Humane Treatment

I threw another pair of yellowing breeches into my beaten, brown leather suitcase. The luggage wobbled with the force of my throw, threatening to topple the heap of wool tunics and cotton cardigans piled there, but I didn’t care. I was facing bigger issues than crinkles in my clothes. My face was damp with sweat despite the cold air leaking in from outside. My hands shook as I straightened the loose papers scattered all around the house. There wasn’t much to pack, and for once I was glad. I didn’t have long.

I slammed open cupboard doors and yanked out drawers, but in the midst of the chaos, I stopped, and picked up a scribbled drawing of two figures in a sunny field. It was a children’s sketch, with scribbled blue skies and crudely drawn characters, their difference in height suggesting this was a picture of parent and child, rather than lovers or friends. The two figures were holding hands.

Cringing, I tossed the picture aside, and thought, as I continued to grab rags and stuff them into my small bag, about the moment that brought us here. The day Katrina and I had gone to the park, a small field on the outskirts of our village.

*“Daddy,” she said, in her grating, singsong voice, “Can I play with the fairies?”*

*“Fairies?” I’d asked, confused, “What are you talking about, Katrina?”*

*“They’re right there, can’t you see them?” she’d whined, pointing towards an empty patch of grass. “They want me to help build up their castle. They need protecting from the monster.”*

*“Oh – yes, I see,” I had smiled with forced patience, “Alright, go on and play, then. I’ll stay here.”*

*She galloped off, laughing and twirling, her golden hair spinning out behind her. I crossed my arms and frowned; she danced around on the green expanse of earth, the bright sunlight glittering off her beautiful, scaly skin.*

*Suddenly, a wiry, old hand with skin stretched too thinly over frail bone latched onto my shoulder and yanked. I recoiled in horror at the crinkled, pasty face with white eyes, scarred and set deeply back into her face. It was a she, I knew, from the thinning grey braid that lay lifeless on her back. This was a Syr witch, a powerful and dangerous being, with unnatural strength, and magic beyond my mortal imagination.*

*“You will bring us the girl,” her raspy voice croaked. “By sundown, to the south ravine. She is ours, and you cannot keep her here.”*

*And then she was gone, not in flash of smoke or wind, but in utter silence.*

*What was I to do?* I wailed, slamming shut my suitcase and darting out the door. Nobody ever disobeyed the Syr witches. Or, if anyone had, they’d all ended up dead, because no one had heard from them. There were tales of what the Syr witches could do: scatter your bones into dust, melt your organs into stew. Burn up the very essence of one’s being, until all you were was a shriveled shell, curled like a fetus in the womb*. No, I do not regret my decision,* I thought as I walked swiftly up the dirt road, *I’d had no other choice.* But still, the memory of Katrina creeped in, like mist into an early morning.

*“Daddy, no!” Katrina screamed, as I dragged her down the dirt path that lead to the south, “I don’t want to go! Please, Daddy, stop!”*

*“I’m sorry, Katrina,” my voice cracked as I tightened my grip on her arm. She struggled and clawed, but a little girl was no match for me. “Darling, I’m sorry. I have no choice.”*

*She screamed long and loud into the clear blue sky, and raked her short claws across my skin. Instinctively, I cried out, and loosened my grip, four thin trails of blood now leaking down my arm. Katrina stumbled back from the sudden release, propelled on by the strength of her fight and shimmied loose by the momentum. The heel of her shiny black shoe caught on a root sticking out from the ground, and she began to fall back.*

*“No!” I cried out, lunging forward. But it was too late. Katrina’s wide eyes and gasping mouth were the last thing I saw before her head – crack! – broke on the jagged surface of a rock.*

I shuddered and closed my eyes. Why did these memories haunt me? I. Was. Not. Guilty. I did not wish for my little girl to die. “*She is ours,” the Syr witch had said.* A small voice in the back of my mind replayed the scene in black and white. *You’ve killed one of their own,* it threatened, *And you will surely be punished.*

*“Raoul Malison,*” I stumbled in my tracks at the new, booming voice that rattled down to my very soul. *“You stand accused of killing a Syr witch on the eve of her initiation. How do you plead?”* The female voice held no remorse as it echoed through my mind.

“Not guilty!” I cried. “Please, I didn’t know! She was my daughter –“

*“She was your daughter, and yet she is dead.”* the voice rang out, like bells in a church. “She was under your care, and now is killed. Do you have anything to say?”

“I only thought –” I started to say, but a gleeful cackling slithered into my mind and cut me off.

*“Oh, you and I know he has no reason, Sister,”* this second voice squealed, *“But let him try, anyway. Oh, how I love to watch them squirm –”*

*“Enough,”* the first voice ordered, sounding exhausted and very old. *“If the suspect cannot provide defense, then the answer is clear. Raoul Malison, you have been sentenced. You will now receive punishment.”* The voice disappeared, and I could feel the smoky tendrils of its power seep out from my brain.

“No, wait!” I cried out desperately as I increased my pace, now stumbling off the path and into the forest, hoping the dark shelter of trees and rough ground would hide me from the icy feeling in my soul. I felt a pull at my mind, an alluring call urging me to turn around and face my fate, but I forced myself to step forward, and pushed the feeling from my mind.

I had abandoned my bag and jacket by now, but despite that fact, it seemed that every tree root and wet puddle, every cawing crow and screeching vulture, served the sole purpose of slowing me down. The creased and weathered tree trunks looked like faces in the dim light, and I thought the Syr’s milky eyes stared out from every one. A damp dirt odour permeated the air, and the thin fog grew thicker and thicker as I descended deeper into the woods. At last, I had to slow down in order to see where I was going.

This deep in the forest, birds’ calls were faint, and the small rodents and reptiles that I had passed earlier on were either gone or hiding, with not the slightest rustle of leaves to indicate where they had gone. I trudged on, careful to not slip on wet leaves, until eventually a wall of pale grey rock appeared immediately in front of me. I whipped my head around, not understanding how this could be possible – I had never heard anyone speak of a cliff wall at the back edge of the forest. Then again, I doubted anyone had ever been this far before.

Staying close to the wall so as not to get lost, I began to creep along the side of the cliff and look for some sort of way around. The air grew mistier the more I walked, and soon the only thing I could see was the grey slate of the cliff and the white pillows of fog that seemed to isolate me from the world. I thought I heard a child’s laugh in the distance, but it disappeared a moment later, and I decided it was just my imagination. I walked for a long time, and I was considering heading back when I came across the smooth, rounded entrance to a cave.

I was not quite comfortable with the idea of stepping into the cavern, but I was even less prepared to spend the rest of the night in the woods. So I stepped in, and was immediately rewarded by an absence of fog, and the comforting presence of a faint orange glow emanating from around the corner at the end of the cave. If I had been fully under my own control, I might’ve questioned the presence of a fire in an empty cave, but as it was, I was scared and tired, and so quietly picked my way along the cave’s stone floor, peering around at patches of glittering sapphire, and ruby, and gold that hid in crevices along the walls. I began to feel calm, and safe, and I walked as in a dream, floating towards the sound of a woman’s cradling voice; it was humming a lullaby I had often sung to my Katrina, and it appeared to be coming from around the same corner as the fire’s warm glow. As I grew closer to the corner, the song got louder and louder, and then I stepped around the bend.

My eyes widened in shock and I spun to run away, but a frail and veiny hand grasped my cloak with such strength that I could not move. There stood all the Syr, not just the one from the park, the one with her iron grip on my shirt, but thousands and thousands of witches, all covered by cloaks and filling every crevice in the room. Front and center, two witches stood next to a glistening, blue pool of water; but unlike the others, their hoods were off, and their smiling, toothless faces reminded me of what I had done.

“P-please,” I said shaking, trying to yank myself out of my captor’s hold, “I t-tried to bring her, I swear –“

“Silence,” the witch on the left spoke, and I recognized her as the first voice that had judged me in my trial, “You killed a Syr witch, your own flesh and blood. The punishment is decided.”

“S-she would not come!” I pleaded desperately. The witch holding me captive had begun to drag me forward, and I thrashed madly about in her hands. “I didn’t mean for her to die, I promise! Please, you have to believe –“

Sharp pain pierced my temple, and I fell to my knees in agony. I cried out as my bones snapped and shriveled, shrinking and knitting back together to change the structure of my spine. Light flashed behind my eyes as my scaled skin ripped into bloody shreds, and was replaced by a smooth, fleshy outer coat, with hands sensitive and receptive to the cool stone of the cave floor. Tufts of brown, matted hair clawed their way out through my scalp, and I screamed.

“The transformation is complete.” The first Syr said, and I felt the grip releasing on my cloak. I dragged my broken body to the pool as they watched, and cringed in revulsion at the reflection inside.

In place of my emerald green and sapphire scales, I had hairless, pale pink skin, and wide, chocolate saucers replaced my beady yellow eyes. My sharp, thin teeth had been replaced by dull white rows of squares, and my claws were nothing more than flimsy, colourless plates of nail.

“What did you do to me?” my scratchy voice squeaked, but I already knew.

“Oh, can’t you tell?” The young Syr on the right cackled and clasped her hands together. “You acted the part, and so we changed you. Changed you to something with which we think you can relate. To something *human.*”

Her joyful scream was the last thing I heard before I passed out on the cold, stone floor.

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