn the Squeak. Yet the Squeak do not listen. All I want is the peace. Then the cat of the black of the night come and burn away the hope of the peace. Not even pay for my crimes I can now. Not face the justice of the Queen. Denied of justice. Thousands of times I want to give in to the pain. And not try no longer. Yet I help the Squeak. Yet I help. Again. And again. Never I say I am good at helping. Yet people always come. And I try. And now there is only salt. Denied even the dignity of justice. Now I ask what happen to the Squeak and it accuse me not to care. Of all the things I am guilty of. The Squeak

accuse me of not caring. Not *really* trying. That hurt more than my eyes."

"I...I didn't mean to..."

"Yes you do. The Squeak think me a terror. A monster. And the Squeak think true. I hurt others. I hurt myself. The Squeak have the right to indulge in the hurting. In the hurting that is true. Deserved. It is just punishment. For all I do not and do wrong. I care."

"You didn't seem like someone who'd care."

"You not seem like one to kill your husband. That is why I ask. The Squeak is hurt. And I try care. Against the Squeak making it difficult."

"We...we rested here in this temple. That was twenty-four years ago. Back then there were still people here, of the *Old Faith*. My husband—*Maurice*—we'd saved some coin over the years. A lot of coin actually. Both of us had always been fascinated by everything that crept and crawled and hopped and ran; though there was nothing like the things which flew. Well...in hindsight it hadn't been that important in beginning; mostly his smile and his eyes when he laughed. To be true, I'd barely listened to anything he'd said the first day we'd met, I was too busy losing myself in his eyes. And then there were his courage—he'd always been better with people than me—his contagious serenity, and the clever little jokes which hadn't always been quite appropriate and —"

She caught herself blushing and decided it was to pretend she'd never gone off on any tangents. Though, she noticed herself smiling a bit more than before.

"And our love for birds...I loved him more than all my books combined...I still do. And that's why had visited this temple; books and birds. I had found an old legend and he'd actually found someone who swore that is more than just a legend. We saved as much as we could, hired a guide, some mules to carry the baggage and there were some others. I...it seems I haven't thought about a lot of this in a while...only about how afraid I was. Also excited. But that did not really help. I didn't sleep. For three nights, I barely slept and Maurice, the patient soul he was, he waited

for me. The others were less patient. I can remember some people leaving. And then it started raining and delayed our little expedition even further.

"First, I thought I was in luck, I had more time to gather my courage. Then it stormed and thundered and the little courage I did have, fizzled in the air. I kept telling myself how one could get struck by lightning and how there have been cases where the person survived and in the face of that, that no one ever—ever—was killed by thunder but that did not make me less afraid. When the storm finally passed over, the others were no longer willing to wait and I knew that I would never find the courage to travel with them. And Maurice, understanding as he was, he just kissed me on the forehead, smiled and told me how he was proud of me for having it made this far and gave me a cold, little bottle. *Release what is kept inside when you no longer know where to go*, he'd said. He'd caught something for me in the storm and wanted me to have it. To protect me on my way back home, while he was away. The next morning, he departed with the now much smaller company, leaving the guide and a mule behind for my descend. I can still recall exactly how we said Goodbye, how he told me that he laughed me and would paint whatever he'd find for me and...that's the last time I ever saw him.

"I've barely set foot outside a door since then. And to make it worse, two months after he'd left, it became apparent I was pregnant. The poor, poor child. I wish I could give her all the love she'd never got from me when all I had was fear and regret."

Until the bloody cat appeared one day and made her dream again. The *bloody* cat.

"Mh. Sound not like killing to me."

Ramona sniffed.

"Sound like the husband was reckless fool."

Ramona jumped at him and punched him as hard as she could. He screamed as her she buried her fist in his chest. Then she screamed as her leg gave in under her and toppled painfully to the ground. Now they both

laid there, wincing and and groaning.

"You are reckless fool just the same. Make sense you belong as one."

"I will not apologize."

"No, no. This hurt I deserve. I see that."

He coughed and his ugly face distorted.

"The gods play tricks of cruelty with the mortal minds."

"It that your justifications why you are such a horrible person?"

"It seem to be yours. But no. Is the justification why I always need face the punishment. Always face the *justice*. And the justice wait for me in the harbour. If it wait at all. Yet I have to try. It is my manner to make right again. To care."

He struggled to his feet, visibly in pain.

"The Squeak help me there? Get to the harbour?"

Ramona was confused why she even considered agreeing. The Alchemist was a wretched, self-centred, untrustworthy creature. Not much better than what she thought of herself. And then she nodded. Followed by the realization that she was talking with a blind man. She'd not yet looked at the Alchemist as such, as someone worthy of sympathy.

"Yes. I'll be your eyes."

"*Marvellous*. Let the journey begin then. Immediately."

"It is still dark outside."

"Oh."

He slumped against the wall and groaned as he assumed the position he'd occupied for the previous hours, always staring at nothing and no one. When the sun finally rose over the mountain tops, she poked the Alchemist, though he did not respond and only snored softly. Ramona did not look forward to going back into the unknown again but staying in the temple seemed even worse. It was almost noon when the Alchemist awoke with a start.

"Squeak. The sun return?"

"The first light of dawn must have awoken you."

"Marvellous. Descend the mountain then."

In the light of the summer sun, beyond a clear summer sky, the temple was even more beautiful. A soft tear ran down Ramona's cheek and for a moment, she almost felt something was healing, though she'd lived long enough to know that she was just hungry and imagining. She was sure of that.

Birds were chirping and the ocean waves sloshed against the mountains below. In the far distance, to her right, under the midday sun, she could almost make it home. She could scarce believe that just...had it been yesterday? She had lost her grasp one time. Whenever it had been, that she had found herself with a cat as black as night in the *Old Man* and now she was here.

"Where the way go? The left or the right?"

Ramona wondered what had happened to the temple in the last twenty-what years. What had happened to Maurice. She sniffed. Had he ever found anything? Why had he not returned? He had promised to return. She looked back to where she had once fled after the last storm she'd witnessed here. The harbour was there. And whatever the Alchemist sought was there, too. She had a pinching feeling in her chest as she opened her mouth. She would not have thought to be able to develop sympathy for a man as cruel and foul as he was. He groaned with each step he took, Ramona clinging to his back. *I will find a way to make it up to you.*

"Left. We go left."

I will find you, my love. After all this, I shall finally seek your legacy.



Consciousness returned to him in a puddle of his own blood.

The room around him was spinning and some creature was fiddling with his arm. He kicked at the creature and it squealed and scuttled into a corner. His arm throbbed and his heart pounded against his temples as he rose to make after the vile thing, though he only stumbled and fell as the floor shifted beneath him. Instinctively, he broke his fall with his hands and immediately regretted it as pain shot through him.

As he rose again, cursing, the creature cowered before him, spindly hands entangled above its head, pleading in a language he could not understand. Had he not struggled for sure footing, he would have kicked it again. It had no business with him, least of all his blighted arm. Gods only knew what wretched poison it had kneaded into the bandages wrapping his right arm.

"Disregarding your aversion for prudence, it would be unwise to tear away these dressing so hastily. Our little Rat may not look the part, yet he is a tried physician."

His stomach boiled as he looked around the room, in search of a weapon within his good arm's reach. When her blade pricked his back, to signal him to turn around, he was still unarmed and cursing under his breath.

"What reason would I have to trust a word from your mouth?"

"Name a reason why I should consider poison and disease when I could

skewer you this very moment."

"I would not die as slowly and painfully."

She closed the cabin door behind her.

"You have...valid reason to assume my interest in your demise, yet the accusations of sadism is strictly unfounded in the face of—"

He simply had to lift his blood-drenched bandages to shut her up.

"Then what is *this*?"

Silence. He waited for an overly flowery husk of a response. A platitude. An insult. A threat. Another strike for his head. Yet nothing happened. Only the Queen struggling for a response. No, not the Queen—the woman who had once decided to become the Queen, struggling for an answer...struggling for *courage* of all things.

"A...*mistake*."

He bit his tongue again. The temptation to use this opportunity to mock her was almost too great to resist. Her unexpected vulnerability enticed him more than any of her revealing garments could have ever done. He wondered what a *good* person might do in his stead. Something dumb and pointless most likely. And then they would die. He had no interest in apologies, no interest in dying, not when he could see this goddamn ship go up in flames. So he waited for her to take the next step, the step off the plank.

"If you think this gives you now power over me, you are mistaken."

He was not.

"My mind has remained unchanged. Your grievances will direct spite at none but yourself."

"Would you deny me the truth still?"

"It is your last breath to waste in seeking to bring shame upon me. When the gods accept you into their halls, they will know you died for my mistake...for my pride—do you truly have it in your heart to humiliate me further still?"

Only a fool would use this opportunity to tie a noose around her neck,

when all what was needed was a little help to get the Queen to do it herself.

"Tell me then, what is *your* purpose? What will I die for?"

A moment passed.

"*Fine.*"

Her voice was but a faint whisper. She turned around and vanished onto the ship's deck and he followed. Cold summer rain pelted on his face. With a deep exhale, he exorcised the tension torturing him from within. *Pure, ecstatic relief.* Out of his cage, onto his stage.

Hardly anyone of the crew paid him more than a moment's notice. All of them were engulfed in the chaos of navigating the ship through rough sea. When he arrived at the bow of the ship, the Queen handed him a spyglass and pointed into the waves. He awkwardly held the piece of metal to his face, as best as he managed with only one hand. There was only the grey and blue of the sea. Waves rolling over each other, infinite wetness, nothing at all. Had he misjudged his position again? Was this another dumb joke at his expense? But then he saw it: a shimmer, a shine. And then an enormous serpent sprang forth from the waves and into the heavens. Its scales shimmered in the starlight in a million different colours. It arched so high it nigh touched the stars itself. When its head finally met the ocean's surface again, its tail had still not left the sea and for a brief few seconds, the moon was framed by a million different shining colours, until the tail finally erupted from the depth and sprayed the ocean's guts into air and for that brief moment, the sky had a million billion stars. Then the tail vanished beneath the waves and the world returned to banality.

There was no need to feign awe when he took the spyglass from his eye.

"Now you know. It's been named the *Old Man under the Sea*. It will reveal truth to anyone who catches him."

"And what truth to you seek?"

"Truth beyond mortality. So profound, only a god could conceive it. And I will catch it. The truth. This god."

"Too bad you have to kill me."

"I will not apologize. I have a duty to fulfil. To this crew. This ship. This mission. If there was any truth with what you uttered this night, you will understand."

"I do. I understand why you think you have to kill me. But if there was any truth to your words tonight, then you'll know that I can help you. That we more alike than not."

"Your sentence has nought to do with fear."

"*I know.*"

His voice was but a faint whisper.

"You would only need to fear me, were I to rival your position, your qualities. Why did you offer me kinship then? Were we to share qualities, you might have good reason to fear my ambitions. It would make me dangerous, to have witnessed you give in to weakness. That is what you think, is it not? My arm...this entire charade, it is a testament to your inadequacies. Well, it is. As it is to mine. I could have accepted your invitation and now, after I've witnessed...what you pursue, I wish I had. And yet, in a way, I would have made your offer void, for you never offered me kinship for my qualities, did you? We are not alike in what we excel at, are we? Only in what we lack, what we wish we had, what we wish we were. I do not think of you as weak, you did not give into weakness. You dared to be true, to be vulnerable and I perverted your offer. What grudge, what accusation could I hold against you, when I know that I would have done the same? When I look into your eyes, I see my own failures, my own blights. From what you did to my arm, I can tell you see yours in mine. You can kill me but that won't kill what you hate about yourself. You can hate me but that won't change the fact that I *understand.*"

He lifted his bandaged hand to stroke her flawless cheek. She flinched from his fingers, only a hair, not enough to deny his touch. Before he managed to reach her chin, she grabbed him by the wrist to thwart any and all further attempts of intimacy. Their eyes locked while the sea raged around them, studying, scheming, longing. *Who would have known that to*

make her doubt, I had to almost doubt myself? Before she could muster a clever response, he turned on his heel and strode away into the pandemonium of sails and ropes and pirates.

"Where...where are you going?"

"Go hunt after the rainbow serpent? What else could I do after this but waste my life? I've seen the truth. And it's set me free!"

Lies had set him free. And for his next trick, he would sink this ship.



Yolanda wished she could have helped those fish. But the little woman and her had left the Soup Cliff and its squirming garnishes behind. A wooden spear would not have stopped Yolanda from throwing them back into the sea, but she had made a silent promise so she had stopped herself. She doubted the fish would understand. Yolanda remembered how she almost drowned herself and that did not help at all. Her thoughts trashed in her head with the fish in the puddle. In a way, they had been through similar disasters, in a way, they had been kin to her and that made it worse still.

I am sorry.

Thick raindrops pattered in the willow crowns. There was a crack, as a tree snapped in the storm somewhere in the distance. Yolanda's singed hair stood valiantly against the wind. The woman to her side quaked and shivered in the cold. She was pretty. So very unlike Yolanda. The carcass of a codfish dangled over the woman's shoulder and Yolanda tried not to look at it. *At least this one had been already dead*, she hoped.

The woman wagged the cod every now and then, shouting for the cat.

"Here come, kitty-cat. Mummy brought a tasty fish for you."

Though, if the cat was hiding somewhere near, it chose not to show itself. Wherever it was, Yolanda had to track it down somehow. Then she remembered the bog's name and almost tripped. Without the intention of

ever getting up again.

"How come to don't talk? Or do you only know two words and find it hard to contribute to conversations with only *give* and *more*? Well, let's try it out: Isn't it awfully wet and muddy and generally just simply unpleasant? What is such a place of unpleasantry called again?"

Yolanda had no idea what the woman was talking about but she wanted to be polite and coughed as she tried to form a word in her throat.

"Pity. It's up to me to keep this conversation running, then."

Though after that, only silence followed.

As Yolanda rummaged through the underbrush, she found many things left behind and forgotten—a cracked spyglass, a shiny, blue feather the length of a forearm, even a ragged wedding dress—but no cat. Every now and then, Yolanda heard rustling in the willow crowns though she never found anything among the leaves but yet more storm. The bog had grown thicker and wilder, ever less inviting and more difficult to trespass. At least the increasingly interwoven foliage also held the worst of the storm at bay. Yolanda cleared a broken tree out of their path when the woman broke the silence.

"Do that again."

Yolanda lifted the tree again and only then realized that it was twice the size of the little woman.

"Throw it."

Yolanda flung the trunk into the thicket and it spun and spun, ripping leaves and wines into the wind until it shattered against a willow with tiny red leaves. The woman whistled.

"I wished you could talk."

Yolanda did not know how to respond, not that knowing would have helped her. Though, it seemed to be a nice thing for the woman to have said, so for the first time in a while, Yolanda smiled a toothy smile. When she resumed the search, her horns had gotten tangled in the canopy of vines which she carefully disentangled one by one. The woman laughed.

Shame crawled up Yolanda's neck, though as she glanced at the giggling face, she felt unexpectedly warm inside.

"Alright then, it seems I have to satiate my curiosity sooner rather than later, before you inadvertently hang yourself. Keep walking, I am morbidly curious to see what happened to that tree trunk. You can handle yes-or-no questions, can you not?"

Yolanda could and so she nodded.

"Do you think we'll ever find the cat?"

She had no good reason to believe they ever would but Yolanda had made a silent promise and she would give her best to honour it, so she nodded her head again.

"I had expected you wanting to give up rather than go on. Colour me surprised, if you will. I can't really say I share your confidence. But then again, you seem to know more about this than you let on; and definitely more than me. I wouldn't mind getting out of the storm, but I wouldn't want to go home either. Not without the cat at least. We've had a little fight...again. It wasn't really that little. I told my father I hated him. I don't think I meant it, but he made me mean it. Imagine, how would you react if someone told you they hated you?"

The way she had practised to; appreciate it, for it were only words.

"Oh right, only simple questions. If someone told me they hated me, the last thing I'd do is try to prove them right to hate me. Not if I loved them. I suppose that's where my father and I differ. That, or he simply..."

She'd never been close enough to another person for them to have shared such personal, intimate details about their lives with her. It was new, it was weird, but above it all, it was overwhelmingly uncomfortable to the point, Yolanda caught herself looking for another cliff to jump off. Before she could make up her mind if drowning truly had been that much worse than this conversation, it fortunately came to a halt as they arrived at splintered willow.

"Now would you look at this. It's hollow. Who hollows out a tree? What

idiot would—oh...of course."

The woman's fingers traced a symbol burned into the splintered trunk. Then she laughed for a moment but the laughter died in her throat. Yolanda knelt to peer at the symbol. It was a simple shape: A circle, divided in half and one side halved again. So simple. Almost innocent. And Yolanda burned. She punched a clenched fist into the wood and after the first, a second followed and then a third until her knuckles bled and she'd run out of numbers. The willow tipped and fell. Somewhere was an insignificant shriek. Yolanda grabbed for the approaching branches, but all each one snapped in her fist until the bark under her fingers became thicker and less fragile. She stemmed against the weight of the toppling tree and roared. The wood creaked and screamed with her as she tore the crown from what still made it a tree and hurled it through the canopy of vines, bellowing as it vanished from sight. Yolanda barely registered the startled birds squalling and fluttering to the heavens. Her eyes were fixed and hate reached for the tiny woman to her feet. The woman sobbed and fell into the scarred arms reaching for her. A cool wave washed over Yolanda as she found herself again, entangled with the small woman.

"Thank you. Thank you...And I appreciate the gesture, even though you nigh scared my heart into a knot. But I think...this is something I'll need to face alone."

And with that she vanished into the hollow tree trunk and left no trace behind. The cool wave ebbed and Yolanda slumped against the tattered willow trees, arms around her knees. She was so gross and dumb and lost and she felt like a stupid little child again. A thunderous crack, not from the heavens but a whip hissing from calloused hands. Dumb little big girl. Freak. Freak. She rowed as hard as she could and the oar snapped. Crack. Stupid big freak. An iron circle, twice divided smouldered in the coals and burned into flesh on her back and into her mind. *The stench.* The horrible grins. Freak. Collared and beat and sold and kicked and burnt and sold again. Until the monster made them all disappear. Until the freak made

them pay. Until Yolanda killed them all.

The little girl sobbed. For all the people the monster had killed. The ringmaster, the strongman, the fire eaters, the attendees, even the dancers, and the little girl they called Yolanda. And then it had taken her place and made off, never to be seen again. And no one mourned the girl for barely anyone knew she had lived and no one knew she had died. No one but the monster. And the tears ran and ran. For the girl who never lived, for the revellers who'd lived too much, and the fish in the cliffside soup. With each shiver, the crust engulfing Yolanda lost a tiny piece until she sat there, alone and naked. She felt a little less trapped and a little lighter, having finally faced...herself, though where before she was numb, pain now stabbed. Yet, despite it all, she preferred this. Just, *this*.

When she finally opened her eyes, the cat was sitting there, a few feet away, examining her carefully, licking its paws. What a strange little creature it was. What a strange big creature she was. What strange creatures the two of them were. The burning room with the two rigid bodies on the floor shot across her mind again and the tears fell anew. The cat took a cautious, silent step, then paused. Yolanda would have liked to apologize to small furry thing—not that she spoke cat or spoke at all for that matter. But she had made a silent promise.

Yolanda grabbed the poor codfish the small woman had left behind and placed it between the cat and herself. The black demon eyed her expectantly before it limped towards the dead fish, never taking its gaze off the big, horned girl kneeling in the mud. First, it hissed when Yolanda tried to scratch it behind its tiny little ears, though after a while, the promise of fish was too enticing to turn down and in the end, it purred as Yolanda's fingers ran through its soft, black fur.

Somehow she had to make amends. *Somehow*. Wherever that would take her, however it would end, it could not possibly start with her breaking this promise. So when the cat had lost interest in the fish and started cleaning itself again, Yolanda grabbed it by the scruff of its neck and into

air. Yolanda had expected, had hoped for it to struggle, to protest, to resent her for this betrayal, though it just dangled from her fingers, resigned to its fate. *I'm sorry my little one. This is to make amends.* She made for the hollow tree stump and found a crude ladder leading down its innards, down and down, though there was a soft shimmer of light at the bottom. The light dimmed around her, as she descended the latter and the smell of the bog was displaced by the stench of moist earth, rotten wood, absinthe, and salt, as the well under the tree opened up into a small grotto.

In the gloom, Yolanda could make out mouldy crates, rusted cages, and a small skiff moored tight, weathered but mostly intact. The other entrance into the grotto was through a hole onto the sea and through which the tiny silhouette of an overgrown islands far out at sea was visible. A piercing scrape behind her startled her and when she turned around, she found the small woman inspecting a rusty cutlass.

"Seems this whole operation's been abandoned quite a while ago. Abruptly. Those crates are still filled with rotting tobacco and spices from who-know-where. The cages now hold the skeletons of the animals that were supposed to *enrich* the menagerie but what surprises me are the chains...these weren't for animals, they—"

Yolanda's back burned. The chains had not been for animals, there the woman was right, but the cages had not only been for animals. Then the woman noticed the dangling cat and stared at Yolanda in disbelief.

"*You did it.*"

She looked around frantically.

"Here, put it into this cage before it escapes again."

Yolanda would have preferred not to, but she'd made a promise. When the lid was back on the cage, the cat started hissing and sparks floated like little orange stars through the gloom. After a while, when neither the iron bars nor the moist wooden crates had caught fire, the cat stopped protesting and retreated into the farthest corner of its little cage. *I am sorry little one.* Was there a way to free the little thing without breaking her

promise, having to catch it anew? Maybe if she found another cat, one less offended by imprisonment. But where would she find such a cat? Where, when she knew just how miserable life in a cage was.

The small woman eyed her up and down and Yolanda caught herself recalling if she'd said anything out loud, if the woman had crept into her thoughts and unveiled her treacherous nature. Rusty iron scraped again against rusty iron as the woman drew the cutlass from its sheath.

"On your knees."

Outside, lightning struck, though the thunder following it was less whip and more akin to the thumping heartbeat in Yolanda's head. She knelt, considering if the cat was to be freed before she died.

"Do you care about justice?"

Yolanda wasn't sure anymore what *justice* meant. Did it mean she had to die, did it mean she had to live, did it mean she had to free the cat, to leave it imprisoned and learn to accept it? Justice meant that she would pay the price for her crimes and face punishment to make things right again. She wanted to make things right again. She cared about that and so she nodded.

"When the Alchemist came to ravage the *Old Man*, he left it a ruin. Do you know what his pirates did to me? They just...I've never felt this helpless...not since the day I've lost mother. All I could do was...watch. I was helpless...still have the bruises, all yellow and green now. Here, look at this mess! Is that a way to treat a lady? All I could do was bite one in his filthy arm. And then they just tied me up and left me there... I imagine you handled the situation quite differently when they came for you. All big and strong, be it mute and dumb. You threw yourself down a cliff and the sea spat you out right away again. And now you found *this* hideout and captured the cat, in the short while I was away. You truly are useful. *Suspiciously* useful. And as I cannot ask, I'll have to decide for myself if you are blight or blessing."

The woman circled around Yolanda once, twice before she raised the rusty cutlass. It first touched Yolanda's right shoulder, then her left, and

then her brow, right between her horns.

"In the name of mercy, I charge thee to protect the innocent.

In the name of courage, I charge thee to be brave, and strong.

In the name of righteousness, I charge thee to suffer no evildoers.

In the name of justice, I charge thee to obey and tell no lie.

"That last one should be relatively easy for you. Now rise, as the knight of the Shattered Tree."

Yolanda looked at the woman in front of her, confused. Even though she was standing and Yolanda was cowering before her, she still seemed small, insignificant next to the towering giant. Though she was pretty, even sodden and dirty and with only one shoe. So very unlike Yolanda.

"Oh, lords, you look pathetic. Get up already. Or have you already forgotten that you are being hunted by Stitchers? We have to punch a pirate ship into the sea. And don't you let anyone take this bloody cat from me. It belongs to me."

She turned around, grabbed the cage with the cat, and hopped into the skiff.

"Let's set sail, good sir...madam, dame whatever. Well...I've seen at least one oar around here somewhere. Let's do whatever a ship does with one oar. Hopefully not sink. I want to find out what my father has hidden on that godforsaken island out there, why he had need for a dirty smuggler's cave, and why he then abandoned it. Come on, I can't do this alone. We're in this together now. The witch and her knight. *For justice.*"

Yolanda rose. She wanted to make her life count. To make whole what she had broken. She wanted nothing more than this. To no longer feel alone. *To make amends.* To rid the world of evil and heal what had been broken. She wanted to believe nothing more than this.

Her heart was pumping, as she put the skiff out to the *Scyllic Sea* and rowed it through the starry night.

For justice, she thought. To make amends.