

CHAPTER I

The Old Man by the Sea



The crescent moon was about to rise above the Scyllic Sea. Homemade stew sweetened the air with its rich, savoury smell and in the *Old Man by the Sea* inn at the harbourside, a cat as black as night was not available for purchase.

And yet, the mortals coveted it with all their hearts.

"What do you want for it, grandma? My seven horses? My two hundred sheep? A dozen cakes? My wife?"

The gratuitous congregation of merchants and fishermen scrambled and shoved way too close for comfort around her and yelled at the top of their lungs about things of nought importance, that it made her ears ring; it all just made her positively claustrophobic. She was not used to people, not to mention crowds containing dozens of them, and in all honesty, she also did not like the company of others, favouring the solitude of a cool room filled with books over one steaming and overflowing with a geyser of people any day. Anxiety concentrated into a deafening whirlpool whenever there was not enough space for it to diffuse and her life had been rather crowded lately. Not only had she acquired the company of a cat as black as night, but said feline company attracted the gazes and attention of strangers like nothing she had ever seen before; gazes and trouble. The furry thing had one morning showed up on her windowsill and since not left her side. It had chosen *her*. Of all people. Hundreds of greedy eyes stared at the

gorgeous ball of fur on the oaken table right in front of her, all craving what was not rightfully theirs. The thought made her nervously fidget in her seat, the bench responding with the strained creaking of an old fishing vessel. Perhaps, if she closed her eyes hard enough, the wood she clung to would turn into a mighty raft and free her from this smothering impasse, carry her away on a stream of soothing water. Yet alas, the bench was but a ship in strain and not in function, not even seaworthy enough to save her from drowning in this incessant crowd.

The black cat met her beseeching stare with its deep, orange eyes. Her fingers clutched the small, cold bottle hidden away in her purse. It was not yet time to break it, she might yet escape this hardship herself, even though the idea was seductively tempting.

"Hear ye! Hear ye! My brother's trying to trade his wife for the magic cat. 'Haps *his wife* should try trading *him* for an ox instead? Seems only fair to me. Such a beast may yet be of more use than *he* and his marriage might even lose a few pounds in the deal."

As the roaring laughter rose like wildfire in the room, so rose the red in the insulted brother's chubby cheeks.

"Just ya wait and see if ya'll still be laughing after I've beaten ya stupid."

"Yer hoping stupid I'd believe ye lot of sheep to be two hundred and ye seven donkeys to be stallions and that ye own even one uneaten cake?"

The laughing brother barely maintained his balance on his chair, shaken by a fuming storm of laughter trying to yank him overboard, salty surges of joyful tears streaming from his exhilarated eyes. The butt of his jokes clenched his fists, mortified. His knuckles were showing white through his freckled skin, though the crashing waves of demeaning laughter eventually carried him through the tavern door, his anger drowned out by shame.

The laughter carried on, even minutes after the brother with the red face had left the *Old Man by the Sea*. In the eye of this tempest of merriment, she finally found some calm and refuge from the cage of piercing stares, which had held her paralyzed ever since she stepped foot into this forsaken

establishment. A grey strand of hair dangled in front of her right eye. She swiftly tugged it back where it belonged, pushing the question, of how long she had not noticed this anarchic flick of hair being out of place, how long she had disgraced herself, to the back of her mind. The state of affairs had nearly returned to tolerable normality. If only the obnoxious singer with is insufferable harp could now leave her some peace of mind. The black cat laid on its back and looked at her with those knowing, deep, orange eyes. She felt judged for losing her composure, her hair being out of place, the stain on—she felt judged by a cat. A *cat*.

Ramona, you are losing your mind.

In an effort to reclaim sovereignty over her thoughts, she adjusted her dark grey dress and her oversized travelling cloak. More than anything she was in dire need of some quiet and privacy; it was high time to spend some of the little coin she possessed on exactly this, now that the tavern patrons were distracted enough to let her out of their asphyxiating grip. The black ball of fur purred as she picked it up, and pressed it under her coat against her bosom, hidden away from the world. There had to be a better long-term solution for concealing this singular specimen from the world. If only it were easier to conceal or at least not this unwilling to hide its unfathomable beauty from the sight of prying strangers. The way it presented itself, so full heartedly aware of its own amenity and the fascination it sparked in the hearts of mortals. She wondered how many of these self-aggrandising parades she could endure from the slender creature before it finally overstayed its welcome.

Any and all of them, if need be.

"Pardon?"

She looked up at the woman who had derailed her train of thought, immediately irritated the mess of unkempt hair which warded her scalp like an untamed animal worthy of the most ferocious of tales and songs.

"Mind repeatin' *how* many rooms you fancy rentin'?"

"Just...just the one."

She might have blushed, if she had not ridden herself of this particular reflex many years ago, for it had only ever meant trouble; her habit of soliloquizing though, that one still accompanied her even to this day. As she had practised, the embarrassment crawled up her stomach only up to her chest, away from her cheeks. No, this time it was not only embarrassment creeping up her throat, it was the *bloody cat*—*mind your language*—squeezing itself out of her coat onto the counter and presenting itself like a gift upon mankind to be petted and admired.

Any and all of them, Ramona. Any and all of them.

"Aww, how lovely!"

Awestruck, the innkeep cautiously extended a hand to ruffle the cat's shiny black belly which responded with complacent purring.

"Oh, you cute little thing, will you hear me prayers with your tiny magic ears? I'm wishin' fo' a beautiful and warm night, a long life, and fo' rich and pleasant patrons until the end of me days."

"How novel. Though you will reap but disappointment from your quaint requests. Magic beasts obey not the whims of any simpleton demanding their service, but their own. Communing with its spirit is a matter of fine art, tremendous amount of study and dedication, with which you have obviously not been burdened. Furthermore, it has yet to heed a wish of mine and it'd be nothing short of miraculous should a peasant woman like you be bestowed upon, what it has thus far withheld from me."

The woman looked at her through her tangle of blonde hair with this familiar, indignant expression she was all too accustomed to.

"Maybe it'll be different for me and it'll listen to me humble request. The gods know me heart is pure and I couldn't do no harm to nothing. Wouldn't be the first time they'd bless me with miracles, isn't that so my cute, little darling?"

She stroked the cat under its gorgeous chin and smiled a counterfeit smile.

"Maybe such a beautiful creature just won't waste its mighty powers on someone as mighty old and mighty bitter as you?"



O h, how he envied their simple excitement. The two new arrivals had nothing short of bewitched the tavern patrons. Well, the black cat was considerably more impressive than the granny. Word was, there were certain folk travelling in the company of black cats, whispering words in their ears to make them to their magic bidding; witches, warlocks, nutjobs commanding their magic pets. Not this one, though. Even to the common folk, the old woman was nothing but painfully ordinary and uninteresting. This furry companion of hers, on the other hand, might yet prove to be a rare sight indeed—if the cat's fur turned out to be a black of the genuine variety, that is. He had met his fair share of pompous merchants trying to sell common cats dyed in coal and soot for the mighty price a black one might merit. Yet so far they had all been unmasked as frauds and charlatans. No surprise there. People rarely separated with such rare treasures willingly. He imagined if he had a magic cat, he would hate parting with it, not to mention trading it for something as worthless as gold. There were much greater prices to be claimed in this world.

To her credit, the old woman had not yet accepted a single offer for her pet. Even the grandest proposals seemed to have left her cold. A nice trick no doubt, naturally, not enough to convince him of the extraordinary nature of her feline companion, but it was at least enough to peak his

interest. Not many things merited his undivided attention, an authentic black cat though, might make the list of exceptions.

Delicately, he plucked at the strings of his harp, yet the chord they created struck the room with such primal ferocity, it threatened to tear one's heart asunder, his voice carried a soaring note through the air. The tension was corporeal. The faces of his audience, mesmerized by his performance, longing for a resolution, painful anticipation of sweet release in their expressions; pain they embraced, for it meant the honey it promised would be sweetened with the herbs of heaven.

He considered ending the song right here, one a chord of promise, leaving it vacant without release, keeping the promised honey for himself. The thought excited him. A promise of satisfaction beyond even the applause of millions. Temptation nearly paralysed his fingers, but he knew he entertained a notion he could not pursue. These songs were but the prelude to a piece much greater, much more rewarding in its completion, than a simple tune could ever be in its lack thereof; the little pain *he* had to endure to earn his honey.

A sly smirk crossed his lips as he let the harp release the sweet chord he had made the audience long for with all their aching, little hearts and placed a high note with this heavenly voice of his like a cherry on top of this marvellous musical pastry. The pain in their faces released in waves of joy and the silence of anticipation was drowned out by thunderous applause.

How *agonizingly* disappointing.

Even after all these years, there was no joy. He bowed for his cheering audience, emptied his tankard of ale and left it with his wooden harp and his thoughts about supposed magical beasts on the *Old Man's* small stage.

His performance had concluded, *now* the real show began!

There, outside, on the pier, his actual audience waited for his attention, oblivious to her supporting role in his performance, oblivious to the man who was about to become the protagonist of her entire existence: a girl, all

alone, staring longingly upon the sea. To her, he was but a complete stranger, yet to him, she was but another instrument, versed and familiar, and now he was aching to play.

As he always was, as he always had to, he was only passing through, but people liked to talk, especially to handsome bards whose heart-wrenching tunes their predictable, little hearts they had listened to. And he listened back when they talked about people, when they talked about things. Naturally, he was a lot more interested in the tales about the former than the latter, but he had to know every little detail to arrange one of his dramatic spectacles around unknowing extras.

This one's name was Laurelle, not that he ever intended to call her such; he liked to name his toys himself. She was one of seven daughters of some boring merchant selling carvings of marble, granite and other lifeless crap from overseas; strict and unforbearing man, not that he had not already found that out himself. Her body language, the way she conducted herself, they spoke more truths to him than any of these tavern folk could ever hope to know. He could read her like an open book and this one's spine was broken, figuratively speaking of course. Her posture was upright, seemingly unbroken but he could look past her dilettantish constructed facade. Yet he went out of his way to verify his suspicions with the simple folk, even though they could never tell him any of the *interesting* stuff.

Pride went before the fall.

This one, for example, was quite the secret keeper, naturally, something he would never discover digging only in the superficial chatter of strangers concerning his person of interest. The discovery of the covert was reserved for the observing, for they were not ignorant to the things hidden in the brilliance of daylight, or in this case in the cold blue of moonlight and warm oranges of lantern fire.

No one knew of her unrequited love. Even her overprotective father, let her wander upon this weathered pier, the place of her past and soon to be unravelling; waiting for this love of hers. She was waiting in vain, of course.

Not the first time a sailor's treat fell in love with her evanescent admirer, for he smelled so much of freedom, salt, rum, and distant lands. No one else knew, but he was certain and he would make her unbosom her pain, rebuild her as a captive in his shadow.

One man's trash was another man's treasure.

And this man knew exactly how to play the vulture.

He bought a bottle of rum; a beverage filled with the spirit of sailors and the open sea, one not too cheap but also not too precious. Good enough a poor man could afford it for an important occasion—an *emotionally* important occasion—but not too good to arouse suspicion. He wanted the character he was about to play to be convincing, charming, inconspicuous and as irresistibly relatable as possible.

Through the open door, cool evening air greeted him into a moonlit night. A delicate aroma from the kitchen downstairs sweetened the harbour atmosphere. An appropriate reception for tonight's star of the show, playing a forlorn sailor, or at least the most convincing stereotype thereof. Intently the sailor made for the pier; not too fast, he might reveal his predatory intent, but also not too slow. He dared not endanger his opportunity to orchestrate a first impression in his liking.

She had not yet noticed him, distracted by the moonlight dancing on the Scyllic Sea, when he appeared at her side with the bottle of spirit, a bag of sweets and three mugs in hand, for he was a wicked little man with a wicked little plan.



Yolanda loved the smell of food more than anything. It reminded her of the good in herself and the size of the world with all its curiosities she did not understand; she seemed small in comparison. A reassuring thought in this tiny kitchen. So very unlike the big wide world spread outside and the big wide woman cramped inside. The four walls were stacked to the ceiling with shelves filled with ingredients from the finest gardens, finest fields and finest ships from overseas—well, the finest Susan and her husband Eric, the owners of the *Old Man by the Sea*, could afford. Which was not a lot, but it was good enough and Yolanda loved preparing, whatever she could get her hands on, in this steamy, little kitchen. Even though she could scarcely turn in place, but through the vent, she could see the harbour. A lovely place of novelty, love, and adventure. A place Yolanda did not belong, but a sight she could admire more than any other cook before her, for they would have simply been too short to peek through the tiny window and notice the cobbled harbour streets, the rocking ships and the cute couple standing together on the pier looking at the moon floating in the sky like a weightless wheel of half-eaten cheese. She loved the view, but she also better made sure no one noticed her wild appearance peeking through the vent, so she retracted back into the steamy safety of her kitchen. On days like these, she wished she was normal. Or at least a tiny bit less *ugly*. With her apron, she cleaned

the fogged up mirror hanging on the shelf in the corner. It had cracked when she had dropped it once, startled by what her reflection. A close inspection of her daunting mane of copper and chestnut hair revealed her tiny horns were still safely hidden away underneath.

What a curious woman she was. Her towering appearance, reflected in the mirror, cramped into this tiny kitchen, her inquisitive eyes darting over the broken glass. She liked her button nose and the glimmer in her eyes when there was no sign of...*it*. And there were probably bald people somewhere willing to pay a fortune for hair like hers. But anything else she possessed was ugly, it was crude or sometimes possessed and frightened her. It reminded Yolanda of a captured beast she had once seen with a travelling circus. It had been a strange beast. Arms thick as trees, eyes black as the deepest sea, claws sharp as knives and an insatiable hunger too big for any cage.

Yolanda clenched her fist. Her meaty fingers trembled with the raw strength of several grown men. She was well capable of breaking down these puny walls restraining her, run into the open fields, away from the town where she did not belong. The distorted face in the broken reflection woke her from her unpleasant daydream with cowering eyes, sending an electric shudder down her spine. She was not *that*. She was better than *that*. For a moment she stood there, staring until the kitchen's scented fumes clouded the silver reflection anew, the unveiled unpleasantness repressed once more.

Yolanda despised the figure in the mirror. It was not her, only a glimpse of fear. A fear she only knew to displace with savoury smells and the warmth of food. Yolanda would never use her strength that way, the way the caged circus beast did. Never use her strength at all.

Because it was not the right thing to do.



A *myriad of changing colours.*

The gods show themselves in the tessellation of the elements.

Luffing of reefed sails. Sloshing of the tides. Trapped. In the middle of a transmutation circle traced on weathered wood. Rambling about refining the inner divine. Rambling about purpose. What a bunch of overbearing bullshit.

The eyes of the *Rainbow Serpent's* crew fixed on him. They thought him the bringer of truth. An Alchemist of the *Old Faith*. The bringer of sugarcoated horseshit. That's what he was. And he had run out of sugar. There was not enough left for another, final glaze. Only poisonous salt. In the harbour air. On his sun tanned skin. Encrusting his heart. He was ready for the salvation his tongue was so accustomed to promising. An empty promise. He had yet to see a word his tongue had given on behalf of the gods fulfilled.

When he looked upon the crowd, he saw a congregation of believers. When he looked within himself, he saw a man without faith. When he looked to the past, he saw a life wasted. When he looked to the future, he saw the black abyss. When he looked upon the sea, he saw the moon reflected in the water, the lanterns' images dancing on the waves.

A myriad of hollow colours.

They had served him well. He continued chewing on his leaf.

"Brother Adonai, what to do when one has seen a sign from one of them higher powers? How can one know what it means?"

Usually, he was great at answering questions. Questions reeking of meaning to hide the vacancy beneath. Giving them the vacant answers the deserved. Practising on himself, he had become competent at the most revered of the deviancies. Adonai the Liar. Not tonight though. Tonight was finally time for honesty. He had dedicated it as such. Then why did he not open his mouth, dignify this consecration?

He knew he should. For his own sake. He had to. Yet he did not.

"Because I've seen one of them magic black cats down in the *Old Man*. With an old hag. One of them witches maybe. T'was a sign I'm sure."

A black cat? A creature of sheer magic? Granting wishes to their masters at their heart's desire? The pinnacle of power? The deckhand must be mistaken. Drunk maybe. But what if he was not? What else could it be but a divine sign? No, he could not hold onto the gods. Not now. Not on this night of all things. He had struggled so long to find the courage. To make embrace salvation. He could not start holding onto empty promises again.

It is a sign of opportunity. Of the endless possibilities of life. The treasure hidden where our eyes dare not look. For it is where it darkest around and within ourselves.

He played the preacher part so well. The audience followed every word he uttered. When he had finally lost faith in the gods, they sent him a sign.

When he finally had decided to let go, he started holding on again.

He had to witness this cat for himself. A gift from the gods ripe for the taking. He had so many overdue favours to ask from the gods.

A black cat. *His* black cat.

The sea opened up again in front of his inner eye, possibilities reflecting upon its surface.

A myriad of blackened colours.



The scent of salt and sweat and rum heralded his entrance. Accentuated with a hint of black powder. A single note of danger in the symphony of his sailor disguise. Not an imitation of the familiar, but a calculated homage to an unknown perpetrator of heartache, whose seeds of carelessness had bloomed into magnificent carrion flowers, ready for the reaping.

"Beautiful."

She turned her head. For a short glimpse, she met him with her forlorn eyes before he lost her attention again, left only with her cold, tense shoulder. She had no interest in anyone but the one lost at sea. In the single moment he met her eyes, he knew his assumptions ratified. Compliments may be a safe route to many women's hearts, but this one's heart was sealed away on an isolated island, surrounded by treacherous reefs in an ocean of sorrow. No compliments would lead him there. Naturally, he was prepared with multiple contingency plans.

"Sea's beautiful tonight, ain't it?"

Her eyes still fixed on the sea, keeping the false promise afloat. The promise of a very singular man, no other man would do, or so she thought. He had yet to meet a man singular enough to not be replaceable by him, so he leaned next to her on the railing.

"How long's it been for you?"

She met his eyes longer this time, puzzled. Her tense shoulders eased subtly. The right perfume never disappoints; false familiarity successfully established. *Embark on feigning kinship.*

"How long's it been since the sea's taken 'em from you?"

The wound rupturing her heart laid open in the expression on her face. An unveiled secret he would make her confess. Unbosom every hurting scar, bit by painful bit. For him. And just for him. Though her quivering mouth had not uttered a word, her eyes were already crying to him of excruciating loss. Too much pain for a long bygone lover, a year at most. As he had predicted; young love was not made to last. What a man he must have been to leave such a wreck behind. It would be an honour to follow in his venomous footsteps.

"S'been a year for me. To the day. Was the best man I've ever known. The bastard, probably got himself killed. Told him not to go, he did not listen. Left me holding onto old memories and I dare not let go, lest he forgets me too—Wherever he be."

Silence.

Only the soft sloshing of waves.

"Sounds familiar. That sort never listens."

Her first response was absent, dry, though that mattered not. Where enough words were spoken, a thousand will yet follow. The bait was set. A few more words and the trap would spring. A few more steps and she would be his for the taking, but these few steps she had to make herself; he could speak no more. Should she refuse to do so, well, a perfectly good plan would go to waste, but there were plenty more fish in the sea.

"Been some time longer for me."

Blood of wine or blood of vinegar?

"What do you need a third cup for?"

She was hooked; plunder lay just ahead, oh, what an easy catch indeed.

"Dreams been buggin' me lately. Y'know the sort. Unpleasant kind. Don't think I've yet made peace with the old bastard being gone. Still hoping he'll

just appear on the doorstep any day; heart knows I'm not being true to myself. Feelin' miserable, but I know he would've always wanted for me to be happy, move on, especially when he be no more. Opened my mind. Need to face the truth, need to let go—but don't think I can do that on my own."

His eyes wandered from the distant horizon across her face. Tears were welling up in her eyes, where she once stood high and proud, she now seemed meek and tiny. Her left hand clawing in her right arm, trying to drown out her sorrow. She bit her lip as a soft, quivering sigh escaped her strained throat. He was almost impressed with himself. Almost. No need to jeopardize his well-earned finale with complacent carelessness. Though he allowed himself a moment of admiration for the calamity he had created, awaiting the orchestrated avalanche to pour her right into his dishonest embrace.

"I just miss her so much."

Not as much as you will miss me...Wait, Her? There was no her. His intuition had never failed him on this. There had been no gossip. He was *certain* she was *not* into girls. *Certain.*

"I know I'm supposed to be strong and strong people do not require help from the dead. And I really try, you know? I really do. I try my best to be strong, but sometimes I just want to be weak. And safe. And loved. And not alone. Sometimes I just want to see my mum again and tell her how much I love her and how much I miss her and that she should have never stepped on that godforsaken boat. And I want her to tell me that she loves me and that she is happy wherever she is and that she's proud of who I've become. And I want her to know that father has always loved her, even though he was never strong enough to admit it and that ever since she died, he has become a shadow of his former self. I want to tell her that we all miss her. Of the problems, I don't know how to solve. Because I know she would understand. Even though I know I can't. Even though I know I have to say *goodbye*, I just can't. She was the only one who ever listened, the only

one who ever made me smile when I was sad. With everyone else, I have to pretend to be strong. It makes me feel so weak. I just miss her so much."

Ooh, this was *exactly* why he should stick with the infamous and powerful, and keep the *fuck* away from disasters like this one. How in the devil's name did he miss a *dead mother*? These damned townspeople and their worthless fucking gossip about nothing—*nothing*—of importance. They were so goddamned clueless it hurt his fucking brain. It had all been going so well. He had been so close. So *goddamn* close.

Time to improvise. Perhaps this whole disaster was not yet entirely unsalvageable. *Concentrate!*

"So you're into girls then?"

"What?"

Was he *fucking* serious? *So you're into girls then?* He had just butchered any possible chance he might have had. All of this worthless applause and easy prey was getting to his head. And why the fuck was she smiling so stupidly?

"Only if you're also into guys. You already seem to hold a man quite dear to your heart. Would be a shame, really. I think you're actually kind of cute. In a weird way. That's good. And also funny as it turns out."

She wiped the tears off her face.

"I have to admit, no one has yet tried the dead-mother-pick-up-line. Not to mention managed to make me cry so much from grief and laughter at the same time. You must be mighty pleased with yourself. Gods, does it feel good to finally have that off my chest. Thank you for that. Though, you're not yet all out of the woods. Still haven't really answered my question: what do you need a third cup for?"

What...was going on? Just a moment ago she had been paralysed with grief. And now she was *laughing*? It made no logical sense. Everything he had learned about the emotions he could not feel stood contrary to...*this*. But *this*, whatever it was, was his opportunity to strike. He could yet salvage the situation to his benefit. If he overthought it again now, he

might actually ruin it for good. He lucky bastard did not deserve this second chance. Who would have known this one would catch itself?

He looked up, meeting her smiling, tear-dimmed eyes. The pain was still there, washed up in her weird fit of joy. He only needed to tear the wound open anew. As he had done just a moment ago. He could do it again.

Her eyes sparkled as he tried opening his mouth.

It was too late. His opportunity had passed. She was healing. The wound was closing. He could not bury his grip in her chest any longer, not play with her heart threads like the twisted puppetmaster he was, not abandon her when she felt most intimate and safe and watch her wither away, drain her of every ounce of love and life not dedicated to him and him alone, and revel in every second of it. *That* opportunity had passed.

Was this...was *this* an opportunity to do something...*good*?

Whatever in the world that was supposed to mean. He never did anything *good*. He was sick. He was twisted. He liked making people suffer for his own delight. He was not *good*. He was the opposite of *good*. He knew *that*. He had always known *that*. Everybody, from where he was from, knew *that*. But he had left there a long time ago. As he had left every place he's ever been to, when people had started knowing *that*.

She didn't know *that*.

Could he be better? Could he be *good*? *Could a fish walk on land*? He was completely and utterly out of his depth. The fuck was *good* even supposed to mean?

"Wanted to fill it up and toss it into the sea."

Not too far off from what I had planned for you.

"The cup, I mean. As a symbolic gesture. The ones we used to share them with have left—letting go. Take one last sip. To the memories."

Of course, a fish couldn't walk on land. Then why the fuck was he trying anyway?

"That's actually not a half bad idea. I like it. No need to be shy about it. Even though I think it is kinda cute."

Cute. There she had said it again. He had once made a woman jump off the castle tower after he had *unravelled* her heart and with it all hope and meaning. He was not *cute*. He was a fish out of water. A sick, twisted fish. She had nothing she could give him. There were plenty more fish were he belonged. He had nothing he could give her. *You cannot help her*.

"To your mother."

"To your friend."

He took a small sip from the designated third cup and passed it to her. She took a considerably larger one, smiling, even with closed eyes and her face puckered by the spirit burning in her throat. He had never in his life seen a face more puzzling than hers; a confused collage of emotions. Was she was moving on? *How? Why?* This was not his creation. He had lost any and all control of the situation. She cried, she laughed, she hurt, not for him, but for her own sake. *You have no business here!*

"Begone, this swill of aching memories! May only the good remain."

She threw the half-full pitcher in a shallow arc into the sea. The *good*. He did not belong with the *good*.

"I already feel a little better, thank you. How are you holding up?"

Her mouth was smiling, but her eyes were still welling with sadness. He did not feel better. Not one bit. He felt confused. And emasculated. He was lusting for the honey he was promised. And yet he nodded. *You sorry fool*.

He did not belong here, with the *good*.

Yet, for some goddamn reason, he stayed. Sharing sweets. Listening to her stories. Taming her tears with his flute. *Being a fool*.

Despite his nature, he stayed with her, stayed with *Laurelle*.



Yolanda's mind had calmed again. The soothing mists of concocting meals had always been there for her when she most feared losing herself. They were always there, for her mind and body; a woman of her stature had to eat. A lot. On good days she hauled the wagon all the way from the market square to the *Old Man* without help from the horse Linda or the mule Joey. Not every day, of course; she took turns with the horse and mule. They had after all been born for this, so Yolanda only undertook the journey when they seemed tired. Stealing away another living being's purpose was a crime she dare not even think about. She could not imagine someone else taking away her reason for being, her meaning in life: she was born to cook. That's what her step-father had been telling her since childhood, and it was what she told herself. *If you learn to cook, girl, you can stay indoors all day and still be of use.* She was certainly gifted when it came to the art of spices, patience and she possessed an unfailing, predictive intuition when it came to identifying unusual pairings that yet yearned for each other. Like her combination of baked apple and roasted beef, or salt from the Scyllic Sea to anything sweet from the faraway provinces.

On her toes, she looked again through the kitchen vent onto the pier. The couple was still standing there at the pier. They seemed to have grown closer. A bag of the Scintilla Bread she had baked yesterday between them.

She could not help herself but smile.

Her hotpot was nearly cooked to perfection, it needed only a few more additions: the juice of a lemon she effortlessly squeezed with one hand, a pinch of pepper, a toe of garlic and a root of ginger—do not forget to take those two out again, when you serve the dish—a nice amount of salt and three leaves she bought from the foreign trading vessel laying anchored just outside her doorstep. *The Rainbow Serpent*. What a beautiful name for a ship. The thick leaves smelled of open prairie, honey, clay and sweet, sweet pepper. Rumour had it they harboured an alchemist from the provinces on board. No wonder their spices were so delightfully irresistible. She had never met a man of the *Old Faith*, though she would have loved to, it all sounded so interesting. If she had not been quite as big and horned and ugly as she was, perhaps her curiosity would have gotten the better of her. Yet here she was, in her kitchen like every night, telling herself it was best this way; for the sake of the world sake and her own. Cooking stew. Like every night. Though she never cooked the same dish twice and what a particular delicacy this one had become.

A single taste from the giant pot upon her fire melted on her tongue like ice on a fireplace. She could feel her fingertips tingling, the hairs on her neck rising...her horns aching. *No, please don't do this to me. I've been good!* The sound of boiling kettles, waves and creaking wood was overpowered by the drumming of her own heartbeat. *I've been so good!* Why were the gods tormenting her, again? Why was she the one predestined for such cruel punishments? She only wanted to cook, be left alone. Raging nausea turned her stomach upside down. Open prairie, honey, clay and sweet pepper on her tongue, the world was turning, her senses were failing her. She clutched the burning hot stove in her enormous hands. The kitchen had barely enough room for her to turn around, yet she was falling, turning, failing. The cast-iron oven creaked and moaned as she tried her best not to lose her balance, clinging to the searing hot iron as if her life depended upon it. Thick, maroon hair fell in hair face as she stared down

into the soup of her unmaking, clinging as hard as she could to the roaring hearth. The boiling stew blurred to a messy sea of colours before her very eyes. She could barely maintain her grip on the world threatening to sweep her away. In the sea of colours, there sank a crooked ship, a liar's queen fell for a man of every name, a brimstone sun, an evil man with a heart of salt. Everything turned upon its head and turned and turned. Evil men. So many evil men. Not as evil as the beast. Her mirror image in the boiling soup gazing back at her with rage-filled eyes. She had to hold on! Never let go! This fury was not her own! Her heart pounded a war drum to the battle she was losing. Those eyes...she could not allow herself to give in. Burning hot pain shot from her clenched hands up her arms. She had to hold on! The hateful grimace burned away to reveal a cat as black as night sitting on a windowsill. Fire. Fire! So much fire! Devouring everything. Engulfing all.

Yolanda's eyes burnt with rage once more.



My Queen, my sun, I bring tidings of great importance.
He knelt before the bejewelled Queen of the *Rainbow Serpent*.
Even though he had nothing but the black cat on his mind.
And how to seize it for himself. He owed her this one last debt.

"I dare not imagine you carry within your heart a declaration of premature departure, Brother Adonai. The sheer thought fills my heart with dread too unholy for words and my dreams with terrors too maleficent for even the sharpest blade. Spiteful tongues have carried these foul whispers of unseemly rumours to my unbelieving ears. I meant to seek your counsel on this matter. Do they speak true? My heart knows you would not leave my side, yet I withhold rightful punishment for such disrespect. A tongue cut is not a tongue easily regrown and there burns but a flicker of doubt. "

She was a beautiful woman. There was never a day he doubted that. Dressed in fine silks. Weaving mesmerizing tapestries of the foreign language his tongue had yet to get used to. All the beautiful words he knew he had learned from her. At least copied from her. One required understanding in order to learn. The whispers were true though. Even to this very moment, he planned to leave. Only contemplating what route to take. She deserved his farewells after everything she had done for him. Though he was uncertain he could muster the courage of looking into her

almond eyes. Sometimes at all. But for certain when he meant 'goodbye'. He would let another deliver such unpleasant news.

But for now, he was still among the living. Kneeling before his Queen. Still holding on. And she deserved knowledge of the reason: *the black cat*. She need not know he wanted the cat only for himself and himself alone. And leave. Maybe she would understand. Most likely not. A few severed truthful tongues were a small price to pay for such a reward. Especially, when he was as willing to share the glory, as he was.

So he told her of the sighting of the black cat. Every one of the harbour folk, he had asked, had confirmed the story: a cat as black as night, with deep, orange eyes. The Queen was an intelligent woman. She knew the powers of trueborn black devils; he needed not to elaborate. He told her of the alchemical ingredients one could harvest from such a creature after it had outlived its purpose. The heart. The Liver. The claws. The ears. She was an intelligent woman. But not intelligent enough to also be versed in the ways of the *Old Faith*. He told her nothing of his plan to keep the cat for himself. She was an intelligent woman. But not intelligent enough to mistrust him. She would kill him, should she find out. As it was just.

But she trusted him. With half of her fighting men. For these spice traders knew how to fight and strike fear into the hearts of men wherever the name of their Queen was uttered. Twenty and three hands. Certainly enough, to achieve his cause. Hopefully not too many, to thwart him from keeping the cat for himself. The loyalty for the *Rainbow Serpent's* Queen ran deep. Even within him. Yet his treacherous heart pushed.

The dozen men under his command followed him to the *Old Man*. Soft moonlight shimmered on the town made of white, square houses. The harbour air was calm and sweet. A sign from the gods: his fortune was his for the taking. If he could find a way to pay his Queen back with his promised treasure. He would repay her a thousandfold. For the trust, he was about to betray. For the generosity, she had shown him. Be it with his severed head. If there was no other way. Though he would pay her another

day. Not today. Not in this singular night. Not before he had held the black cat in his very own hands.

He bit into another leaf. A soft release trickled up his spine. Accompanied by a scent of honey and sweet pepper. Who would have thought, that on this singular day his life could take such a turn? He had stepped onto the plank expecting a bitter fall, yet it had unmasked itself as a springboard into a colourful, new world.

"You are the Alchemist of the *Old Faith*? I need help with a question."

A young man, in the sorry disguise of a sailor, obstructed his path. Could the boy not see he was occupied? He was about to change his life. For the better. Forever. For Good. There was no time for the dumbfound questions of forsaken children with the smell of distilled spirits still on their breaths.

The gods need me elsewhere. Your girlfriend's waiting for you back there.

"That's what I wanted to ask about."

He would not let this horny brat deter him from his destiny. Though he could feel the scrutinizing eyes of his entourage. For them, tonight, he was still an alchemist of the *Old Faith*. He could endure it this one last night. The gods demanded this final test of him.

What then is your question, boy?

"What...what makes a man...good? Can he be good through only lies?"

Of all the ways the gods could have revealed them to him, of course, they settled for nothing short of mockery. Once again, the gods offered their infamous cruelty. He would not accept it this time. He would make them pay. The time of playing along with their wicked little games was coming to an end. He was about to rewrite the rules. *Your betrayal is justified, Adonai.* May the gods and this stupid boy be his witness.

A good man does not squander his life given. He is to seize the world's light, when he is needed, and to remain audience to deeds of greater men when he is not.

He played the preacher part so well. Tonight was finally the time for him to change the part he had been given. He was about to wield the quill himself. The ignorant boy and his teary-eyed girlfriend would witness him.

"No, no you don't understand. Not a word you just said made sense or was helpful in the slightest way! You are an Alchemists of the *Old Faith*, you know the transmutation of matter, how are your words of advice this vacant and immaterial?"

He did not like the tone in the boy's voice. Something about the kid made him uneasy. And frankly, he had grown sick of him. The boy wanted to do good? Fine, he could help him do just that.

Chain the rude boy, he insulted the gods on their night of splendour! The heretic will serve as a distraction to the common folk, for they are blind to the will of the gods, and he will not distract as any longer from our rightful cause.

The Queen's men were outlaws. Faithful outlaws, who obeyed his every selfish command. He ordered half of them to stay behind and restrain the annoying boy. His rowdy curses and screaming girlfriend already drew the attention of the common folk. The half-dozen men guarding them would secure that the tantrum lasted as long as possible. As long as needed. Only half a dozen left to follow him. Hopefully enough to achieve his cause, take the cat from the old woman and any men guarding her. Certainly few enough to give him a chance to make it out of his betrayal alive.

Alive. Holding on again. This strange, familiar feeling.

The six men followed him through the doors of the *Old Man by the Sea*. Against the tide of curious and frightened patrons flowing out. He bit into two more leaves; an electrifying tingle curling up his spine. He closed his eyes.

A myriad of colours, as far as he could reach.



W*hat horrors will I yet endure because of you, sweet kitty?*

The black cat was cleaning its shiny, black fur with its rugged tongue. Ramona deserved a fair amount of hygiene herself, though she dared not even think about leaving the cat without surveillance to take a bath; every single living soul desired this beautiful, powerful creature for themselves, but it had bestowed itself to her care, for better or for worse. She had to treasure the fragile little thing, protect it, even if it yielded nought. Such a duty left not much time for self-care. She could join the cat and lick herself clean. *What a stupid thought.* That was out of the question, beyond any doubt, reasonable or unreasonable. So was left sitting there, weary and dirty. She hated being weary and dirty but not enough to humiliate herself with the consideration of such silly thoughts. The cat and the troubles she had to endure for it slowly eroded composure. It was dreadful. What she would give for a nice, warm bath.

Whilst, the alluring sea, outside the window of the small room she was now renting, reflected the waxing moon so beautifully. Galleys, Shallops and Barques laid there anchored in the harbour, floating on the waves like magnificent walnut shells. She had dreamed of sailing the seas of the world on one of these ever since she had read her first pirate story as a little girl; utter tat of the low-brow variety, though she still held it dear to her heart to this very day. Put together with the cat, that now made two things she held

onto with all her might, even though she had every reason to leave them behind. They also were the two things which had driven her from her the safety of her home into the wild, to this harbour city and perhaps soon onto the rocking sea...where adventure awaited.

What a delightfully terrifying thought.

"Perhaps one of these beautiful ships will take us to a safe place far away or perhaps one will become our new home. What would you think of that?"

The cat was as quiet as ever. Unnervingly quiet and unbearably unhelpful. It just sat there, cleaning its paws, playing with her purse, looking at her with its deep, orange eyes.

"Be careful with that, will you? You magnificent disaster. Are you trying to hide my own purse from me *while* I am watching? Has your previous owner taught you no manners? I bet they are looking all over the world for you, not knowing you are hidden with my purse. If someone comes chasing after me in search of you, I will be very angry with you and you won't get treats for an entire week, do you hear me? But you are safe with me, I promise, I'll protect you. And I guess you are protecting my purse in return. Were you owned by a pirate king before? I imagine a pirate king could use a magic cat. Oh, that would make one delightfully terrifying adventure."

Giggling to herself like a little girl, high on the anticipation of future adventures, she extended her hand and the cat left its corner, eagerly accepting the offering of further belly rubs. Even though her journey had unfolded anything but orderly, she imagined there were few things easier than following them. Someone owning magic cats might as well own mundane dogs and she had not bathed in days and cultivated quite the scent under the dress she had not changed since she had departed from home. The cat had indeed eroded away some of her composure. It was delightfully naughty.

She lifted the cat to her face and whispered softly into its ear.

"The innkeeper is a stupid cow."

The black cat reciprocated her stifled giggling with delicate meowing and soft purring. Even though she travelled with a cat as black as night, she was definitely not a witch and the furry thing would definitely not make one out of her. But maybe it could bestow her the ability to deal with people. She thought of the dangerous bottle in her purse across the room. Or even better, make them disappear altogether. *Conjure forth sweet silence.*

A bloodcurdling scream ruptured the cool summer air.

"Leave him be! He did not do a thing to any of you!", a woman begged downstairs.

"He stand in the way of the gods!", a foreign tongue responded, "Better you go from the way. Or the men of the Queen take you away the same."

Ramona dared not look outside her window. She hated confrontation. If she showed no interest in the doings of misguided people, they would show no interest in her, so she told herself. Even though the clamour of the turmoil outside the *Old Man* grew louder, she feared to close the windows. *No one threw stones through empty windows.* Yes, that sounded reasonable. It had to be true. She just had to remain calm and quiet.

From the other side of her room, the sound of heavy steps on the stairs boomed through the door. If she remained motionless, no one could notice her presence, they could not find her. If only the cat shared her sentiment but it had climbed into the entablature, mustering the room with its deep, orange eyes from above, its tail swinging like a pendulum of impending doom. *Please, sweet kitty, be quiet, remain calm, please.*

A thumping knock against her door.

"Old woman with the cat. Open the door!"

Paralysis. Quiet as a mouse. Inanimate as a stone. And yet the pounding of her heart rocked her like a storm on raging waters.

The pirates have come for me.

Another, heavier thump against the door. And another. The primitive lock gave in with a cracking sound and the door crashed open, revealing seven shadows against the light of the corridor.

"Old woman, no need of fear."

The shortest of the shadowy figures stepped into her room, into the soft summer moonlight. He was not dressed like a pirate, but in the patchy, yet beautiful garments of an alchemist of the faraway provinces. A man of the *Old Faith*. Perhaps he had come to help her. Please. His bloodshot eyes darted around in the sparsely furnished room. The cat under the roof met his inquiring stare for a brief moment before he dedicated his full attention to her, visually pleased with how the situation was unfolding this far.

Please.

"We come for the cat. But the cat is not in here. Old woman, tell of the hiding place you put the cat. Or the men of the Queen search every room and every cupboard and every cup in every cupboard in this house. And the men find the cat. And the men bring the cat and you to the Queen. Who is not fond of the waiting. It is painful to the Queen. Old woman, do not pain the Queen of the *Rainbow Serpent*. Or witness her justice."

He stooped to her level, poignant spices deviling his breath. Still paralyzed, she gasped for breath as he laid a calloused hand around her skinny neck.

"Squeak. I mean speak."

Not a word left her frightened lips. Paralyzed. Suffocating. Confused. Afraid. *So very Afraid.*

"This one know not the words of men. Her silence tell us nothing. The cat must be on the escape. Search the rooms! Find it! The Queen demand it!"

The supposed alchemist's entourage left the three of them alone, dispersing to the other rooms in search of the black ball of fur hiding in the wooden firmament. Loosening his asphyxiating grip around her aching neck, the intruder looked up at the black cat with teary eyes. It still occupied the same wooden beam it had during his staged interrogation.

"Do you know of pain? I know it too well. I want an end to pain. My pain. And I do not want to cause unnecessary pain to you. But you run. I break your leg. You scream. I break...your other leg. Or something different. I am

sorry if I do not the thing I threaten. This is not the tongue of my mother. Just do not get in my way. And I do not hurt you. Understood?"

She managed an impalpable nod and he released her from his grip.

"I advise travel with better protection next time. I steal your cat. Unharmed. Unbroken. There is no glory in this. No Honour. Bad luck I do not seek glory or honour. I seek my salvation. Sitting there. Look at it. I trust not to believe my heart. Yet my eyes show me fur as black as night. *My own myriad of colours.*"

He stared into the night and the night hissed back at him, two deep, orange gemstones glowing in the dark. All moonlight had vanished from the little room. Clouds of darkness crawled through the open window and the broken door. There was nought but night and silence and two orange eyes burning like fiery coals in the dark. A soft wind of honey and sweet pepper stroked her cheeks.

"Come here, soft catty."

The alchemist extended his hands into the darkness and the darkness presented him with a hissing cat as black as night in his grip and a shadowy, horned figure, towering over him, its silhouette shimmering, wavering against the night, slowly manifesting from a blackened cloud of scented smoke.

"Give. More."

The creature's rumbling voice echoed through the darkness.

"Give. Me. More."

It sounded strained, coarse, desperate, angry.

"I. Want. More"

With rattling breath, it grabbed the tiny man with its enormous hands.

"You. Reek. Of. More."

He let out a tortured scream as the creature squeezed him in its mighty paws, the cat wrenching from his loosened grip and jumping hissing onto the intruder's pain-wracked face. The iron smell of blood mixed with the faint scent of honey and sweet pepper into a foul amalgam.

Ramona choked, nausea clouded her mind and unbelieving eyes. Quiet as a mouse. Inanimate as a stone. She bit her hand. She could not scream. She *must* not scream. Through the thickened darkness the screaming exasperated with the cracking sound of ribs breaking under the pressure of monstrous hands. The cat clawed at the intruder's face, ripening the air with the stench of blood. Scattered droplets hit Ramona's hands and face, but she managed her urge to scream. Something hard and round hit her square in the head. Was that...was that a *human eyeball*? The last thread of composure she had maintained, held onto, dismantled, unwound, lacerated the night with her terrified and helpless scream. The shadowy figure dropped the man in its paws, who landed with a frightening *thump* in the wooden floor.

"You. Reek. Of. Fear."

It turned its mighty form towards her. Damn her fear, damn her frailty, all be damned! *She was no witch, someone get her out of here. Please.*

"Give. Me. More."

With the first step the horned beast took, the walls converged around her. *Stomp*. Quiet as a mouse. Inanimate as a stone. Maybe the creature would just walk by, ignore her. *Stomp*. Quiet as a mouse. Inanimate as a stone. Why had she ever left her home? The bottle in her purse was so far away. *Stomp*. *Quiet as a mouse. Inanimate as a stone*. Someone help her! Anyone help her! **STOMP**. Agonizing pain shot up her left leg as the shadowy beast buried under its mighty heel, crushing it with a horrifying crack.

Trapped like a mouse. Helpless as a stone.

"Give. More."

Shadowy hands grasping at her, a long, guttural snarl from the black cat on the windowsill. Two deep, orange coals in the darkness flickered against the sombre night. The creature's giant paw recoiled from her face as the scent of blood and honey and pepper made way for the stench of smouldering wood. Fiery flames unfurled from the cat's soot-black fur, licking at the walls, dancing to the ceiling, reaching for the horned creature,

making it wince in fear. From the midst of an unkempt mess of rusty hair, two hateful eyes of black and blood stared into the flames, terrified.

The creature's spine-crawling roar overpowered the cat's dreadful snarling, as it flinched further and further from the blazing embers, its vitriolic eyes fixed on the cat engulfed in flames. With its mighty pranks, it threw impotent punches at the cat hissing on the windowsill, but to no avail. It could not reach the cat where the flames could not reach it first. The fire crept further and further along the roof and down the walls, having nearly reached the floor, only increasing in intensity with each passing moment. The entire room trembled when the horned beast bellowed a second time, so loud, all sensation was drowned out but the gorging wave of quaking sound. The cat shrieked and jumped, startled by the overwhelming wall of sound and hateful shadow, from the windowsill and vanished in the turmoil of people outside on the harbour square. Surrounded by spitting flames, the horned creature let out a third, tortured roar, before it recoiled from the flames through the broken door, splintering the frame on its heedless way out.

Ramona coughed as she inhaled the thick smoke building up under the ceiling. Her leg throbbed, yet there was no pain, only the burning need to survive. She pulled herself across the floor towards the shattered door. There was no time to think about what she had just witnessed. No time to give the fear a chance to consume her from within. She had been afraid her entire life. She did not want to die afraid. When she crawled past the motionless body of her initial captor, his mutilated face gazed back at her. Deep scratches running along his cheeks, parts of his nose scattered around the room and where his eyes once were, only gaping holes stared right back at here. Unprecedented nausea overwhelmed her senses and sent bitter convulsions through her crippled form.

When the sight returned to her, she was still laying there beside the worst men she had ever known and yet she could not turn away from his pitiful, disfigured appearance. Despite the sight of his mutilated face burning in