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| The black Cat  On the Windowsill |

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| Chapter i The Old Man by the Sea |

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he 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 thane 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?"

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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.

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olanda 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 cowing 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 unpleasantry 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 displaced 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.*

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| salt |

*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.*

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he 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.*

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olanda'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.

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*M*

*y 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 this foreign language his tongue had not yet gotten 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 eyes. Beautiful eyes. Blue and calm like frozen lakes. Sometimes he could not muster the courage to look into them at all. For certain now that he meant 'goodbye'. He would let another deliver such unpleasant news.

But for now, he was still among the living. Among her crew. Kneeling before his Queen. Still holding on. And she deserved knowledge of why he did: *the black cat.* She need not know he wanted the cat only for himself and himself alone. Take it for himself and leave. Maybe she would understand. Most likely not. She was too pure and serene to understand such wicked thoughts. And so he lied to his Queen. Exposing the truthful tongues whispering of his departure as the liars they were 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 of the magic 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 as 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 as to mistrust him. She would surely have his head, 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 his plans to keep the cat for himself. The loyalty for the *Rainbow Serpent's* Queen ran deep. Even within his heart. Yet his treacherous mind pushed on.

*A myriad of colours.*

The dozen men under his command followed him to the *Old Man.* Soft moonlight shimmered on the town made of white, square houses. The silhouettes of mountains in the distance. Hills adorned with ancient willow trees. Steep cliffs to the seaside.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 into 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.*

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*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 heir 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 innkeep 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 rips 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 her eyes, the aching around her neck burning in her memories, and the stench of her vomit on his filthy robes burning in her nose.

She took a deep breath of smoky air, grabbed the alchemist by his collar and screamed at the top of her lungs as she used her shattered leg to drag the additional weight across the smouldering floor. Through fire engulfing the room around her, despite the throbbing in her fractured leg, against the smoke stinging in her eyes, in spite of the cramping in her meek little arms, in defiance of the burning in her throat, she pushed on through the horrors. With her free hand she grabbed the purse hidden away in the corner. The bottle inside lay cool in her grip as the fire raged around her. She knew what was inside could very well kill her, but it was her only chance and she was not done yet with this world; this creature would not be the end of her. The air started circling, howling around her as she smashed the bottle on the floor. Within the tiny confines of the room in flames, a miniature storm brew with a dizzying ferocity, keeping the fire at bay, feeding it to unseen heights with its rampaging winds. The spirit trapped inside the shattered bottle howled, as cold as ice, as he escaped. *Take me faraway, oh haunted soul.* The winds tore at her with deafening might, the raging spirit lifting her and the mutilated Alchemist into the air. *I broke your prison, do not break my spine.* With a tortured screams, the burning room vanished before her very eyes as the spirit banished her from the smoke, a faint mountain range in the distance. Despite these fickle magic beasts, this was not the day she died.

She had yet to *bloody* step on a *godforsaken* boat.

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| Chapter ii The Whirling Crossroads |

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he *Rainbow Serpent* had put out to the Scyllic Sea.

Cramped into a tiny cage of rusted iron, drenched by caustic sea water, his fingers trembling, his stomach rumbling and cramping. With a soft *clank,* the lock on his cage opened but slipped through his gaunt hands and fell to the floor. The banging of rusted iron on sodden wood echoed through the ship's hold. He snatched the heavy metal lock through the bars of his cage with his bound hands and fumbled to reattach it whence it had just fallen. Heavy steps in the darkness outside his cage; faint lantern light creeping into his world; a soft *click* as he fiddled the lock to a close. Just in time as a meaty hand lifted the thick cloth covering his prison and revealed a fat face illuminated by flickering lantern light.

"Whatcha doin' all this noise for? Haven't ya been told to be dead silent? Ya was so well behaved. A man's tired and trying to get some rest over here. Don't force me to shut ya up, boy. *Hush.*"

The light burned in his eyes and the man's stench burned in his nose, but he kept his composure and played the part of the dumb prisoner.

"Y…yes, Sir. I just banged me hand. Believed there were some thing. Mayhaps a rat. Promise to make no sound no more, Sir."

The fat man got some sick pleasure from getting called *Sir,* his eyes twinkled every time he was addressed as such. Every single time he uttered it, the word crept across his tongue like bitter poison. He felt no respect for the fat man, nothing but distilled hatred; for him and his entire goddamned crew. Especially for the fucking Alchemist, whose face burned whenever he closed his eyes, ready to be cut and choked.

"Well then, we have an agreement. Ya be quiet and perhaps y'earn yourself some chicken once more. And ya best be quiet when the Queen eventually speaks to ya, eh. She’s not as lenient as I. She'll might have yer tongue if ya make the wrong noise."

"Aye, Sir. You need not worry 'bout me, Sir. The Queen need not worry the same. There's no need for her to hurry herself for me. I am just content with sitting in this cage and swatting them rats."

"Yes, yes, ya've said that already. Don't mistake me for one who doesn't know how to use 'em ears. Well, I did bring them words to our Queen but she didn't like hearing 'em, though. I think. Yer an odd fellow, ya know that? Sitting content in yer cage. Swatting rats, as you say. We normally don't let 'em passengers wait so long to meet the Queen. Normally they beg and plea and wanna see her as soon as they arrive, and we let 'em rot a bit. Ya've rotted enough though, boy. She's finally ready to meet ya, so be quiet and behave when she graces ya with her presence. She wants to see the man fallen in love with 'em cage of his."

"Aye, Sir.“

"'*Hehe.* 'Haps I’ll leave ya some chicken again later. Now *hush.*"

Oh, the thought had to torture the Queen of the *Rainbow Serpent;* someone not dying to meet her and a prisoner at that. She had to be intrigued at least a little bit by this strange stranger—or be fuming at the mouth ready to crush this little, disrespectful maggot. He had bet his freedom—his life—for it to not be the latter. He had bet his life on the assumption, that he had not blundered into the workings of a madwoman, this all seemed way too deliberate and sophisticated; the way he the crew talked about their Queen, the way they followed her, defended her honour, served her. She not only demanded to be obeyed, but demanded to be loved. A command seemingly as easily obeyed by her crew as a command to breath. Everyone, on and under deck, he had observed from the confines of his cage, seemed to have fallen for her at least a tiny bit. Hell, she was a captain of a ship and they called her *Queen.* Everyone on this godforsaken ship—except for him. He had bet on swimming against the tide to give him a way out of this imprisonment…hopefully not into an early, watery grave. But the game the Queen was playing seemed so obvious to him from within these rusty iron bars. A game he was ready to participate in, but not as the pawn he had been designated to be. With the measly wager of his life. *Win, or die.*

Soothing darkness embraced him again as the thick cloth fell over his cage and the fat man stomped back to his post; the memory of bright lantern light still burning a little in his eyes. Stale and filthy seawater stood to his ankles and drenched him to the bone. Every wave crashing against the encrusted hull rattled his rusty cage, rattled his bones in his gaunt limbs. This dirty, tiny cell offered more discomfort than actual living space. No one could inflict such torture upon it and hope to emerge from the whole ordeal unscathed. He would have his vengeance for this. On the crew. On the Queen. And on the goddamn fucking Alchemist. That's what he got for trying to be a good person. Days and night of *this.* Days and nights inside a damp cage, starved and bruised. *Good guys finish last.* What a fucking joke. *Good guys finish their meals in thirty seconds, for they have nothing to swallow but dried bread and cockroaches*. 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.

His stomach rumbled again. He felt like giving up, surrendering his dignity for a decent meal, but that way lay only subjugation and captivity. To regain his freedom he had to endure this; endure this, to earn his honey. This time he would take what was rightfully his and not surrender to false promises of *hope*. The last honey he had bought with suffering was still due, 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*. He had wagered too much on this. Only cold anticipation. 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.

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T

he Scyllic Sea had taken someone from her again.

This time not with crashing waves but with evil men, yet the sea had brought them all the same and then swallowed them whole; right before her very eyes and nothing she had done was enough to stop them. This blue-grey beast of drowning waves with teeth of shells; frothing salt when it crashed upon the land; hiding black gorges ready to digest all and anything. There were dozens and dozens, probably hundreds of books stashed away in her father's library, detailing the failed attempts of man to tame this ferocious waters. Yet she understood—now clearer than ever—why man had not run off into the mountains aeons ago, far away from this ravenous beast. Fear and despair would take her nowhere; nowhere it was safe. After all, she was not afraid of the sea. She was irate, a hot desire for vengeance boiled within her heart, for the sea had now a face: the face of a deranged Alchemist, who had abducted her friend, her date, and a cute one at that. A face of fragile flesh and bone that reflected in the waves and she was ready to ruin it with some punches.

"He didn't even leave me with his name, just an empty bottle and a stupid bag of candy. Bunch of bastards. All of them."

The black cat on the windowsill licked its tiny paws. It always sat there, ever since the morning it had first appeared there. The morning after the night everything had gone to shits. The thing had arrived with the storm and rain, sitting there before her closed window on the windowsill. She was angry not heartless, so she had left it in and now the furry thing ate her food and left hairs all over her bed and sat on its place on the windowsill. Everyone knew that witches commanded the magical powers of black cats, but she doubted that she was now one of them. The cat listened not to a word she said, not to mention had it shown any sign of magical ability. And by the gods, she had tried to get the cat to do something, anything, listen to her, follow her command to hunt down teh Alchemist and claw at his face, but to no avail. The cat was as wayward as any other cat. Which anything but soothed her burning desire to punch something. Punch the sea. But she commanded not over magic and witchcraft, only over her fists and they were small, especially compared to the vastness of the ocean.

She wanted to mark the world with a single strike. She was here. *Alive.* Alive and angry. The cat obviously did not care about her struggles, only ever wanting to be fed and petted, but not for too long. She would find a way to get her revenge. Maybe scream. Scream at the sea. *So helpless.*

Her siblings did not understand. They said mother was dead and that they had come to peace with it, or they said they never really cared for her, or they cried when she brought up mum or they were off somewhere else, doing business or whatever—not caring. Her father was even angrier than her, but he was not angry at the right thing; he was angry with her, for being near the *Old Man.* Trying to *protect* her. *She could have gotten hurt.* She *had* gotten hurt. But not in a way he cared for, not in a way he even noticed. Otherwise he would not scream at her the way he did, burying the knife deeper within her heart, twisting and tearing. She could not stay here. It made her weak. She hated being weak. She wanted to be strong. She wanted to be a witch. She wanted to punch the sea. She grabbed the bag of sweets and made for the door. The black cat followed.

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

Her father screamed after her, as she left the villa; screamed after her, as she slammed the door shut; screamed after her, as the first raindrops hit her cheeks; screamed after her, as she walked past the marble statues. Her father screamed after her, as he always did, when he was afraid. He screamed after her, for he was just as weak as her.

Today was not the day to scream back.

Today was the day to remain silent—and leave…and eventually return, but not before her temper had cooled, not before she had released her anger. Not before she had punched the sea. She had sat idle for far too long. Days, days of doing nothing, feeling helpless. Rage had been building up within her chest and now she could rein it in no more. She slammed the garden gate shut, her father screaming after her. And the black cat followed.

From the hill the villa was built on, she could see the waves glistening through the mist. Waving, wavering, without regard for the pain they’ve caused. She could punch the sea a thousand million times, but she knew the water would not care, and yet she clenched her fist as she trotted down the winding alleys towards the harbour. Something had to give. Something had to break to make things right. Be it impotent blows against the waves.

Heavy raindrops coated the empty streets, flowing down in serpentine currents. Thick mist crawled from the harbourside through the alleys. Faint thunder rolled over the mountain tops and the cold wind cut on her skin like a frozen knife.

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

She was no lady. She hated when her father's men called her that. She knew they only called her such for her father paid them well to to so and to do his bidding like trained hounds. And they would try their best to find her, in the city, at the beach, down by the harbour. She just wanted to be alone. She looked up to the hills, the mountains adorning the horizon.

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

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B

right lightning illuminated the cargo hold.

The slim silhouette of the Queen of the *Rainbow Serpent* was set against the orange of lantern light and the sun setting behind thick, black clouds. Her slender arms jingled and rang with golden rings and bejewelled chains. Her silk dress seemed almost invisible in the faint evening light. She waited out the rolling thunder before raising her voice.

"Now where is this maverick guest of ours? Herald your Queen has arrived and offers him audience. She demands to know his name and purpose. Furthermore, bring some light and exorcise this darkness. It is unbefitting of your Queen."

*…one could not marvel at her glamorous garments and beauty in darkness.*

"The Queen has arrived to see you, prisoner. Present yourself!"

Oh, you sweet, sweet dimwit, that was not what she had said at all. She merely made me the offer to beg for her presence. He would not beg for her, quite to the contrary and this meathead was just the useful idiot he need to undermine even last bit of miniscule power she held over him. She had come this far. *To see the man in love with his cage.* The most degrading role he had ever played but it had worked out for him this far. He had made her come this far to see him—she had not let him be dragged to her quarters—he would make her take these last few steps for him, as well.

"I suppose. If she cares this much for me."

"She sure does. You think she's here to—"

"*Out!* All of you! Your Queen demands it! This quandary requires four eyes and no more! You will return to your posts and fulfil your duties. Your Queen will punish this fool herself. *Out!*"

The confused crew of the *Rainbow Serpent* scattered through the hatch to their posts on deck. Anxious whistling chimed from above from the sailor's, at least from the ones still in possession of their tongues. Things were about to turn bad and they had no interest in getting their necks caught in someone else's noose. They were not wrong in their suspicion: things were about to turn bad, but not for the prisoner, oh no, to the contrary. The hatch shut after the last crew member; the crashing of the waves against the hull drowning out the raging of the storm outside again. Only the flickering light of lanterns, torches, and the Queen remained. This was his time to rise.

"Who are you, prisoner?"

The Queen approached his little, rusty prison. Lifting her silken dress to protect it from the filth swimming across the floor in one hand, wielding a slender blade in the other, its keen edge glinting in the lantern light.

"And how dare you address me in ways so very unbefitting of your Queen? I should skewer you right this very moment with my own hands for your indecencies."

"*Indecencies?* Oh, you clearly have not even the slightest grasp of my potential for true indecency. But of all things, curiosity about other people is nothing to be ashamed of, you know? But then again, you seem to have already made up your mind about it qualifying not only as *indecent* but as an offence worthy of capital punishment. I'd be worried, would I not remain unskewered so far."

"You watch your tongue, prisoner. Loose tongues tend to fall prey to freewheeling blades. They told me you could barely construct a sentence from start to finish and now I witness this eloquence from a farm boy gathered off the streets. What vile games are you playing, boy? And what do you know of my Alchemist and his whereabouts? *Who* are you?"

"These are a lot of questions for a Queen devoid of curiosity. Is it true that your Grace is married to the sea?"

"*I* am the one posing the questions.“

"So it is true. Shame really. It's been going so well between us two this far, wouldn't you agree?"

"You truly elected *these* to be your last words?"

She took a step towards him, the sharp point of the blade glistening in her hand. He could not let his arrogance get the better of him, not again. This time had to show restraint. His life depended upon it. He looked into her eyes, 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. With eyes of someone who commanded respect wherever they went. Cruel eyes. Lonely eyes. *Untouchable*. He would forge himself anew, just for her; transform himself into a weapon. A weapon to rival her beauty. A weapon even deadlier than the slender blade glistening in the candlelight. A weapon to *touch* her.

"My time has not yet come, your Grace."

"I fear you lay mistaken there, prisoner."

"One of us certainly is."

With a rattling bang, he kicked open the door of his cage, 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.

"What do you say we quench your curiosity about my person and my thirst? Appease this unnecessary fight and my hunger, over dinner?"

"Who let you out of your cell? *Who…are you?*"

"Just someone who doesn't wish to be skewered on an empty stomach. If I must sully this fine dress of yours with my blood, the least thing I can do to honour it, is burst and not simply deflate."

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W

aves were crashing beneath, her feet dangling over the edge.

Wet droplets of salt on her face. She shivered, drenched in rain and seawater; clouds pouring from above, waves exploding down below. The cat meowed behind her. It sat far, far away from the cliff, where the willows warded it from the rain. A flash of lightning in the distance over the ocean. When the thunder finally rolled over the shore, she had already given up counting. Everything was so far away; the storm, the sea, her warm bed, a single soul she could talk to.

Her clenched fist buried not even half an inch deep in the muddy dirt beside her. Even if she could reach the water down below from up here, what could she even do? Throw impotent punches against the waves? If only she was strong, perhaps then, things would be different. If she were a witch, perhaps she could simply summon a a giant hand and slap a whale or something…she had no ideas what powers witches truly commanded, but it didn't matter anyway. She was no witch. She would always be weak. Storm and rain had washed away her anger and now there was nothing left but frustrating helplessness.

She pressed her fist deeper into the dirt, at least she tried to, with all her might. She hated being weak. In a high arc, one of her shoes flew into the pressing rain as she kicked the air in front of her. It fell into the waves, somewhere in the swirling mist. Next, flew a clump of moss she ripped out with her helpless fist. She kicked her other leg as hard as she could, but the leftover shoe refused not follow. It clung to her foot, even when she kicked again, harder this time. She felt even weaker than before.

She took a shallow breath and let out a harrowing scream against the raging storm. Even her scream was meek and feeble.

*I hate being weak.*

The air smelled of damp moss, wet leaves, rain, rot, earth, honey, and sweet pepper. Waves crashed against the cliffs below and sprayed their watery innards on her feet. The cat hissed somewhere in the briarwood.

"Give. 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. Me. More."

From the undergrowth, a hulking, towering creature emerged and approached the cliff. It limped on one leg, a crust of blood on its chin, arms, and bullhorns 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 a willow branch, its back arched in a frightened arch. The horned beast flinched at the sight of the black ball of fur in the treetop.

"I…I don't have anything."

"Give. More."

Laurelle slowly rose to her feet, cornered between the wheezing creature and the frothing cliff. Sparks jumped from the fur of the black cat, only to immediately extinguish in the heavy rain.

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

The horned beast took a step closer, its foul breath stank of honey and sweet pepper. It was clearly not interested 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. 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 life. The second time the horned beast crashed into the tree, moist dirt exploded from the ground, as the willow was nearly uprooted by the impact. The cat jumped into the thicket and 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 legs wanted to run, but she was frozen in place, paralyzed by fear and blank astonishment.

"I have…some…I have something to eat. Is that…*more?*"

She dared not think about what these enormous hands might do with her spine when it was so thin and small. The hateful eyes turned from the wooden corpse of the tree to her. The rumbling thunder drowned out by the pounding of her heart. She presented the soggy bag of sweets she had been gifted that night on the pier and threw it to the monster's feet. The hateful eyes stared at the small thing. In comparison to its enormous form, it was barely noticeable. Laurelle was still frozen in place. There was a strange beauty about the horned creature. Such magnificent strength. It extended one of its mighty hands 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. This was her opportunity to run, run into the mountains. Frozen in place, in awe of the horned beast.

"*Mmmmhhh*…Scintilla Bread."

The creature's eyes opened, devoid of hate and full of questions.

"Who're you? My name's Yolanda. What ha—*aah*…"

Thunder rolled over the cliffs and brought the horned woman to her knees, screaming, crying.

"*No*…gods, please no! I've been so good. Take it back, *please*…*take it back.*"

The horned woman quaked on her knees, sobbing, begging.

"*Take it back*…I've never asked for this. *Please.* Take back this curse!"

"Everything's alright, love, it was only a tree. The gods will forgive you. We all get angry sometimes. It's not like you ripped a person in half."

The horned woman answered with a tortured cry.

"I'm sorry, those were not the right words, just…bare with me, love, I'm sure I'll find something right to say. Yolanda, was it? Cry it out, Yolanda, things are going to turn out alright."

"Please…*please* leave me be. Don't look at me! I'm a monster. I can't take it back. *Please*…let me take it back."

"You're not a monster, love. Come, look at me. It's going to be fine. I've seen monsters and you're nothing like them. Well, you're mighty strong but…"

"I'm a monster. Monsters are ugly."

"What? No! You're not ugly. You should see some of the busts my father is buying with *actual* money. Those are ugly. And people are buying them for even more actual—mounts of actual—money. Here, have another of those biscuits, well, what's left of them anyways. Look at me, love. I am sodden and dirty and I've only one shoe. Do I look pretty to you, love? It's not as bad as you think, Yolanda. Things are going to be fine."

"I…I'm a monster. I hurt people."

Laurelle hesitated. These arms could crush her within their grasp, no doubt about that. Her pity might yet kill her. There was still time to simply turn tail and run, save at least her own life, leave the horned woman in the pouring rain.

"Look at me, love."

The big, horned head peeped out from the shelter of enormous, hairy hands, with eyes blue and teary and devoid of hate. Laurelle took a step towards the horned women cowering before her feet. Even now Laurelle seemed small, insignificant next to the cowering Yolanda. She laid a tiny hand on a massive, sobbing shoulder.

"It's going to be alright, love. Here, let me help you. Is your leg hurt, love? You were limping. Let's go somewhere less wet and dirty; dry those tears."

Somehow, she helped Yolanda to her feet, who dwarfed her by at least two feet. From horns to toes she might have towered over small trees, even though she walked so hunched over, scared, trying to hide her sight from the world. Somehow, she supported her away from the cliff, into the woods, to a cave where they were safe from the storm. Yolanda sagged to the ground, leaning against the cave wall. The rain was still pouring, but safe from the pond occupying one half of the cave, it was safe and dry in here.

"Thank you."

"I'm just happy I could help you, love. I—did you hear something?"

Yolanda listened but there was nothing but the patter of rain.

"I thought I heard someone calling for me. Best we hide, love. Don't want my father's men finding us here."

They moved deeper into the cave. From the distant safety of a willow tree, the black cat watched them, with deep orange eyes. It was freezing cold and someone called again from underneath the surface.

Yolanda prayed to the gods. She never—ever—wanted to hurt this woman.

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omething 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 imagined death to be without 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 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 smell 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? Probably. She was an intelligent woman. And he knew she could not forgive him. Even if she wanted. He wondered if she did. He certainly deserved no forgiveness. Yet he feared she might carry it within her heart. Despite this, she would still deliver justice unto him. What admirable strength. And he did not even manage to claim the cat for himself. Her anger would strike him swift and hard. Her disappointment even swifter and harder. He managed to raise himself from the ground. Merciful justice seemed a much better death than to be drowned in the rain. Everything still hurt. And everything was still black. But that was fine. Justice was just as blind and 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 eyes 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. A aching tremor in his chest. He took another painful step. And felt vindicated. *There was a reason.* 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 just. It was fair. 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 path. 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. There was no sugar left. No sugar left to give. *Didn't you listen?* The echo in his hurting head. He turned around.

*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.*"

He tried locating the Squeak in the void. 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 hard than the first one. His lungs were empty. His chest was screaming. He lied there. Wincing.

"There…there is…don't walk into the holes. There is another one right there. 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 not 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. I promise. 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?*

"I see…I see a grove. Follow…follow my voice. I might find shelter there. 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 chest. 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. The raindrops dwindled in numbers when the sound of them on foliage grew prominent. The scent of summer rain drove the stench of smoke and blood and vomit away. He dropped to his knees. Carefully. His chest nearly burst.

"*Thank you.*"

The words echoed in his head.

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olanda's horns were aching.

There, outside of the cave, the storm was still raging with its heart's content. Here, in inside the cave, Yolanda was giving her best not to do the same. She gave her best not to let the monster lurking under the surface show. Raindrops crackled in the willow crowns. Thick, singed hairs on Yolanda's skin stood valiantly against the wind. Through the crackling, there was a crack, as a tree snapped somewhere in the wind. The woman to her side shivered in the cold. She was pretty. She was. Even sodden and dirty and with only one shoe. So very unlike Yolanda. The woman was so much smaller, so much less hairy, so much more fragile. She could easily rest her petite head in Yolanda's hand…and Yolanda would need no more than one hand to crush her pretty little skull. No. *No!* Take it back! Take back the thoughts! *Take back the hurt you've caused.* Yolanda flinched away from the woman shivering the in the cold.

"What's the problem, love? Still seeing monsters? Don't you worry, you might have crippled a tree, but its kind won't come to get you. You're safe here. Here, maybe the…bread, I forgot what it was called will help. Glad to see you're already doing much better, love. Mind if I cuddle a little closer? I can already feel how I'm getting a cold and you are just steaming hot."

She winked at her. Look. *Look!* Look how sweet she smiles. Why would you ever want to crush her skull? Stay away. *Stay away!* But Laurelle had already snuggled up next to her, a hand extended with a bag of soggy Scintilla Bread and a smile on her face.

"You…you're you not afraid?"

"I mean…yes, a little bit. Not as much as I was, when I was a child, but thunder still gives me the creeps. Strangely, I don't mind lightning one bit. Really makes no sense, doesn't it? Or have you ever heard of someone being killed by thunder? Lightning on the other hand…My grandfather swears that his ship got hit by lightning *two* times. But you can never trust the stories of a sailor. Believe me."

"I meant…you're not afraid…of my horns? Of me?"

"What? No! Why would I? I mean…you were quite scary when you punched that tree there, love, but in a good way, you know? Like a really good campfire story. If you fear we might have started on uneven footings, I can tell you a scary story, if you want. I know a few good ones. I have a really weird one where the monster is the good guy and the humans are the monsters and they first break the legs of their victims and then eat their eyes. Oh lords, you look terrified already. I am sorry, love, no more talk of monsters, I promise. I think it's best I just take one of your soggy biscuits to shut me up. *Mmmh*…tastes like a mermaid's birthday party. These really help to calm you down, hm?"

Yolanda took the small linen bag and swallowed its contents whole. The sweetness in her throat brought with it a calming wave tingling down her spine. Her fists relaxed and the evil thoughts subsided, hidden away behind a wall of sugar and spice. She did not want to hurt this woman. She never—ever—wanted to hurt this precious little woman.

"Well, someone's hungry. Careful though, it's mermaid cake after all and you don't quite look half fish; be careful not to drown."

"You joke 'bout everything?"

"Just about. But who knows, you might be a mermaid after all. Haven't really seen one myself, so no idea what they look like. That would make you…a mermaid…let me guess…lumberjack? Do you live here?"

"No. No…I cook…cooked in the *Old Man.*"

"Oh, you are the big girl who sometimes pulls an entire cart by herself. I thought you seemed familiar. Seen you sometimes down in the market, when it was still pitch-dark, all hooded and cloaked. I had no idea you had horns like this. Like a unicorn, well, two unicorns—half a fish and half double unicorn."

Yolanda grasped for her forehead and found her horns, not small and buried in her maroon mane, but big and monstrous looming from her brow. *Why, gods why?* She had been so good. *Take it back.*

"So…what are you doing now then, that the *Old Man's* burned down?"

"It burned down?"

"Yeah, nobody's certain what actually happened. Some say it were the pirates; the pirates—at least the ones they've caught—say it was an old hag or something; others say it was the cook. Hm, that would be you, wouldn't it? Did you do it? Is that why you're hiding here?"

Yolanda was too ashamed to shake her head.

"T'was the cat. That one."

She pointed to a willow swaying the wind, in its branches, a cat as black as night, watching them.

"So…you two've met. I had the impression there was some history between the two of you. What happened that night? The cat is not the particularly talkative type."

Burning flames, a mutilated face, painful screams, the cracking of bones, the stench of blood, smoke, honey and sweet pepper. *Take it back.* Her skin crawled like a swarm of a thousand million ants, her hair stood against the wind, another tree cracked in the wind, the feeling of ribs cracking in her grip. *No.* Take it back. *Take it back.*

"And you're not the type either, it seems. Hey, hey, it's fine, love. No need to cry. You can tell me another time. Or don't, I don't need to know. It's going to be alright. The cat won't say anything either, I promise. Everything's going to be alright. Trust me."

"Not if no one fixes what…fixes what I've done."

"There, there, don't you worry love, you are strong and powerful, you can fix anything."

"*Please*…don't call me that…I…I can only destroy. I…I was in my kitchen. I saw you there, on the pier. With your boyfriend—"

"My boyfriend? Oh, oh no, that wasn't my boyfriend. He…ehm…he seemed nice. I wouldn't call him my boyfriend though. A date perhaps. Don't even know his names. You might not believe me, but he got kidnapped by pirates. In front of my very eyes. I can still picture the face of the man leading them—if I get my hands on that Alchemist…well, it probably won't do much. I may talk feisty and all, but against half a dozen pirates, these spindly arms won't do. I tried. They just…pinned me down and I could do nothing…just…*watch.* I still have the bruises, well, they're all yellow and green now. Wanna see? Here, look at this mess! I imagine you could have handled the situation quite differently. I get shivers when I think about what the Alchemist would have looked like after you'd have been done with him—oh, oh no, I'm talking too much again? Oh, love, don't cry. Or you know what? Just let it out, let the tears flow. Let it all out."

"I'm a monster. I hurt people."

Yolanda's horns were aching. Her hands were trembling with unholy strength. Her heart pounded in her ears; the beast was still lurking there right beneath the surface.

"I…I hurt the Alchemist."

"Oh, you go, girl!"

"No…*No!* You don't understand! Look at me!"

"I am looking, love. What did you do to him? Tell me, I wanna know."

Yolanda grabbed her by her tiny arm and pulled her towards the cavern pond. She wasn't really looking. She was seeing what was really there. The sound of cracking bones echoing in her head—*No!* Yolanda would break no more. A low rumble escaped her throat. It wanted to snap the arm in her grip. Snap it like a twig. No. *No!* Yolanda let go of the meek arm. She would do harm no more.

"*Look!* Look there in the water!"

Yolanda stared down into the pond. And her reflection stared back at her with hateful eyes. A hiss from a distant willow tree answered.

"Wow, now *that* is freaky. How are you doing this? Wait—did you hear it this time? Someone called again."

The low growl in Yolanda's throat made the mirror image dance on the calm surface.

"I'm. A. Monster."

The reflection stared back at her, grinning, its hateful eyes bobbing like little burning ships on the crystal surface. Yolanda looked up from the horrifying sight and saw the woman kneeling next to her, hunched over the edge, captivated. She was so small, so light, so fragile, bones of sticks. The cat hissed at her from the other side of the pond, sparks cracking in its soot-black fur. *No*—she had made a promise. She would not hurt this woman. She would never hurt anyone again. The water surface still stared at her, grinning, the image waving and wavering, distorted by the waves. Whenever it vanished for a moment, it only did so to reform, bigger, darker. Yolanda looked back at the woman, at Laurelle. The black cat snarled as it primed itself to pounce, claws extended.

"Be. Good."

And she plunged herself into the crystal waters. 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, no one could see her horns down here, now she was a flower in bloom. She closed her eyes. The small bubbles escaping her mouth tickled her nose. From somewhere: a scratch. Her horns still tickled, her head ached from within. The emptiness pressed against her chest. From somewhere else: a grip. With each passing moment the darkness tightened its grip around her. This was not peace. This was but eternal nothingness. Water pressed against her lips, prying against her chest. *Breathe.* Waves of panic gushed over the calmness. No. *No!* Breathe. *Breathe!* She had been so good. She could be good again. She could not take it back. But she could make it good again. Breathe. *Breathe.* Why had this only not crossed her mind? Only now that she was already six feet under water and without ever heaving learned to swim. She could make it whole again. Her mighty fists threw impotent punches against the darkness, trying to grab onto something, anything, but the simmering little pieces 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.* Something clawed at her leg, dragging her further…further where? Breathe. *Don't breathe.* And she could hold it in no longer and took a deep breath. Thick darkness pierced her from within. The water raged and turned around her trying to drown out her will to survive. And everything went black.

*Take it back. Please. Let me take it back.*

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I

n the distance, through the mist, the sea glistened in the storm.

Irregular flashes of lightning reflected on its wavering surface. Thick raindrops fell from even thicker clouds; she was drenched and freezing in her place under the trees on the mountain. Ironic, she would be so wet and yet so far from the waters, far from the harbour, far from the ships, but at least she was safe—somewhat. The Alchemist laid a few feet away from her on the ground. If only he were commanding over enough decency to hide his mutilated face, but it lay there in the open, exposed to the heavens. The sight still sent shivers down her spine. Though their severity paled next to the terrors the image of his unscathed face evoked in her mind. The bruising on her neck still hurt. At the very least her leg only throbbed and pulsed—barring the occasional stabbing ache—at least as long as she did not move it. Stranded. Alone. With this…monster of a man. And the worst part was she needed his help, if she didn't want to starve here under her tree. She had not yet made up her mind, if she didn't prefer starving after all. Even though he had already carried her a few yards, she neither trusted his ability nor his willingness to continue to do so any further. He might change his mind any second and simply throw her down the mountain, if she made a wrong sound. *Break her other leg.* How many feet was she above sea level? Too many, no doubt, especially too many to descend on broken limbs. She looked at the man again.

"Would…would you mind…covering your face?"

The ragged man answered only with a hoarse grunt.

"It's…I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you…thanks. *Don't hurt me.*"

"The Squeak already says the thank."

"It's just…I—"

"The Squeak is afraid. Is that it?"

With a pain-stricken face, he lifted his head from the rocky ground. 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 a former eyeball. Sickening rumbles seized her stomach and terrifying memories seized her mind.

"The Squeak is afraid of my face. How bad is the sight?"

"It's…it is…tolerable."

"*Tsk.* Lying not what the Squeak does best."

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

"How far the way to the harbour is? I need to return to my ship."

"The…the harbour?"

"Yes. The harbour. My face must hold the terrors of the burning worlds. When the Squeak can only squeak and stutter."

"I…I just fear you might carry it…in your heart to…to hurt me…I'm sorry. Please don't take this the wrong way. I'm not very good with words. Well, people really. I…I am just adding insults to injuries. I don't mean you any ill. The harbour…it might be off quite a bit—"

"*Might?* Where is this place? Are we not near?"

"I…I don't know. Somewhere in the mountains. Though the sea…it's still down there. I can see it. We might not be too far off. But…"

"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…not really. It's…it's actually quite fascinating. It involves a spell—a bottled spirit to be precise—which…or who carried us—you—I mean carried you away on the wind."

"What care a spirit for me? Why carry me on the wind? Is it a spirit of the gods?"

"No…no it is an ancient spell but no divine magic. The spirit is old and vengeful and therefore…therefore one must pay him in…in incantations and…time."

"*Time?*"

"Yes…it…it carries you someplace else and takes as much time…as much time from your life as it sees fair for its services from you, so…so you arrive a few days…thereafter…however much time it took. It's archaic and clunky but also so incredibly interst—no, it's…it's archaic."

"I cast no spell. Yet am I here."

"Some…someone else must have…"

"Someone cast spell of the wind on me. To spite me. And now I linger in place I wish not to reside. And I paid with…*time* for all the trouble?"

"Yes…*someone*…"

"Marvellous."

"That…that's a nice word. I didn't expect you to…Where did you learn—"

With a strained grunt, he struggled into an upright position. Her words wilted in her throat. He stood and screamed to the heavens. His mutilated grimace stalked on shaky legs towards her. What was he doing? Someone. *Someone.* How could she be so stupid? He most likely knew she had released the spirit, 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. *He* cared nought for justice, not her, and yet she was exposed to his sickened rage. She pressed her back against the tree, her leg responded with agonizing screams of protest. *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 on. You say your leg is broken. There must be reason the gods sent me. Cursed with with a spell of the wind. I must repent before I perish. I need to reach the harbour. I need eyes. You have need of legs. I might carry you. If the stars align. Maybe more than half the way. This journey is the last I take. So follow only if you do not fear death. Or desolation. Or death all desolate. I might not make…the way…Where your heart desire to be?"

She didn't know what to respond, so the first thing on her mind crossed her lips.

"I…I always wanted to sail the seas on…on a boat. It's…it's a stupid…"

"Boat. Marvellous. Then we have similar goal. Take the way down the mountain. And if we find the *someone* who released the bottled spirit of the wind on me. We help him take the way down the mountain the fast way."

His ugly holes almost looked at her.

"Now I am tired of using the words. I need the embrace of the silence. We go when rain did pass."

"Why…would I not fear…who…who does not fear death?"

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

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hey had him beaten, shaven, washed, and tied up.

Unfortunately not in that order. The trail of dried blood on his temple itched like hell but his hands were tied behind his back; at the other end of the world. And yet it cost him all his acting talent to stifle a shit-eating grin. The Queen surely wouldn't tolerate such *indecencies.* She would have had his head—or his tongue, or whatever body part she was fond of fetishising—for his utter lack of respect and humility in the face of her presence—and the presence of her face. What a joke.

The Queen's personal chambers were decorated fitting for such a pretentious personality; 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, there was honeyed chicken, grilled fish as big as his famished thighs, and bottles full of sweet sweet vine. The water rising in his mouth might have sunk the ship, had he not kept it shut.

"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. What would your crew think of—"

"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. Don't flatter yourself. I don't intend you to leave these quarters still with it in your possession. Consider this your last meal before I put you out to sea—if your behave and answer my questions that is."

"*Ouch.* I hope your stomach can extend to a size comparable to the extent of your vocabulary, or I fear you might explode by sunrise. Which—again—might not please your crew."

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 admiration you uphold for yourself. But then again, you seem to spare to respect for me, so I suppose it is a feeling of mutual nature. Even though my heart aches at the thought of having to inform you of the tragic reality: your whole act suits you rather ill. Now, listen closely, for 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.* If she wanted to skewer him, she had to dine him first. He retorted with his own, cocky smile.

"So I advise you to listen carefully now, prisoner: what is this game you are playing? You might think yourself some great hero with your petty escape, yet even beyond any benefit of the doubt, you are still a prisoner, a captive—*my* prisoner. 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 to get a rise of a superior of yours, or are you simply 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 fear for your life, my Queen."

"See here, see here, he is not only a charlatan, a prisoner and a loudmouth, but one posing as a physician, is that what I am supposed to believe? 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 revealed 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.

"My Queen, you may not have much knowledge of the games I play, but I know of the game you play. 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, married to the sea. If there is a thing that breathes, it seeks your gaze upon its humble flesh, it seeks the gift of your love. Yet if you showed any of your followers more attention than any of the others—well, jealousy makes people to all sorts of wicked things…even to their Queen. So you divide your love among them equally—none receives any at all. After all, you have to remain unattainable. No other woman could not strut half-naked across a ship of drunken pirates and call herself *Queen* and wish to remain untouched. You play a cruel game, I can admire that, but it is a dangerous game indeed. And I fear for your life. The years will not be kind to you, 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 enthralling perfume enveloped him. Vanilla. And lavender…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. Even after I've explicitly 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 of ours. 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. Perhaps even for days."

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 with children for reading his work when *she* was the one who *willed it into existence*. *I* possess ears, am *I* supposed to be impressed with 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?* 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 in her hand under his chin. The cold steel scraped over his scrubby throat, before the point travelled down his chest. It tore 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 into the eye. Her eyes cold and blue like frozen lakes. Her silken hair caressed his stubbly 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 *balls* 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. He remained yet unskewered.*

Eventually, she broke the silence.

"Marvellous, isn't it?“

"*Mmh*…I suppose you hope me to follow you as your inferior now?"

"*Now?* Was there ever a time you were anything but my inferior? You are now and you have been, ever since you've first stepped foot on my ship—as a prisoner. And worry not—you remain my prisoner still. A simple look in the mirror would suffice to answer all your piteous questions. It must be dreadful; not indulging in the pleasures of superiority for once."

"I could be if you want me to. Just call me *Sir* and—"

"And perhaps I have not yet discarded the idea of simply cutting out your tongue and to feed you to the creatures of the sea. Legends tell of men who survived for days in the waters, whilst being eaten alive, of course. The longer I revel in this thought, the firmer it entwines my heart. I really hope, for your own sake, you know how to behave, or I foresee a dark future for you on the bottom of the Scyllic Sea.“

"I'd be worried, had you not already shown your unwillingness to entirely follow through on your gruesome and yet imaginative threats—at least against me. Oh, I like that ferocious look of yours, you should keep it, it suits you. Come one, we both know I am way more useful to you alive than dead. And oh so much more entertaining. In more way than you might think…the night is young, you are already half undressed, I feel at least a little tipsy, who knows what—"

"Are you daft? This is no way for someone in your position to conduct himself in front of your Queen! Our little play has concluded, I've won, you've lost, know your pla—"

He abruptly rose from his seat, staggering—his dinner swashing in his overstuffed belly. Her pristine eyes followed him, studying him carefully, as he swaggered around the table towards the end she was seated on. She rose to meet him eye to eye, as he approached, a hand on the hilt of the sword at her side.

"*I know.*"

His voice was but a faint whisper.

"I imagine no one has ever regarded you as anything but their superior, anything but their *Queen.* I wonder if anyone but you survived your childhood; the other children, your mother, your father. Or if you've impaled their heads on spikes along the way and left them there to rot. Or their tongues. I'm not going to judge your personal style. Ah yes, always so quick to draw your sword…but I have to admit: you look quite beautiful when you feel threatened. So…*perky.* Has anyone ever told you that? Mmh, most likely not, or you would have had their tongues and probably their heads, to put them next to ol' mum and dad. It must be terrifying to not stand amongst someone who is not your inferior. What agony it must be, to sail a million miles, always at the top—always *alone*—when everyone else is among their equals."

He lifted his bound hands 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 storm raged outside the cabin windows, studying, scheming, longing. *A weapon to rival her beauty indeed*. Before she could muster a clever response, he turned on his heel and strode away towards the cabin door.

"Where…where are you going?"

"Back into my cage, of course! After all, I am your inferior—your prisoner. And besides, I do not intend to be knifed in my sleep by jealous pirates for sharing the bed with their Queen. Have a good night!"

He slammed the door behind him. Cold summer rain pelted on his face. With a deep exhale, he exorcised the tension torturing him form within. *Pure, ecstatic relief.* He did not look forward to returning to the small cage they called his prison—oh, how he wished he could return to her chambers—but the cage was the only place where he was safe now on this godforsaken ship; the only place she had control over him. He took another deep breath. The image of this singular Queen would haunt him in his dreams tonight—oh, for so many nights—but if went back, there was no coming back alive. *Alive.* For now. But the events he had just set in motion could only entail catastrophe. Ill fortune would strike down one of them, so much was certain. And he had no intention to be the one stricken down.

*No god can save this Queen.*

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Y

olanda was drenched, cold, and shivering.

But everything around was calm and peaceful. Her chest and throat ached as if she had swallowed a melon whole. The gurgling of water rushed in her ears. When she opened her eyes, an emerald vastness greeted her, as far as she could see, spread across the sky. It was swirling and curling with stars of orange, turquoise, and alabaster. Small, glimmering dots swam like crystalline petals across the warm and vibrant sea, through the knobby limbs of ancient trees with leaves of dark blue and violet. Their twisted roots not buried in the earth, but clinging to the ground like crab legs; gnarly, wooden crab legs. Yolanda closed her eyes. Only the gurgling of water remained. The sky was still turquoise and green when she opened her lids again. Green and misty. Spirals of stars. The white lights still flickering and dancing through the air. She lifted her head. To her one side, the long grass extended in beautiful colours of red and dark purple, softly waving in the wind and tickling her cheek. On her other side, a pond of obsidian water, surrounded by strange crab trees, and churning and swirling underneath a perfectly calm surface. Yolanda was still half submerged in its wetness, but even as she pushed herself to dryer grounds, the surface neither moved nor distorted even one bit. She dared not lay her eyes upon the blackness of its reflective surface, instead, raising her gaze to the sky. A single brown cloud crept across the misty sky, leaving a sparkling, orange trail against the sky. Yolanda let her eyes wander across the strange and yet oddly beautiful scenery, certain now she that she was dead.

"Hey, you're awake. You really scared me there, jumping into the pond like that. Are…are you alright, love?"

Laurelle sat against the trunk of a crab tree, her wet hair clinging to her shoulders, a worried smile on her lips, as she mustered Yolanda through the read, waving grass. When Yolanda tried to answer, she first coughed up a draught of water, before the words came through.

"I…I'm not sure. Where's…*this?* Did we die?"

"I really hope not, love. Otherwise I've just pulled a muscle for nothing. Even though that might explain why there is air underwater…or why there are roads. Unless, of course, the fish built them for their tiny feet and seahorse carriages. But wherever we are, isn't it just…*enchanting?*"

Laurelle crawled through the read sea of grass into the mud beside Yolanda.

"I was really worried about you, you know? I feared the worst might have happened, even after I've gotten your head over the surface. Say what you want, love, about your horns—and their undeniably sick aesthetic appeal—but I doubt I would've gotten you out of there without them."

Yolanda could not bring herself to manifest an answer. She stared into these eyes that were as green as the sky; she owed this woman her life. This was not what she had wanted; how was she ever supposed to repay such a debt? All she had wanted was to get away from her, so the beast could not hurt her and now…*what now?* Now they were bound together. This was not what she had wanted. The black cat strutted forth from the billowing red grass, visibly contempt with itself and remarkably dry with only a hint of steam rising from its shiny fur. The deep orange eyes conjured horrifying images and the scent of iron blood in Yolanda's mind. It purred.

*If only she could take it back.*

"*I am so sorry—*"

"Don't be, love. It's just a pulled muscle. Just promise me you'll never do anything this stupid again, okay? If you don't mind me asking why…why did you—"

"***Ah, welcome, Apprentice. Welcome to the* Whirling Crossroads*.***"

The intimacy of their conversation was suddenly disrupted by rattling and clattering of metal on even more metal and wood. The noise was coming from a shabby, old carriage wobbling down the street on crooked wheels. It was dragged by a moth the size of a donkey, covered in thick, ivory fur with streaks and dots of orange, its four fluffy wings curling on its back. The carriage came to a stop in the field of waving grass. From the coach box descended not a fish, but a tall figure who approached them through the waist-high grass. A white bird face, surrounded by dark red feathers and spikes of bone bobbed towards them on a long, stalky neck. The light of the white, glimmering dots floating through the air, reflected in the polished surface of the pale bird mask. The voice from underneath was deep, soft and calm, vibrating within Yolanda's chest.

"***They call me Dotor and I am to see to the Apprentice's schooling and—***

***Oh, what do we have here?.***"

The mask swayed curiously between the two of them. The figure was clad in a long, heavy cloak of red and brown adorned with small stones and feathers. Hidden underneath, one could glimpse a dark blue robe spotted with sparkling stars. The fabric, if one could call it such, moved and billowed nothing like anything Yolanda had ever seen, almost as if it were alive.

"***You are no Apprentice. You are not allowed to be here. This goes beyond even the wildest of protocols. If you would be so kind as to please cease intruding, it would be most appreciated.***"

"Hey, listen here Birdface, I am no intruder. If anyone here is, then it's you intruding on our private conversation. So if you would be so kind as to give us some space, that would also be most appreciated."

"***Of course you are no intruder here, Apprentice. The other one though does not seem to share your decency to apprentice.***"

He bent down to examine Yolanda's horns. She flinched from his scrutinizing gaze. Her horns were so big and ugly. *Don't look at me.*

"***How curious…still, you cannot linger here. The* Bog of Nooks and Crannies *is no place for you. I suggest a quick* Goodbye *before the relationship between you and the Apprentice has any chance to develop. That would no doubt unnecessarily complicate matters for all parties involved.***"

"What? Are you sure you have the right address? I don't recall signing up to apprentice to a homeless bird. What do you even teach?"

"***The art of witchcraft, of course. Your Apprenticeship begins the morning after this little matter has been resolved and you have absolved the entrance exam.***"

Laurelle's eyes glistened in the misty light. She looked down at Yolanda, who was still cowered into the mud, and grinned widely.

"Witchcraft you say? Well, then I don't think we have a problem here. She'll just become an Apprentice same as me."

"***I fear she cannot do that without a cat as black as night. I conduct the practice of magic, not a nursery. No cat—no Apprenticeship.***"

Finally the stranger was no longer eyeing her horns, instead preoccupied with Laurelle's volley of questions. Very unlike her, Yolanda had no interest to be instructed in the ways of witchcraft. She was still uncertain *where* she was. Not to mention *who* she was talking to. Tough Laurelle seemingly shared none of these concerns. As did the black cat sitting on her foot, scrutinizing the masked stranger as if it had found its next meal. Yolanda flinched when the black cat hissed at the masked stranger. Even with his face hidden, the robed figure was noticeably uncomfortable. Laurelle curiously cocked her head.

"***How to reign in this feral beast, will have to be your first lesson.***"

Even though the masked figure still seemed uneasy, his voice was as calm and soft as ever.

"Then let's start right now with the Apprenticeship. You said there was an exam, let's do it, I am ready!"

The mask's empty eyes look at Laurelle until the stranger suddenly held a book in hand, as ancient and massive as the crab trees. It was bound in a thick, scaly hide and had to contain hundreds upon hundreds, if not thousands of pages. The mask wandered across the age-old bindings as he opened the book to the first page. A strong breeze whiffed around them, turning dozens upon dozens of pages, before it vanished as fast as it appeared, leaving behind only a faint trail of cinnamon.

"***I am afraid I must first resolve the matter at hand. The Rules are anything but clear on how to proceed when presented with a non-Apprentice. Mmmh…Here. Here is an old passage on how to deal with the presence of non-Apprentices, but it lacks any instructions on groups of non-Apprentices* and *Apprentices. Best I remain on the side of caution and initiate your Apprenticeship not until this while debacle is resolved.***"

"Why not just do what it says in that one passage?"

The stranger looked down on his book and began reciting.

"***Art thou presented with a single intruder, or a group comprised of intruders, thou shalt not suffer them to live and dispose of them presently by***—"

"Ha—! You know what? On second thought: let's…best ignore that one. You were right, it *does* sound rather vague. How about we don't do anything drastic? How can you even breathe through all these rules? But fine, I understood: no proceeding without sacrificing a new born to the almighty protocol. Then give us a moment, will you? There are things to be discussed…in *private*."

The stranger moved not one bit, standing there, the mask's empty eyes wandering between the two of them.

"…to say *Goodbye.*"

The masked figure nodded and finally turned around and slithered back into the grassy sea of red to the strange wagon. When he was out of earshot, Laurelle sat next to Yolanda in the mud with a bittersweet grin on her lips.

"That one's almost as stubborn as me. But gods, I did not expect *this*. This…it's as if all my prayers have been answered. Like…not my serious ones. The stupid ones where I thought they would never come true, and if I waited a hundred years. And I know what you are about to say; yes, I am one hundred per cent aware that I am setting myself up for a horrible disappointment and nothing will be anything like I imagine it, but I have to take this opportunity. I *have* to believe in it. I have to. Or there is really no reason to believe in anything at all. I might have overrun you a bit—in all this. A little sorry about that. The excitement got to my head before any of the vital blood could. So, what do you actually want to do with all this?"

Yolanda wanted to repay her debt. Or rid herself of the beast within. But she had already tried that a thousand times and it had only ever gotten worse, not better. She might yet repay this debt, even though she had no idea just *how*. Leaving Laurelle alone was most certainly not how. Even though she wanted to go home. This place *had* a certain magic about it but she didn't trust the masked stranger. She had to take care of Linda and Joey, the horse and the mule waiting at home at the *Old Man.* She was responsible for them. Though not as responsible as Laurelle was for her being alive.

"No answer? Well, it seems I should have asked you beforehand. I'm sorry about that, love. I suppose then this means *Goodbye.*"

"No. I wanna stay."

"You do? How delightful. I've already begone to miss your company; all…laconic and stoic. But promise you'll do this for yourself and not for me."

Yolanda did not hesitate to nod, lest she risked raising suspicion.

"Well, then it is settled."

Laurelle stood, smiled and gave Yolanda a hand to help her to her feet. Even in this unfamiliar world, Yolanda still towered over her and even in this unfamiliar world, Yolanda wondered where Laurelle gathered all this strength, as she followed her into the red sea of grass.

"Let's show ol' Feather Pants that we are not so easily turned down. Hey! We've made up our minds and she's staying. Now, tell me all you know about witchcraft!"

"***But you said it yourself, young lady: the passage is anything but conclusive. Caution is to be in order, lest be break the Rules.***"

"First of all: I am no lady, and second of all: I think you are being very sparrow-minded right now."

"***I fear I do not understand what you mean by that.***"

"I think you should give us a beak. You know? Ignore the rules, just a tiny little tit. Swallow your pride and let her stay."

The mask was tilting and turning as if something hard had hit the stranger over the head, yet his voice was as calm as ever.

"***Idioms have changed drastically since the last time I've spoke with one of you.***"

This was Yolanda's chance to repay at least some of her debt.

"Times change. And yet…your rules haven't. I don't want to be no nuisance, so…at least let her try. You can still change you mind later."

The mask eyed her curiously, before the pages in his hand started to turn again in a soft breeze of cinnamon. The stranger briefly studied the text in front of him.

"***Hmm…I suppose you are not incorrect. The Apprentice is no real Apprentice of yet, as she has not yet passed the entry exam. First I must determine the Apprentice's true status, to truly resolve this issue. The problem might yet resolve itself.***"

Yolanda swallowed. *The problem might yet resolve itself*. She had hoped to improve the situation. Not…ruin it more like she always did. The stranger vanished into the depths of his wagon and shortly returned hauling a heavy cast-iron cauldron.

"Please tell me my exam is to brew some potion and not to lift that thing over my head."

"***It is neither. We are about to set out on a long journey to the* Cave of Truths*. There will be many dangers and strange adventures along the way. Therefore*—**"

"I must cast a spell to turn the kettle into a mighty, fire spewing beast?"

Laurelle's eyes almost fell out of her head, she was so excited.

"***No. What purpose with that serve? You must demonstrate your familiarity with the most divine skill of the human condition. I plan not to go uncompensated for my services. Therefore, to pass the exam you must concoct a dish most savoury, for I intend to be repaid in breakfast, lunch, and dinner. You will also have to clean the wagon, tend to the garden, oil the wheels, mend the sails, and feed the moth. But these skills will not be on the exam. Needless to say: should you fail this exam, you will no longer be eligible for the status of Apprentice and I—***"

"Wait. I…I thought you'd make me a witch…not your maid."

"***Should you refuse the exam, then I must pronounce you both Intruders and as stated here I must therefore—***"

"No! No, I'll take the exam. It's just…it's not what I expected."

Yolanda took Laurelle by the hand. She had said herself, she only set herself up for disappointment, but the sight still broke Yolanda's heart.

"Well let's see how this is gonna go. If only I wasn't such a coddled brat. I don't think I've ever touched a pot with the intention to cook something in it. Can you even touch them when they're on the fire? Don't they get like super hot? At least I know what a moth is, no idea though what they eat, and I might know which end of the broom to hold. Well…I bet there's some dumb lesson in this; like for me to pass this, I'm pretty sure I need nothing short of witchcraft, meaning if I'll pass, I don't need his teachings anymore. Gods, I hate these. I just wanna become a witch."

"***Apprentice, the cauldron awaits.***"

The stranger had erected a large, crescent table around the cauldron, stacked with ingredients, tools, spices, and cooking utensils. The fire was already burning and the flames were licking against the cold, dark steel. Laurelle's eyes darted across the table, uncertain what to do or where to begin. Finally, she grabbed some leek and smelled it. She shrugged and held it at arms length, assessing if it would fit into the pot whole. She was about to drop it into the cauldron when she turned on her shoeless heel.

"No wait, you cut the food *before* you cook it! Ha! Not clueless after all!"

She smiled at Yolanda, as if she had just solved all her problems. Yolanda nodded nervously. She could barely watch as Laurelle went back to the table, grabbed a pair of scissors and started to mutilate the poor leek with sharp, snipping blades. Next, she devoted her attention to a big salmon spread across the table. She poked it with the blunt end of a fork.

"I thought these were supposed to be alive when you cooked them…or was that something else entirely? I *do* remember lemon going really well with fish though. Let's try that."

She carefully carried the fat, oily fish to the cauldron and let it drop into the boiling water, splashing bits of leek and hot water everywhere. Laurelle managed to get out of the way just in time. She looked at the robed stranger with a concerned expression on her face, but the mask showed no emotion, just bobbed on the thinny neck, as it always did. Six lemons, each cut in half once followed the salmon into the pot, then two beautifully sliced tomatoes and three eggs whole with shell and all. She tried herself at cutting some onions, but gave up halfway through, squinting, crying, trying not rub her eyes more than once. When she could finally see clear again, she added some more broccoli and a handful of chilli peppers to the brew. Finally she toppled half a bag of rice into the pit of hell constraint to an iron pot to *give it some substance*, before she finished it all of with a bit of salt, pepper, and a handful of spinach.

"Ok, I'm done."

She gave Yolanda a hopeful look, who sat there in the mud, simultaneously disgusted and terrified. *The problem might yet resolve itself*. Yolanda stared at the masked stranger. *He* would kill them both, after her brew would have killed him…not that…that's…she…she had to do something. *Anything*. Laurelle scooped an overcooked egg, some broccoli, chilli peppers, half a lemon, and a bunch of undercooked rice and dirty fish scales into a wooden bowl and presented it to the stranger. He sniffed at the concoction before he turned his back to them and lifted his mask.

"*Wait!*"

Yolanda could remain no longer. She had a debt to repay.

"Don't eat that! For the love of the gods. Let me cook! I can do that. And the gardening and the cleaning. Just don't eat that! I was a cook at an inn. It was called the *Old Man by the Sea.* Until it burned down. I had nothing to do with the burning down. Well…it's a complicated story. I was only responsible for the stew. But I know the in and outs of stew. You want to be paid. I can do that. I won't be no nuisance. I can even drag the carriage. But please, let her study witchcraft. And let me tend to the breakfast and the lunch and the dinner. I beg you!"

Laurelle's jaw dropped and she stared at her, flabbergasted. Yolanda had been sure when she started talking, that she was doing the right thing, now she was not so certain anymore, the way Laurelle stared at her. The masked figure stood there for a moment in contemplation, examining her horns from a distance and the pages of his book up close, before he answered.

"***There is nothing of this in the Rules. Show me this* stew *of yours, so that I may augment the protocol with the account of this incident. I cannot leave them incomplete. The cauldron awaits.***"

Yolanda cooked a simple dish but she put her lifeblood into it; potatoes, carrots, celery, some leek but not cut with scissors, onions, and a little bit of beef. Prepared with love and dedication and cooked to perfection. There were so many delicious spices stacked on the table, she simply had to close her eyes and follow her nose to complete her stew.

When it was finally done, she filled a nice ivory bowl and presented it to the masked stranger who eyed it curiously. Yolanda turned and smiled to Laurelle, but she was not smiling back. Still, with her mouth not entirely closed and a dire expression of disappointment on her face. What did she do wrong? She retraced her steps. No, she hadn't put anything strange into the stew, she has tasted it herself. It was just the way she wanted it to be. What was wrong? She was so certain that she had not done anything wrong this time. *What was wrong?*

The stranger turned his back again, lifted his mask and then the bowl to his face and guzzled the contents of the bowl in one mighty gulp. When he answered, his voice was still no longer calm, but excited and ecstatic.

"***Yes. Yes, this will do. You have done a great service to my insides and the great Book of Rules. I will tend to expanding the rules of Apprenticeship immediately. I dub thee* Apprentice of Dotor *and thee* Servant of Dotor*.***"

He presented a scroll from his sleeve and handed it to Laurelle.

"Your contract, Apprentice. I will fashion the second contract as soon as the Rules allow for a contract beyond the first. The cauldron awaits you tomorrow morning for breakfast."

He slid through the red sea of grass towards his wagon and patted the moth on its head, leaving Yolanda and Laurelle behind on their own.

"You said you wanted to stay for your own reasons, not for me!"

Of all things, Yolanda had expected Laurelle to be angry the least.

"I…I wanted to help you…become a witch. Why're you yelling? Y*ou saved my life!*"

"*You promised me*…"

Yolanda would not cry. She knew she had done the right thing.

"Why? Why…would you do this, love? I can handle myself. Did you even listen? To me? To *him?* He called you *Servant*."

"He would've killed us. You heard the rule in the book. You would've been an intruder."

"*Why, did you do this?*"

Now she was crying. She didn't want to cry. She just wanted to repay her debt.

"I just wanted…I want to help you."

"*Why…? You broke your promise…*"

"Because…you're the strongest person I've ever met in my entire life."

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| Chapter iii Umbramancy, or: How not to die in you Sleep |

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| Chapter iv Of Friends and Enemies |

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| Chapter v The Hardest Way |