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The new two arrivals had nothing short of bewitched the tavern patro

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ariety, that is. He had met his fair share of pompous merchants trying to sell their common cats dyed in coal and soot for a mighty price, yet so far they have all been unmasked as frauds and charlatans. No surprise there. 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 had 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 peaked 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. He saw the faces of his audience, longing for a resolution, painful anticipation of a 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, keeping the promised honey for himself. The thought excited him. Satisfaction beyond even the applause of millions. A tempting offer to be sure, but a notion he knew 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; a 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 marvelous 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, sometimes he wished he could change. He bowed for his cheering audience, emptied his tankard of ale and left it with his wooden harp and his pondering about supposed magical beasts on the small stage of the Inn Name.

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 show, 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, but to him, she was as familiar as his instrument and now he was aching to play. He was only passing through, as he always was, as he always had to, but people liked to talk, especially to handsome bards whose heartwrenching tunes 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 the acquisition of knowledge about things was a necessary pain he had to endure when arranging 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 merchant selling carvings of marble, sandstone and the such from overseas; strict and unforbearing man, not that he needed someone to report him such. Her body language, the way she conducted herself spoke more truths to him than any of these tavern patrons could ever hope to know. He could read her like a beaten book and this one's spine was broken, metaphorically speaking of course. She was standing at the pier, upright, seemingly unbroken but he could look past her dilettantish constructed facade. But it never hurt to verify his suspicions with the simple folk, even though they could never tell him any of the *interesting* stuff. This one, for example, was quite the secret keeper, naturally, something he would never discover digging only in the 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 broad 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, blinded by his ignorance, let her wander upon this weathered pier, the place of her past and soon to be future unraveling; 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, of that he was certain and he would make her want to share her pain, remake her trapped in his shadow.

One man’s trash is 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. He wanted the character he was about to play to be convincing, charming, inconspicuous and as irresistibly relatable as possible.

Through the wooden door, cool evening air greeted him into a moonlit night. A delicate aroma from the kitchen downstairs sweetened the harbor 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. If she had no chance to notice his approach, she was not master of the sailor's first impression upon her and he could orchestrate one he liked for her instead.

She had not yet noticed him, distracted by the moonlight dancing on the sea, when he appeared at her side

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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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Yolanda loved the smell of food more than anything.

It reminded her of the good in herself and the size of the world with all its things 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 with shelves to the ceiling, filled with ingredients from the finest gardens, finest fields and finest ships from overseas—well, the finest the Inn Name could afford. Yolanda loved this steamy, little kitchen. She could scarcely turn in place but through the vent, she could see the harbor. A lovely place of novelty, love, and adventure. A sight Yolanda could admire more than any other cook before her, for they would have simply been too short to peek through the vents and notice the winding harbor 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 better make sure no one noticed her peeking through the vent and quickly retracted her head back into the steamy safety of her kitchen; better not risk anyone noticing her wild appearance. With her apron, she cleaned the cracked and fogged up mirror hanging in the shelf to her left. A close inspection of her daunting mane of copper and chestnut hair revealed her tiny horns were still safely hidden away underneath. It relieved her, knowing a stranger walking by would not have seen her horned face peeking through the kitchen vent, but she knew she had to check the mirror before risking detection. She sometimes lost her firm grasp on what was important in life like that, especially when ingesting the world around her or the aromas of food for that matter. A facet of life she had to accept for she dared not risk starvation … or worse. What a curious woman she was. She saw her towering appearance cramped into this tiny kitchen reflected in the mirror, her inquisitive eyes. Her reflection reminded Yolanda of a captured beast she had once seen with a traveling circus. Yolanda felt the strength in her fingers as she clenched her fist. She was well capable of breaking down these puny walls restraining her. The distorted face in the broken reflection met her gaze with cowing eyes, sending an electric shudder down her spine. For a moment she stood there, staring until the scented fumes of tonight's boiling stew 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 savory 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. For it was not the right thing to do.

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A myriad of colors.

The gods show themselves in the tessellation of the elements.

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

The eyes of the Rainbow Serpent's crew were 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 given away all his sugar. There was not enough left for another, final glaze. Only toxic salt encrusting his heart. It was ready for the salvation his tongue was so accustomed to promising. An empty promise. He had yet to see a promise his tongue had made upon 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 upon the sea, he saw the moon reflected in the water, the lanterns' images dancing on the waves.

A myriad of colors.

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

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

Usually, he was great at answering questions. Questions reeking of meaning to hide the vacancy beneath. Giving them the vacant answers the deserved. Practicing on himself, he had become competent at the most revered of the deviancies. Adonai the Liar. Not tonight though. Tonight was finally the 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. He did not.

"Because I've seen one of them magic black cats down in the Inn Name. 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? What else could it be but a divine sign? You cannot hold on to the gods, Adonai, not now. Not on this night of all things. Your mind was made up.

It is a sign of opportunity, of the endless possibilities of life. That treasure is hidden where our eyes dare not look, for it is where it also most dark in 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 see this cat for himself.

A gift from the gods ripe for the taking.

For he had many overdue favors to ask from the gods.

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

A myriad of blackened colors.

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The scent of salt and sweat and rum heralded his entrance.

Accentuated with a hint of black powder. A single note of danger in the symphony of his sailor disguise; not an imitation of the familiar, a calculated homage to an unknown perpetrator of heartache, whose seeds of carelessness had bloomed into magnificent carrion flowers, ready for the reaper.

"Beautiful."

She turned her head. For a short glimpse, she met his gaze with her forlorn eyes—a telling portrait of a forsaken soul—before he lost her attention again, left only with her tense, cold shoulder. She had no interest in any man but him. In the single moment he met her eyes, he knew his assumptions ratified. Of course, he was prepared with multiple contingency plans.

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

She had only eyes for 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.

"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 lay open in the expression on her face. An unveiled secret he would make her unbosom herself, for him. Her quivering mouth still silent, her eyes already crying to him of painful loss; too much pain for a long bygone lover, a year maybe, two at most. As he had predicted; young love was not made to last.

"S'been a year for me. To the day. Was one scurvy old dog and 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, lest he forgets me too—Wherever he be."

Silence.

Only soft, sloshing of waves.

"Sounds familiar. That sort never listens."

Where enough words were spoken, a thousand will follow. He only needed to bait out a few more; she takes another step, the trap will spring, she does not, well, there are plenty more fish in the sea.

"Been some time longer for me."

Blood of wine or blood of vinegar?

"What you need a third cup for?"

She was hooked; certain submission lay just ahead, oh, what an easy catch.

"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."

He looked up from the distant horizon again, right at her. Tears were welling up in her eyes. 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 calamity he had created, awaiting the orchestrated avalanche to pour her right into his dishonest embrace.

"I just miss her so much."

You will miss me more … Wait, Her? How could he have missed that? His intuition had never failed him on this. 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 she can tell me that she loves me and that she's proud of who I've become. Even though I know I can't"

Ooh, this is exactly why he should stick with the noble and rich and keep the fuck away from disasters like this one. How in the name of all that is holy did he miss a dead mother? These damned townspeople and their worthless fucking gossip about nothing—nothing—of importance. They are so goddamned clueless. It was all going so well. He was so close. So goddamn close.

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

"So you're into girls then?"

"What?"

Was he fucking serious? 'So you're into girls then?' Any chance he's had: dead now. 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 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. Though, you're not yet all out of the woods. Still haven't really answered my question: why the third cup?"

If he overthought it again now, he might actually ruin it. 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 needed to tear the wound open anew. As he had just done a moment ago. He could do it again.

He met her sparkling eyes.

It was too late. His opportunity had passed. She was healing. 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 was completely and utterly out of his depth, normally not the kind of person to consider or even recognize such a chance when it arose. Yet here he was, considering. What was good even supposed to mean?

He was sick. He was twisted. He liked making people suffer for his own delight. He was not good. He was the opposite of that. He knew that. He had always known that. Everybody from where he was from had known that. But he had left there a long time ago. As he had left every place he's ever been to, when they had started knowing that.

Laurelle didn't know that.

Could he be better? Could he be good? Could a fish walk on land?

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

Same thing he had planned for her.

"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 can'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 quite cute."

Cute. There she had said it again. He had once made a woman jump off the castle tower after he had unraveled 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. She took a considerably larger one, smiling, even with closed eyes and her face cramped by the spirit burning in her throat. He was helping her move on; not move from a past flame onto him, move one for her own sake.

"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.

Yet, for some goddamn reason, he stayed with Laurelle.

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Yolanda's disposition had settled down again.

The soothing mists of concocting meals had always been there for her; when she feared most losing herself. For her mind and body; a woman of her stature had to eat. On good days she hauled the wagon all the way from market square to the Inn Name without help from the horse Linda or the mule Joey. Not every day, of course; horses and mules were born for this. 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: she was born to cook. At least that was what she has been told since childhood, it was also what she liked to tell herself. She was certainly gifted when it came to the art of spices, patience and she possessed an unfailing intuition when it came to predicting pairings that belonged together.

On her toes, she looked up again through the kitchen vent onto the pier. The couple was still standing there at the pier. They seemed to have become closer. She smiled.

Her hotpot was nearly cooked to perfection. Only a few more additions: a pinch of pepper, a nice amount of salt, 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 harbored an alchemist from distant lands 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 world's sake and her own. Cooking stew. Like every night. Though she never cooked the same dish twice and what a delicacy this particular one had become.

A single taste from the giant pot upon her fire; she could feel her fingertips tingling, the hairs on her neck rising … her horns aching. No, no this could not be. The sound of waves and creaking wood was overpowered by the drumming of her own heartbeat. What was happening? Were the gods punishing her? Why was she predestined, again? She only wanted to cook, be left alone. 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. This room hat barely enough room for her to turn around, yet she was falling, turning, failing. Hair 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 searing hearth. The sight of boiling water blurred with the oily drops floating atop before her very eyes to a messy sea of colors. She could barely maintain her grip on the world threating to sweep her away. There was a crooked ship upon the sea of colors, a liar's queen, a cat as black as night, a brimstone sun, an evil man with a heart of coal. Everything turned upon its head and turned and turned. Evil men. So many evil men. Not as evil as the beast. She saw 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! She saw the hateful grimace burn away. Fire. Fire! So much fire! Devouring everything. Engulfing all.

Yolanda's eyes burnt with rage once more.

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My queen, my sun, I bring tidings of great importance.

He knelt before the bejeweled queen of the Rainbow Serpent. He owed her this one last debt for her deeds.

"I dare not imagine you carry within your heart a declaration of premature departure, Master 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 rumors to my unbelieving ears. I meant to seek your counsel you on this matter. Do they speak true? My heart fears it to be the word of truth. A tongue cut is not a tongue easily regrown. The culprits know the rightful punishment for such disrespect. "

She was a beautiful woman. There was never a day he doubted that. Dressed in fine silks. Weaving mesmerizing tapestries of the foreign language his tongue would perhaps never get used to. It was true though, he had planned to leave or at least leave his farewell. She deserved so much after all she had done for him. Though he was uncertain he could muster the courage of looking into her almond eyes. Sometimes at all. But for certain when he meant 'goodbye'. He would let another deliver the unpleasant news.

But for now, he was still holding on and she deserved knowing of the reason: the black cat. She need not know he wanted the cat only for himself and himself alone, maybe she would understand. 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.

He told her of the sighting of the black cat. Every one of the harbor folk he had asked had confirmed the story. She was an intelligent woman. She knew the powers of trueborn black devils; he needed not to elaborate. He told her of the alchemical ingredients one could harvest from such a creature after it had outlived its purpose. She was an intelligent woman but not intelligent enough to also be versed in the Old Faith. He told her nothing of his plan to keep the cat for himself. She was an intelligent woman but not intelligent enough to not trust him. She would kill him should he prove her wrong.

And she trusted him, with half of her fighting men, for these spice traders knew how to fight and strike fear into the hearts of mean wherever the name of their queen was uttered.

He bit into another leaf of the Senloî tree. 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 colorful, new world.

The men under his command followed him to the Inn Name. The harbor air was calm and sweet. A sign from gods: his fortune was ready 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 impaled head, if there was no other way. Though not today, not in this singular night

"You are the Master of the Old Faith? I have a question."

Could the young man not see he was occupied? He was about to change his life. For the better. Forever. There was no time for the dumbfound questions of forsaken children with the smell of distilled spirits still on their breath.

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

"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 last test of him.

What then is your question, child?

"What … what makes a man … good?"

Of all the ways the gods could have revealed them to him, of course, they settled for nothing short of mockery. The infamous cruelty of the gods. He would make them pay. The time of playing along with their wicked little games was over, he was about to rewrite the rules. His betrayal was justified, may the gods be his witness.

A good man does not squander his life. He seizes the world when he is needed and remains audience to deeds of greater men when he is not.

And 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-eyes girlfriend could witness him.

He bit into two more Senloî leaves; an electrifying tingle curled up his spine. The men followed him through the doors of the Inn Name. He closed his eyes.

A myriad of awful colors.