

THE RESTAURANT OF LOVE REGAINED

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THE RESTAURANT
OF LOVE REGAINED

I CAME HOME FROM my part-time job at the Turkish restaurant to find my apartment empty. Literally everything was gone. The television, the washer, the fridge, the lights, the curtains. Even the entrance mat had been taken! Not a single thing had been spared. For a moment, I wanted to believe I'd walked into the wrong apartment. But no matter how many times I checked, there was no changing the fact I was standing in the love nest I'd shared with my Indian boyfriend, with its heart-shaped stain on the ceiling staring down as indelible evidence.

The entire place looked exactly as it had when the estate agent had first showed it to me. In fact, the only thing different was the slight scent of garam masala that hung in the air and the key I'd had cut for my boyfriend, which now sat catching the light in the middle of the bare living-room floor. Each night, my boyfriend and I had slept here, holding hands under the covers of the futon in this apartment I'd gone through so much trouble to rent. His skin had always carried a scent of exotic spices, and there were photo

postcards of the river Ganges taped along the window sill. I could never read the ornate Hindi script on those cards, but whenever I touched them it felt like holding hands with his family in India. I wondered if I'd be going there with him some day. And what an Indian wedding would be like. My daydreams were as sweet as mango lassi.

The room had been crammed full of keepsakes that we'd accumulated in the three years we'd been living there, with each evoking a precious memory of our time spent together. Every night, I'd cook in our small kitchen as I waited for him to return for dinner. It was a smallish kitchen with a small kitchen sink. But I liked the tiling that went all around it. It was a corner apartment, so there were windows along three walls to let in plenty of light. Some of the happiest moments in my life were when I'd come home from an early shift and basked in the orange sun that streamed in from the western sky while cooking dinner.

We even had a simple gas oven. There was also a little window by the kitchen, so the smells never lingered whenever I cooked dried fish for myself. This kitchen had been the home to my beloved kitchen utensils too. There was the hundred-year-old pestle and mortar that belonged to my late grandmother, a container made of Japanese cypress that I'd used for keeping rice, a Le Creuset enamel pot I'd bought with my first pay cheque, a set of

long-serving chopsticks with extra fine tips I'd found in a speciality shop in Kyoto, an Italian paring knife given to me on my twentieth birthday by the owner of an organic-vegetables shop, a comfortable cotton apron, jade gravel I used for making pickled aubergine, and the traditional cast-iron *nambu* frying pan I'd travelled as far north as Morioka to buy. It was a collection of quality items built to last a lifetime. A collection accumulated over an eternity with whatever I could spare from my meagre monthly pay cheque. And now it was gone.

In a moment of misplaced hope, I opened and searched each and every one of the kitchen cabinets, but my fingers grasped at nothing but air that seemed to hold a hint of what had once been there – the jar of plums my grandmother and I had pickled together, carefully wiping down each one as we went, and the couscous and other ingredients I'd gathered for the cream croquette for my vegetarian boyfriend that evening.

Suddenly, a thought dawned on me and I ran out of the door in my socks. I'd remembered the only Japanese fermented food my boyfriend had been partial to – the vegetables we'd pickled in salted rice-bran paste. It was something he ate every day without exception, and only the bran paste from my grandmother could give it that special flavour he liked. I'd kept its vase in a small closet by the front door, where the temperature and humidity

were always just right – being cooler than the rest of the apartment through the summer but warmer than the fridge in winter. Delicious and homely, it was a keepsake evocative of precious moments with my grandmother and I prayed for it still to be there.

As I opened the door and peered inside, I was delighted to find it was there, sitting silently, waiting for me in the dark. I opened its lid and checked inside, relieved to find it just as I'd left it after smoothing its surface with my hand that morning, with the tips of several light-green leaves poking through. I thought of how each of these leaves led to a stalk that was in turn attached to an aubergine, peeled and with an "X" carved into its side, helping it to soak up the sweet juices and wonderful flavours. Overjoyed that the vase was safe, I swept it up in my arms and cradled it to my chest, feeling its cool ceramic surface against my body – my only remaining worldly possession.

After replacing the lid of the heavy vase, I struggled to tuck it under one arm. Then I returned to the main room, scooped the key up off the floor with my toes, held my basket in my other hand and walked out of my desolate apartment, letting the door slam shut loudly behind me as if closing a chapter of my life. Then, instead of taking the lift, I chose to take the stairs, moving carefully so as not to trip and drop the vase, and set off on my way.

Outside, the moon floated full in the eastern sky and I turned back for another glance at my thirty-year-old building, standing still in the darkness like some oversized monster. I remembered when I'd first found the place and how I'd convinced the landlord to let us rent the apartment, despite us having no guarantor, by sending him a batch of my fresh home-baked madeleines. Then we'd moved in and made it our own. *Our* love nest. And there was no way I could bear to stay there if I was to be alone.

I stopped off at my landlord's place to return the key. It was the end of the month and I'd already paid the next month's rent. The contract had clearly stated that tenants were required to give a full month's notice when leaving. But since I had paid up already and all the furniture was already gone, I figured there should be no problem about me leaving right away.

Since I didn't have a watch or a mobile phone, I couldn't tell what time it was. But I knew where I needed to go. So I dragged my feet through the dark streets, walking the equivalent of several stops along the train line until I came to the main bus terminal. Then I spent most of what money I had left on getting myself a ticket for the overnight bus – the one that would take me back to the village I'd left at the age of fifteen but had never returned to since.

Almost as soon as I boarded with my rice-bran vase in my arms, the bus started up and took off. I sat by the window and watched the city lights pass me by. “Goodbye,” I thought, giving the city a wave in my mind. Then I closed my eyes and let the stressful events of the day disperse like leaves in the autumn wind.

My mother’s house was in a quiet village surrounded by mountains. Nature was all around and I loved that place from the bottom of my heart. But on the night of my high-school graduation, I’d boarded a night bus – like the one I was on now – and set off on a one-way journey. Since that day, my only contact with my mother had been through the exchange of New Year’s cards. Several years after I left home, my mother sent me a New Year’s card bearing a photo of her dressed as a street performer, sitting shoulder to shoulder with her new pet in a flowery dress. That’s how I found out that my mum had replaced me with a pet pig.

When I’d first arrived in the city as a fifteen-year-old, I’d stayed at my grandmother’s place. And ever since then, whenever I’d returned, I’d call out, “I’m home!” as I rattled those old sliding doors open to see her standing in the doorway of the kitchen, welcoming me with the warmest of smiles. Grandmother was my mother’s mother. She lived in an old house on the outskirts of the city and her lifestyle was far from luxurious. But she knew how to make the most of the simple pleasures in

life, treasuring each passing day and moving in harmony with the changing seasons. She spoke with elegance and had a soft demeanour. But beneath that she was strong and self-confident. She was also one of those women who looked great in a kimono. I loved her. I loved being with her. And the ten years since I first arrived at her place had passed in the blink of an eye.

I wiped the mist off the window and stared beyond my reflection, watching the skyscrapers grow smaller behind us and the highway that snaked along in front. Except for occasionally trimming my fringe, I hadn't really cut my hair since I'd met my boyfriend. I'd left it long because he liked it that way and I'd parted it down the middle with a braid on each side that hung down to the middle of my back. I stared at my face in the window again and opened my mouth wide, swallowing down the sodium-yellow-and-black scenery beyond like a humpback whale breathing in a ton of krill. And at that moment, for just a split second, I locked eyes with myself from the past. I thought I'd caught a glimpse of myself ten years ago, sitting on a bus on the other side of the highway, headed in the other direction – my nose pressed up against the window, my mind buzzing with big-city lights. Immediately, I glanced back at the bus as it passed on by. But the moment was gone. With one bus headed towards the past and the other towards the future, the gap between us

grew quickly until it disappeared altogether in the mist that clung to the window.

I don't know precisely when, but at some point I'd decided I wanted to be a professional chef. But my culinary career had been like a transient rainbow in the fading evening light. I'd worked hard in the big city until I'd learnt to talk and to laugh just like the rest of them. Then, one day, my grandmother drew her last quiet breath. I remember coming home late from my job at the Turkish restaurant and finding her. She looked as if she was sleeping next to the low table in the living room, with a delicate napkin covering a plate of doughnuts in the middle. I held my ear to her flat chest, but there was no beat to be heard. I held my hand close to her mouth and nose, but there was no breath to be felt. She was gone and I knew that, so there was no need to call for help. So instead I decided to spend one last night with her. Just her and I, together.

I sat by her side and ate doughnuts all night long as her lifeless body became cold and stiff. I'll never forget the heartwarming taste of those doughnuts – lightly fried in sesame oil, with a delicate sprinkling of poppy seeds and just a dusting of cinnamon and brown sugar. Memories of my grandmother surfaced like bubbles with every bite. Memories of days bathed in warm sunlight. Of my grandmother's pale, veined hand turning the bran in her vase. Her small, rounded back working hard. Her profile

as she placed a small taster of her cooking in her hand and carried it to her mouth. The memories kept on coming, floating in and out of my consciousness.

It had been during this difficult time that I'd met my boyfriend. From Monday to Friday, he worked as a waiter at the Indian restaurant next door to my Turkish restaurant. On the weekends he was a musician in their belly-dancing show. We first ran into each other when we were taking the rubbish out back. And from there we'd progressed to chatting during our breaks and on the way home after work. He was tall, kind, and had beautiful eyes. He was a little younger than me and could only speak a little Japanese. But his awkward language skills combined with his smile helped me forget, even if only for a second now and then, the devastating void left by my grandmother's passing.

When I think back on that time, beautiful images of India and Turkey overlap in my mind. For some reason, I always picture a majestic mosque and a beautiful blue sea stretching out behind my boyfriend, as he sits eating beans and vegetable curry, looking every inch the quintessential Indian with his dark skin and clear eyes. This overlapping of images in my mind no doubt came from the restaurants we'd worked in when we met. By that time, I'd been working at the Turkish restaurant for just under five years, which was the longest I'd ever worked

anywhere. I was only a part-time employee, but I worked just as many hours as a full-timer. And for the second half of my five-year stint, I'd been working in the kitchen, helping the chefs from Turkey make authentic dishes.

People constantly came and went during my time at the restaurant and I soon became overwhelmed by the constant waves of goodbyes and nice-to-meet-yous. The trick was to take a short-term view and live each day at a time. But when I look back on those days now, I realize those days were special. Miraculous, even.

Realizing I should probably call the Turkish restaurant, I let out a sigh. Then I stared at the reflection in the window, with drops of condensation framing a view of passengers sleeping peacefully in their seats and a stretch of transparent blue darkness beyond that heralded the end of the night.

I opened the window to get some fresh air and stretched my back. The sky was slowly turning white and there was a faint smell of salt in the air. I could see rows of white wind turbines standing tall in the grasslands and turning at speed. I also felt cold, with my knee-length skirt, high socks and long T-shirt doing little to stop the chill that seemed to seep in through every pore of my skin. Even the tips of my nails seemed to be feeling the cold.

When the doors hissed open at my destination, the scent of rain drifted in from far away and I stepped out onto the

roundabout of a sad-looking station. The place had changed so little, it was almost as if I'd only been gone for a day. Only, the colours had faded, leaving the whole place drained and washed out, as if someone had sketched the whole scene with pastels, then tried half-heartedly to rub it away.

I had more than an hour to kill before my connecting minibus arrived. So I walked into a nearby convenience store, with its freshly waxed floor exuding the only sense of newness around, and bought some flip cards and a black marker pen with whatever pocket change I could find. Unwrapping the flip cards, I sat down and began to write out the words I'd be needing to use on a daily basis – one word per card to make them as easy to use as possible.

Hello.

Good morning.

The weather is beautiful.

How are you?

Could I have this?

Thank you very much.

Nice to meet you.

Bye. Have a nice day.

Please.

Excuse me. Sorry.

Go ahead.

How much is this?

I did this because I had realized something. Could it have been when I was buying the bus ticket? Or when I'd gone to return my key to the landlord? No, it was before that. It was when I'd walked into my room to find it empty. I had lost my voice.

I guess it must have been a physical reaction to the mental shock I'd suffered. But it wasn't the case that my voice had just become hoarse. It was more than that. I simply wasn't able to talk. As if my voice had been completely switched off. Like when someone turns the volume of the radio all the way down. So the music, the voice, the melodies were all there. They just couldn't be heard by anyone.

I was surprised at this discovery. But there was no pain; no discomfort. It didn't hurt and it didn't itch. If anything, it somehow made me feel a little lighter. I'd even been thinking on the bus about how I never wanted to talk to anyone ever again. So I guess it had worked out perfectly. All I could do was focus on my inner voice, the only voice I could hear. I knew this somehow made sense. But I also knew, from my twenty-five years of life experience, that I wouldn't be able to go far without interacting with others.

I took out my flip cards and wrote on the last one "I have temporarily lost my voice". Then I climbed aboard the cheap minibus. Unlike the other bus that had raced through the night, the minibus ambled along at a much slower pace. In time, the sun came over the horizon and

my stomach started to rumble. Then I remembered my rice ball left over from yesterday's lunch and took it out of my basket, leaving behind a handkerchief, some tissue paper and a wallet containing just a handful of loose change.

I'd made rice balls every morning to take to work. The Turkish restaurant where I worked was too cheap to provide free meals for its staff and my boyfriend and I were doing our best to save money so that one day we could open up a restaurant of our own. For a moment, I wondered if there was any chance this plan might still go ahead. Then those thoughts were washed away, as if a bucket of white paint had been poured right through my mind.

I'd kept all the money we'd been saving in a closet instead of a bank. There were ten-thousand-yen notes in one-hundred-thousand-yen piles. And whenever we'd accumulated ten piles – or a million yen – I'd put them in a sealed envelope and hid them in a rolled-up futon we no longer used. I wondered how many envelopes there'd been in the end. There was more than one. That much was for sure. But before I could think just how much we'd managed to save, down came another bucket of paint to mask my tarnished dreams.

Unwrapping the wrinkled aluminium foil, I took out the half-crushed rice ball, popped it into my hand and carried

it to my mouth. At its heart was the last piece of plum I'd ever pickled with my grandmother and for some reason it tasted unfamiliar. We'd taken turns checking on the pickled plums at night to make sure they didn't develop mould. Then we'd put them out to dry in the summer, laying them out on the veranda for three whole days, during which time we'd massage them with our fingers every three hours or so to soften up the fibres within. Gradually, my grandmother's pickled plums turned a beautiful shade of pink. She didn't even have to add a sprig of red perilla to lend them colour.

I sat there, frozen, for a while, with the last morsel of pickled plum in my mouth. Its sour heart reaching into the very core of my being, its taste more valuable to me than any hidden treasure. As my heart filled up with memories of days spent with my grandmother, tears threatened to overflow from my eyes and spill down my cheeks. But somehow, I managed to keep my despair in a knot that sat somewhere around my throat.

It had been my grandmother who had first taken my hand and led me gently into the world of cookery. At first, I'd just watched. But soon enough, I was standing alongside her in the kitchen, absorbing her many culinary secrets. This was how I'd learnt. Not from my grandmother using words. But from her giving me a tasting at every step of the way. Through this physical experience, I

learnt to recognize how different textures worked together and how much salt was just right for each kind of dish.

Things were different at my mother's house, where cooking consisted of little more than popping open cans or heating things in the microwave. But my grandmother made absolutely everything herself – her own miso, her own soy sauce, even her own sun-dried radishes. I remember being absolutely astonished when I first learnt just how much effort goes into making a single bowl of proper miso soup, with its dried sardines, bonito, soy beans and fermented rice. And those are just the basic ingredients! When she was cooking up her magic, it was as if my grandmother was enveloped in a glorious aura. And when I stood by her side, I felt I was a part of something sacred.

At first, the words my grandmother used to describe differing amounts of seasoning such as *tekitou* and *anbai* were like another language to me. But I gradually came to understand what they meant. They were soft terms with rounded edges that painted a vague picture of the appropriate amount of flavour, and only those words could describe the resultant state of perfection.

In my mouth, the pickled plum had all but melted away, leaving only a tiny seed on my tongue with the fading memories of my grandmother. I glanced out of the window. Autumn had already arrived in the village, but there were traces of summer still lingering. After finishing my

rice ball, I felt a slight chill run through me and I wished I had a hot drink. But I was already perched on the back seat of the bus, with nowhere to get something to drink and no money in my pocket to pay for one. So instead, I cradled the bran vase on my lap, hoping it would somehow help to keep me warm. Then I pressed my forehead to the window and looked outside. A map of my village slowly emerged in my mind like a photograph being developed. And as we wound our way through town and the misty mountains above, I became more nervous and my heart started to pound.

Every time we rounded a curve in the road, we could see the “Twin Peaks” in the distance. Those two mountains of exactly the same size, sitting pertly side by side with an outcrop at the summit of each that painted a mental image of a woman lying on her back. Between the two mountains there was also a famous spot where you could bungee jump, plummeting down into the canyon below while being flanked by those enormous breasts. “Welcome to Bungee Jump Valley!” said the shocking-pink flags that lined the narrow mountain road with a width that could accommodate only one vehicle at a time.

As I got off the bus, I flashed the driver a flip card that read “Thank you very much”. Then I started to walk in the direction of my mother’s house, passing by those shocking-pink signs with the bran vase tucked tightly

under my arm as several drops of rain started to fall from the grey sky above.

Needing to pee along the way, I crouched down in some roadside bushes. There was no need to worry about being spotted. After all, there were less than five thousand people living in my village and you almost never ran into anybody on one of these mountain paths. So my only spectator was a tiny tree frog that watched me pee, jumped onto my finger and hopped down onto my palm.

Bidding farewell to the tree frog, I continued along the mountain path lined with cedars, noticing a squirrel scurry by with its fluffy tail held high. The Twin Peaks were close now and I felt another shiver run through my body as I approached my mother's house. I stood out in front for a moment, with the bran vase under one arm and my basket on the other, and looked on at the house that other people in the village referred to as "Ruriko Palace", after my mother. It was a large house and the same property was also home to Amour – a bar my mother ran – as well as a storage hut and several fields. It was a place filled with layers and layers of memories for me, like an intricate *millefeuille*.

By the front gate was a palm tree that must have been planted some time after I'd left. But it seemed ill suited to the mountain climate, leaning heavily to one side and with brown leaves at its base. I gazed across the breadth

of the property – the only levelled land in the whole forest – which had originally been owned by my mother’s lover, Neocon. The house had been designed to look luxurious. But now the sheen had worn off, it just looked like a cheaply built structure with a dirty grey exterior that made it seem as if it had been showered with ashes from above. If I could take a bulldozer and tear the whole place to the ground, I would.

Neocon was the president of the Negishi Tsuneo Concrete Company, which was very well known in the local area. Apparently, Neocon had been his nickname since elementary school. As for me, I was born to a single mother and never knew who my father was, but I desperately wanted to believe it wasn’t him.

I sneaked past the main house, past Bar Amour, and headed to the fields out back. I knew my mother didn’t trust the banks, so she kept her money hidden in a champagne bottle, which she buried back there. I’d only come to know about it because I’d once caught her burying it in the middle of the night. But if I could find it, then I could run off with it and start my life anew.

As I stepped across the soil, hailstones started to fall from the grey skies above. I noticed vegetables growing from the soil, which surprised me since Mum had never taken any interest in farming whatsoever. Perhaps she’d got one of her other lovers to work the field. There were potatoes,

green onions, Japanese radishes and carrots, and though it was neither the time nor the place to think about it, this array of fresh vegetables gave me a sudden urge to cook.

When I reached a scarecrow that looked somehow out of place, I started to dig at its base. Most people would never dream of burying their money in such an obvious spot. But then, my mum wasn't like most people. After several minutes of pushing through the soil I succeeded only in digging up an old treasure box that I'd buried myself many years before. At first I didn't recognize it because it was covered in dirt, but as I wiped off the mud I recognized the familiar biscuit tin. With a hint of fear, I carefully opened the lid to find a rusty interior crammed with memorable items I'd long since forgotten. There was my favourite water pistol I used to carry with me all the time – the one I used to fill with juice so I could squirt it into my mouth whenever I got thirsty, or fill with water so I could shower the turtle I'd once taken home from a festival. There was a yo-yo I'd often played with when there was nothing better to do, letting it go up, down, up, down, from my perch on the branch of my favourite fig tree. There was a white stone with the word "MUM" written on it that had been important to me as a kind of stress-relieving tool. I'd throw it against the concrete ground to release my frustration and anger whenever my mum had told me off, and on the back of it was a childish sketch

of her, with eyes, a nose and a crude mouth scrawled in clumsy crayon. There was also a little stuffed panda, a gold wrapper from the first piece of imported chocolate I ever ate, a scented eraser, a butterfly wing I found on the street, a piece of snake skin and the shells of clams I'd eaten. It was a biscuit tin filed with previously precious things, all of which had long since lost their value to me, and I stood there in a daze wondering what on earth to do with them.

When I closed my eyes, various memories came back to me. Whether I was eating a snack, eating dinner, watching TV, doing homework, taking a bath or sleeping, I'd always been alone, while my mum had always kept herself busy, flaunting her sex appeal and entertaining the customers at Bar Amour. For a moment, I felt like playing with my old yo-yo again. But before I could, there was a loud bang by the door of the main house and a round white blob suddenly came rushing towards me. It was a pig! The same one I'd seen on my mother's New Year's cards every year. And it was charging towards me with the power of a raging bull. Before I could even let out a gasp, the pig was already right in front of me. My mum had been sharing her house with that porcine lodger ever since I'd left home. It was a lot bigger than I'd expected, and really quite intimidating when you saw it up close.

I turned and ran for my life. But the pig was a lot faster than I'd expected and I ended up tripping on vegetable roots several times as the distance closed between us. At one point, one of my shoes fell off, but I just kept on running. And every time its snout poked me in the bottom, I feared it might gobble me up. They were omnivores, after all, which meant they could eat anything. So why not a human?

Little did I know the worst was yet to come. Only moments later, alerted by the sounds of my panic, my mother came running out of the house yelling, "Thief! Thief!" She was dressed in a lace teddy and black rubber boots and had probably not been in bed long after finishing up her night shift at the bar. But scariest of all, she had a sickle in her hand and she didn't seem to recognize me at all! As she ran across the field, ten years older and without make-up, she looked like a middle-aged transvestite who'd had a bit of work done. And as she got closer, I could make out the scent of her sickly sweet perfume that mingled with the smells of the soil and it made me want to vomit.

Luckily she wasn't entirely blind. Just as she was about to bring the sickle down on me she finally recognized me, leading us both to freeze in place in stunned silence. Funnily enough, the first thing I noticed was my mother's breasts. She wasn't wearing a bra and they were clearly visible through the thin material of her teddy. But after

all these years, they were still great breasts. Just like those famous Twin Peaks I'd seen from the road.

As I stood staring at my mother with my mouth gaping open, having momentarily forgotten about the flip cards in my basket, she stood staring back at me – her shoulders heaving with her breath that came out in dragon-like puffs of mist. Then, after locking eyes for several moments, she simply turned and walked back to the house, pausing only to gesture for the pig to follow, which it did with tiny steps and a wave of its spiral tail.

It was an absolute worst-case scenario. I'd failed to find her stash of money, but she'd succeeded in finding me, and now my clothes were all covered in mud too. My dream of starting anew somewhere had suddenly evaporated and I didn't even have enough money to take the next minibus back to the terminal. So there was only one place I could go. I put the tin of treasures back into the hole I'd dug earlier and covered it with dirt. Then I retrieved my shoe, picked up grandmother's vase and my basket, brushed myself down and prepared to meet my maker.

As I strode towards the house, I could taste dirt in my mouth. I thought of how it had been ten years since I'd called this place home. Then I looked over to a massive pen by the side of the house, to the place where the pig called Hermes called home, with its big painted nameplate above.

After taking a bath, I sipped on my mum's lukewarm and slightly sour coffee and wrote my conversation in pen on the back of one of her flyers. I'd changed into a pair of pyjamas she'd lent me that still carried the heavy scent of her perfume. And for some reason, rather than answering directly to me, my mum decided to reply to me by writing on the back of the flyer in a pen of a different colour, which reminded me of what nice penmanship she had. Mine, on the other hand, was dismal. And being tired and nervous made it worse, leading me to cringe as I scrawled down tiny odd-shaped letters that looked like drowning worms.

We moved over to the *kotatsu*, where we sat facing each other, still conversing entirely in writing. There was a huge expanse of time that had grown between her and I. Like a mountain made of years, with a summit so high that it hurt to try and see it.

Since the bottom line of my situation was that I was broke, I tried asking my mum for a loan. But as I'd expected, she shot me down immediately. She wasn't so cold-hearted that she could let her daughter sleep on the street though. So, in return for promising to take care of Hermes, she agreed to let me move back in – as long as I paid for my food, utilities and rent, of course, which would require me to find another job.

Looking for a job, however, was not going to be such an easy thing. After all, this was a really secluded village with