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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 Stormroad Encounters |

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Demon of the sea, I judge thee for the lives taken, the spirits drowned. Never again shall I suffer thy kind upon my lands! In the name of justice, I sentence you to death. I am the golden mistress and I bow to none!*

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

Through the milky glass, her father's voice screamed something about better making sure the young lady was confined to her room and that she better not hurt herself again. *As if he cared.* She looked at the green and yellow bruises around her wrists where the pirates had restrained her. The remnants of her other injuries were hidden well enough under her garments and Laurelle was glad for it. Though none of them had hurt even close as much as being forced to witness it all. Forced to witness the kind shy stranger and her being torn apart; forced to relive the ship taking her mother to see, never to return. Forced to sit and watch. *So helpless.* She *had* gotten hurt. But not in a way her father saw, not in a way he cared for. She smashed the stump of the wine bottle next to her into the floorboards. This time, the pain was more than just a pinch. Thick crimson dropped from her fingers. But she did not scream. Or whimper. Or flinch. She was not as weak and frail as everyone thought. She could handle a little pain. And yet—for some godforsaken reason—what she was not strong enough to handle was effectively nought for anyone else—everyone else—everyone except the stranger on the pier. A little overconfident at first, a little shy after that, but nice, maybe even a little cute. He had cared for her. He had believed that she was strong. And he had allowed her to be weak. And then the sea had taken him all the same. *The stranger on the pier.* She hadn't even gotten to ask him for his name. He'd just left her there alone, with bruises all over, a bleeding heart, an empty bottle, and a bag of sweets. Helpless to protect what she actually cared for. Now her heart was dripping from cuts on her hands over the bruises and the refilled bottle lied there spread across the floor in pieces. What was left of that night were the bag of overly sweet pastries in her pocket and a burning desire in her heart to stake the Alchemist alive. This whole reminiscing gave her conniptions; she needed some quiet, some peace, some fresh air or she'd wither away in here.

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

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

Her father towered over her against the pale grey sky.

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

"Screaming at me…"

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

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

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

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

"You were lucky like you always are; it’s just a shallow cut. Now stop making such a fuss about it and go back to your room to get this bandaged and…Hey! What did I tell you about looking at me when I talk to you? Would you mind to remember your manners as I can recall teaching you some quite clearly? And wipe that brash look off your face, I did not raise you to be an arrogant brat. Someday you are going to learn that the world does not revolve around you and you'll wish you'd listened any of the twenty times I'd told you already."

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

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

He looked at her in disbelief.

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

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

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

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

"Lady Laurelle, return home with us to your father! It is cold and crap outside! He'll calm down eventually. *Lady Laurelle!*"

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

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

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

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

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

"*Hush.*"

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

"Y…yes, Sir."

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

"Caught another rat?"

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

"Here, Sir."

"Hm, this one’s a little small."

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

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

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

The beard eyed him suspiciously.

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

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

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

"Aye, Sir.“

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

*Win, or die.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She pressed her clenched fist into the mud beside her, but it buried not even half an inch deep into the dirt. The cut ached again. So weak. The earth would not make way. She kicked the air in front of her and her shoe flew in a high arc into the approaching rain, tumbling and turning like a dead bird before it vanished in the swirling mist of crashing waves. A clump of moss followed the shoe into the sea shortly after. She kicked her other leg as hard as she could, but the leftover shoe refused to follow. It clung to her foot, even when she kicked again, again and again. She took a shallow breath and let out a harrowing scream against the onsetting rain. Even her scream was meek and feeble, unlike the waves beneath, ferocious, captivating, and sourly uncaring. They crashed and raged against the cliffs, their watery innards sprayed towards the heavens and drenched her in a cold, salty shower of sea guts. First, Laurelle shrieked, then she laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She took a deep breath and sighed. The air smelled of damp moss, wet leaves, rot, earth, honey, and sweet pepper—and disappointment. Before she could call herself a witch, she would need to learn to control this little beast. But after that, nothing would be able to stand in her way. Nothing!

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

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

"What do you want?"

"More."

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

"Give. More."

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

"I…I don't have anything to give."

"Give. Me. More."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Please. Please. Let me live. Kneel…"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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right lightning illuminated the deck.

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

"Behold!"

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

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

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

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

The bearded man cleared his throat.

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

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

"Does he speak truth, *kitty?*"

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

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

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

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

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

*Doubt.*

And just like that, her eyes were no longer fixated on him. He followed them wandering across the horizon. First, there was only a hint of disappointment in her eyes but then it spread, tracing hairline fractures across the facade hiding her face. But still, he could barely catch a glimpse of what was hidden beneath. *It might just be enough.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why don’t you ask your Alchemist?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*Justice is a matter among equals.*"

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

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olanda's horns were aching.

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

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

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

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

Yet the whipping didn't stop and the scars burned on her back all the same. Yolanda shook her head. She wasn't that child anymore, she wasn't there anymore. Another crack, though no whip followed. She wasn't there anymore. She opened her eyes. *Not there anymore.* She was now somewhere else...but where? Raindrops crackled in the willow crowns. The mud smelled rich and warm. The thick, singed hairs on Yolanda's skin stood valiantly against the wind. She struggled to her feet. This was not there. But this also wasn't home. Gnarly trees encircled her and gawked at ther through curtains of hanging leaves. Somewhere waves crashed against a cliffside. Towering over the clearing stood a thick, gnarly tree with leaves of crimson and weeping sap, all splintered and broken. She searched for a peaceful piece in the tattered collage in her head. They smelled of Scintilla bread and tasted of blood. There was a memory in flames. A burning building. Home. *The Old Man.* Yolanda looked at the burnt flesh on her hands. Honey and sweet pepper. She clenched her fingers in an attempt to grasp for the fleeting mists of actions past. Expecting for the pain to set it, she closed her eyes, though the pain she found inside was not her own. The cracking of ribs. The stench of blood. A face. A cat. As black as night.

A sudden bloodcurdling scream eviscerated her efforts to recollect.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Kneel."

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

And for this little moment, Yolanda felt at home.

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S

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 hoped for death to relieve him of the pain. Another broken promise. Another poke. *Where was the light?* He lashed out at the thing poking him. A frightened squeak answered from the darkness. In his fist: a wooden stick. Squeaking wood. *Marvellous.* He broke the thing in two. No squeak. Only a pain in his chest. He threw the broken pieces away. Another squeak. Another pain in his chest. He gasped for air. This was not death. This could not be death.

This was hell.

*What squeaks there in the darkness?*

Silence. Then distant thunder. A raindrop on his forehead. *Marvellous.* Rain and squeaky sticks. Was this the gods' punishment for his betrayal? For his dissidence. For his impiety. He had tried. He really did. To be all what they demanded of him. Another drop. And then…then he had given up. Until the news of the black cat. The cat. Memories came back to him. An old woman. A shadow. A beast. Pain. And distant 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? Presumably. She was an intelligent woman and he had been many things but no that. He knew she could not forgive him. Even if she wanted. He wondered if she did. He would certainly grant no forgiveness to himself. Yet he feared she might carry it within her heart. Despite this, she would still deliver justice unto him. What admirable strength. He was weak. He betrayed his Queen. And he did not even manage to claim the cat for himself. Her anger would strike him swift and hard. Her disappointment more so. He managed to raise himself from the ground. Merciful justice seemed a much more fitting death than to drown in the rain. Everything still hurt. And everything was still black. But that was fine. Justice was 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 eye had once been. It was a weird feeling. When he finally stood on his own two feet again, the world was still black. He extended his hands outwards. Trying to feel what was around him. *Nothing.* There was no reason. No meaning. *Lay back down. Go back to sleep.* *Why even try?* He took a small step. A aching tremor in his chest. He took another painful step. And felt vindicated. There was a reason. His deeds could not go unpunished. His next painful step slipped on loose gravel. His chest almost burst when he hit the ground. All air escaped his lungs. *Give up.* *Stay down.* The only thing more painful than lying down was getting up again. So he got up again. It was 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 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 dark. Only the echo in his head. He took a step into the void. Another one. Gravel shifted under his boot. He kept his balance. Another one. But his foot found no ground. He tripped into the darkness. The fall was even harder than the first one. His lungs were empty. His chest was screaming. He lied there. Wincing.

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

He got up again. Not for himself. His chest throbbed in agony. Echoes in his head. He followed the Squeak. The ground fell off to his side. He kept his balance. His arms extended. He could barely feel where he was going. Finally, the Squeak was right before him. Right beneath him. His hands searched for the Squeak in the darkness. They found a skinny neck. The Squeak went silent. Memories of a room. A black cat in the woodwork. He could not carry the Squeak by the neck. He could not carry it at all. He could 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. There is no need for more pain.*

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

*Where do we go?*

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

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

"*Thank you.*"

The words echoed in his head.

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Y

olanda saw eyes.

Three of them, in the distance, through the wet darkness embracing her. They were a swirl of green and blue and silver and they were looking for her but they did not find her. But for her, they were there, in the incomprehensible distance, suspended as she was beneath the waves. Then they turned away and left only a shy glimmer of light. The water in front of her eyes flickered and shimmered, meek colours and shapes dancing to the breath of the ocean. It almost seemed as if they were forming a picture. A small cottage, three miles high and with a purple roof on top. Through the windows of water, she could see burning stars made of pudding within. The shallow brook embracing the house was overflowing with the juice of cranberries, the trees in the vibrant forest next to it were crabs with blue shells. As she walked towards the door of solid milk, she passed a ghostly white swan guarding the garden. The mules were blooming nicely for this time of year, all pink and ribbony. A moth as white as a bull and as white as the swan opened the door for her. It was then Yolanda realized this was not just a house, this was a home. Her home. She entered the single room, took a bite out of the well-beset table before her and hit her head against the ceiling as she rose again, sated. It was then Yolanda realized she was drowning.

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

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hy had the spirit taken her here of all places?

*Release what is kept inside when you no longer know where to go,* he'd said. Until her room had been set on fire, she'd always known where to go, where to stay: *home.* The bottle had remained unbroken—it was the last gift he'd given her—and by the looks of it, that had been a wise decision. Now she was back here. Of all places.

The old temple still stood just as colourful and wind-bent, the sun-bleached ribbons still fluttered against its walls, and the sparse garden surrounding it still was home to the most beautiful tree she'd ever seen. Even the faint scent of sulfur was just what it had been seven years ago. Tears welled in her eyes. For all its beauty, there was no place on earth she resented more.

Her leg throbbed with each of the Alchemist's clumsy steps; her arms slung around the neck she would have had her full right to strangle., though she didn't. As she was such a good person, is what she would have told herself, had she wanted to be untruthful. This temple was a monument to her meekness, not ger goodness, after all.

"Temple? I study in a temple once."

If ever the day would come when her thoughts would remain quiet in her head. The Alchemist wheezed and spat, befitting a mount of such squalid calibre. Though she dared not forget to appease his equally squalid temper unless she wanted to descend the mountain on a broken leg; two if the Alchemist made promises of his threats.

"Yes."

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

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

She heard herself say and almost fell from the Alchemist's back as she recoiled from her own words. The Alchemist groaned as he leaned forward to prevent her fall. He remained on all fours, trembling. *Get up.* Had it been someone—anyone—else, she might have pitied them, though there was nothing but indifferent for his pain; a feeling she presumed to be mutual. He groaned again and resumed stalking like a teetering scarecrow closer into the garden.

"Where this temple is?"

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

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

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

"We are there."

The inside was not quite as beautiful as she remembered; dust and cobwebs embellished the painted walls and the scent of sulfur had grown from a faint notion to a constant companion. At the centre of the hexagonal room, a big brass bell hang a few feet above the floor. The Alchemist dropped to his knees, sending a stabbing pain through her leg. She screamed. He only groaned as he rolled her off his back and curled on the ground.

"Do not mean to hurt the Squeak."

"Well, you did!"

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

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

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

"*Tsk.* Lying not what the Squeak does best. Even the silence betrays the lie."

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 by the Sea?* If he did, would he not have strangled her already and asked for her cat? The *bloody* cat.

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

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

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

"The…the harbour?"

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

"It is not—"

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

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

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

"No…Yes. Well…"

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

"What care the wind for me? The gods still play their games with me..."

With a strained grunt, he struggled into an upright position. Whatever words she was trying to grasp to calm the man wilted in her throat. He stood and screamed at the painted ceiling concealing the heavens. His mutilated grimace stalked on shaky legs towards her. What was he doing? He most likely knew she had released the 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. She pressed her back against the wall, her leg protested with violent waves of pain. *Please. Don't.* When he sank to his knees next to her, she could still smell sharp spices on his breath. His arms searched for her, undirected and calloused. They found her shoulder, she suppressed a terrified squeak.

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

"Y...yes."

His brow furrowed, followed by a wince of pain.

"You say your leg is broken. There must be reason the gods sent me. Cursed 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 may 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 desolation. I might not make…the way…Is your way down the mountain?"

"I…I want to go home."

"Home. Is that down?"

"Yes..."

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

His ugly holes almost looked at her.

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

She sniffed.

"The Squeak is terrible with the lies. Be of help to find the things I have need of. And sit there under the bell. A ritual. The material pain may be relieved. The immaterial may fester. Learn the lesson from me. Endure material pain when the heart is not whole. The Squak certain?"

"Yes."

"You lie."

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

Under the bell, Ramona sat surrounded by bowls filled with herbs, liquids, and coal. Her leg throbbed and itched with every little inadvertent twitching while a strange, odorous mist filled the bell above her head. The Alchemist shuffled around her, constantly murmuring and groaning to himself.

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

His voice trailed off.

"The Squeak have no need for any of the bullshit. There wait the dreams. Strong dreams. Painful. Forget wishes for the circle to protect for I...see nought. The Squeak is on its own. Prepare."

"...for what?"

"Everything."

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

"Please. No."

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

And the world melted away.

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A

wave, unparalleled in both might and size, rose against the cliff.

Where a heart would have been in a creature of such dimensions, Yolanda raged against the water prying its way into her lungs. The second before it broke against the cold wet stone, it stretched out in the shadow of the gigantic finger of water towering over the cliffside. When it finally crashed over the cliffside, it swept away anything but the thickest trees and brought with it the salt of the sea. Where there had just been an overgrown corner of the Bog of Nooks and Crannies, now a score of confused fish and an indignant squid floundered against drifting further into the trees and at the edge of the cliff, Yolanda held onto her life as adamant as she could. She managed to pull herself over it and lay where just a moment ago, there had been firm ground. Now there was but a muddy fish soup in a cliffside bowl.

Never in her life, had Yolanda felt this exhausted. She let herself drop into the soup in hopes of having a little time before something came around to eat or bother her. Though she realized, her luck must have been as exhausted as she was, as a crude wooden spear poked her in the shoulder. As she rose to face the poker, the tip dug deeper into her sodden clothes.

"Stay down! Kneel."

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

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

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

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

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

"I thought something about you seemed familiar. I've heard people talk about the hellish big freak...about you and that you pull entire carts by yourself. Always in the pitch-dark, always all hooded and cloaked. I had no idea you were a girl. Or that you had horns like this. Or what this...what just happened. Do you often come to the bog on these giant waves and prey on innocent passers-by? And don't even try to spin me some lie about how you are just some over-enthusiastic lumberjack with anger management problems and terrible eyesight."

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. She was too busy trying to decipher if she'd laid hands on this woman, she still had time for a panic attack later.

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

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

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

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

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

All Yolanda managed was not enough to hold back the tears at the mention of her old home, as she heard the man screaming in her head as she crushed him in her hands like some overripe fruit. And then it came back to her how she clawed after the muddy woman. Give. More. She knew little of apothecary and less of field dressing, how was she to make a broken leg whole again? How could she have been this stupid, this naive? It was a foolish idea from the start, nothing but a hollow gesture for...for what?

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

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

"...can you talk?"

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

"You have to be kidding me...not only enormous but also dumb. Gods help me. So you are the horned monster?"

Yolanda nodded.

"And you know of the black cat?"

Yolanda recoiled from imaginary fire and nodded.

"Do you even know of the old woman?"

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

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

This sounded all too real and overwhelming. Yolanda had just found some resolve again, but for what? A fish thrashed around next to her head before it seized to thrash forever. At least it had lasted longer than the false hope she'd found beneath the waves.

"At the very least have the dignity to nod. Consider it your last words."

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

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

Bloody holes stared at Yolanda's and she nodded.

"What happened to him?"

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

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

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

The woman kicked at the mud and cursed at the sky.

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

She traced once around Yolanda, twice, and a third time before she came to a halt. She stared at her, spear in hand and deep furrows across her brow until she finally spoke.

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

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

*To make amends.*

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T

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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| 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 |