

DAUGHTER
of SMOKE
and
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POISON KITCHEN

The rest of the school day was uneventful. A double period of chemistry and color lab, followed by master drawing and lunch, after which Zuzana went to puppetry and Karou to painting, both three-hour studio classes that released them into the same full winter dark by which they'd arrived that morning.

'Poison?' inquired Zuzana as they stepped out the door.

'You have to ask?' said Karou. 'I'm starved.'

They bent their heads against the icy wind and headed toward the river.

The streets of Prague were a fantasia scarcely touched by the twenty-first century – or the twentieth or nineteenth, for that matter. It was a city of alchemists and dreamers, its medieval cobbles once trod by golems, mystics, invading armies. Tall houses glowed goldenrod and carmine and eggshell blue, embellished with Rococo plasterwork and capped in roofs of uniform red. Baroque cupolas were the soft green of antique

copper, and Gothic steeples stood ready to impale fallen angels. The wind carried the memory of magic, revolution, violins, and the cobbled lanes meandered like creeks. Thugs wore Mozart wigs and pushed chamber music on street corners, and marionettes hung in windows, making the whole city seem like a theater with unseen puppeteers crouched behind velvet.

Above it all loomed the castle on the hill, its silhouette as sharp as thorns. By night it was floodlit, bathed in eerie light, and this evening the sky hung low, full-bellied with snow, making gauzy halos around the street lamps.

Down by the Devil's Stream, Poison Kitchen was a place rarely stumbled upon by chance; you had to know it was there, and duck under an unmarked stone arch into a walled graveyard, beyond which glowed the lamp-lit windowpanes of the cafe.

Unfortunately, tourists no longer had to rely on chance to discover the place; the latest edition of the Lonely Planet guide had outed it to the world –

The church once attached to this medieval priory burned down some three hundred years ago, but the monks' quarters remain, and have been converted to the strangest cafe you'll find anywhere, crowded with classical statues all sporting the owner's collection of WWI gas masks. Legend has it that back in the Middle Ages, the cook lost his mind and murdered the whole priory with a poisoned vat of goulash, hence the cafe's ghoulish name and signature dish: goulash, of course. Sit on a velvet sofa and prop your feet up on a coffin. The skulls behind the bar may or may not belong to the murdered monks...

– and for the past half year backpackers had been poking their heads through the arch, looking for some morbid Prague to write postcards about.

This evening, though, the girls found it quiet. In the corner a foreign couple was taking pictures of their children wearing gas masks, and a few men hunched at the bar, but most of the tables – coffins, flanked by low velvet settees – were unoccupied. Roman statues were everywhere, life-size gods and nymphs with missing arms and wings, and in the middle of the room stood a copy of the huge equestrian Marcus Aurelius from Capitoline Hill.

‘Oh, good, Pestilence is free,’ said Karou, heading toward the sculpture. Massive emperor and horse both wore gas masks, like every other statue in the place, and it had always put Karou in mind of the first horseman of the Apocalypse, Pestilence, sowing plague with one outstretched arm. The girls’ preferred table was in its shadow, having the benefit of both privacy and a view of the bar – through the horse’s legs – so they could see if anyone interesting came in.

They dropped their portfolios and hung their coats from Marcus Aurelius’s stone fingertips. The one-eyed owner raised his hand from behind the bar, and they waved back.

They’d been coming here for two and a half years, since they were fifteen and in their first year at the Lyceum. Karou had been new to Prague and had known no one. Her Czech was freshly acquired (by *wish*, not study; Karou collected languages, and that’s what Brimstone always gave her for her birthday) and it had still tasted strange on her tongue, like a new spice.

She’d been at a boarding school in England before that, and

though she was capable of a flawless British accent, she had stuck with the American one she'd developed as a child, so that was what her classmates had thought she was. In truth, she had claim to no nationality. Her papers were all forgeries, and her accents – all except one, in her first language, which was not of human origin – were all fakes.

Zuzana was Czech, from a long line of marionette artisans in Český Krumlov, the little jewel box of a city in southern Bohemia. Her older brother had shocked the family by going into the army, but Zuzana had puppets in the blood and was carrying on the family tradition. Like Karou, she'd known no one else at school and, as fortune would have it, early in the first term they'd been paired up to paint a mural for a local primary school. That had entailed a week of evenings spent up ladders, and they'd taken to going to Poison Kitchen afterward. This was where their friendship had taken root, and when the mural was finished, the owner had hired them to paint a scene of skeletons on toilets in the cafe's bathroom. He'd paid them a month of suppers for their labor, ensuring they would keep coming back, and a couple of years later, they still were.

They ordered bowls of goulash, which they ate while discussing Kaz's stunt, their chemistry teacher's nose hair – which Zuzana asserted was braidable – and ideas for their semester projects. Soon, talk shifted to the handsome new violinist in the orchestra of the Marionette Theatre of Prague.

'He has a girlfriend,' lamented Zuzana.

'What? How do you know?'

'He's always texting on his breaks.'

'That's your evidence? Flimsy. Maybe he secretly fights

crime, and he's texting infuriating riddles to his nemesis,' suggested Karou.

'Yes, I'm sure that's it. *Thank you.*'

'I'm just saying, there could be other explanations than a girlfriend. Anyway, since when are you shy? Just talk to him already!'

'And say what? *Nice fiddling, handsome man?*'

'Absolutely.'

Zuzana snorted. She worked as an assistant to the theater's puppeteers on the weekends and had developed a crush on the violinist some weeks before Christmas. Though not usually bashful, she had yet to even speak to him. 'He probably thinks I'm a kid,' she said. 'You don't know what it's like, being child-size.'

'Marionette-size,' said Karou, who felt no pity whatsoever. She thought Zuzana's tininess was perfect, like a fairy you found in the woods and wanted to put in your pocket. Though in Zuzana's case the fairy was likely to be rabid, and *bite*.

'Yeah, Zuzana the marvelous human marionette. Watch her dance.' Zuzana did a jerky, puppetlike version of ballet arms.

Inspired, Karou said, 'Hey! That's what you should do for your project. Make a giant puppeteer, and you be the marionette. You know? You could make it so that when you move, it's like, I don't know, reverse puppetry. Has anyone done that before? You're the puppet, dancing from strings, but really it's your movements that are making the puppeteer's hands move?'

Zuzana had been lifting a piece of bread to her mouth, and she paused. Karou knew by the way her friend's eyes went dreamy that she was envisioning it. She said, 'That would be a really big puppet.'

‘I could do your makeup, like a little marionette ballerina.’

‘Are you sure you want to give it to me? It’s your idea.’

‘What, like I’m going to make a giant marionette? It’s all yours.’

‘Well, thanks. Do you have any ideas for yours yet?’

Karou didn’t. Last semester when she’d taken costuming she had constructed angel wings that she could wear on a harness, rigged to operate by a pulley system so she could lift and lower them. Fully unfolded, they gave her a wingspan of twelve magnificent feet. She’d worn them to show Brimstone, but had never even made it in to see him. Issa had stopped her in the vestibule and – gentle Issa! – had actually *hissed* at her, cobra hood flaring open in a way Karou had seen only a couple of times in her whole life. ‘An *angel*, of all abominations! Get them off! Oh, sweet girl, I can’t stand the sight of you like that.’ It was all very odd. The wings hung above the bed now in Karou’s tiny flat, taking up one entire wall.

This semester she needed to come up with a theme for a series of paintings, but so far nothing had set her mind on fire. As she was pondering ideas, she heard the tinkle of bells on the door. A few men came in, and a darting shadow behind them caught Karou’s eye. It was the size and shape of a crow, but it was nothing so mundane.

It was Kishmish.

She straightened up and cast a quick glance at her friend. Zuzana was sketching puppet ideas in her notebook and barely responded when Karou excused herself. She went into the bathroom and the shadow followed, low and unseen.

Brimstone’s messenger had the body and beak of a crow but

the membranous wings of a bat, and his tongue, when it flicked out, was forked. He looked like an escapee from a Hieronymus Bosch painting, and he was clutching a note with his feet. When Karou took it, she saw that his little knifelike talons had pierced the paper through.

She unfolded it and read the message, which took all of two seconds, as it said only, *Errand requiring immediate attention. Come.*

'He never says please,' she remarked to Kishmish.

The creature cocked his head to one side, crow-style, as if to inquire, *Are you coming?*

'I'm coming, I'm coming,' said Karou. 'Don't I always?'

To Zuzana, a moment later, she said, 'I have to go.'

'What?' Zuzana looked up from her sketchbook. 'But, dessert.' It was there on the coffin: two plates of apple strudel, along with tea.

'Oh, damn,' said Karou. 'I can't. I have an errand.'

'You and your errands. What do you have to do, so all of a sudden?' She glanced at Karou's phone, sitting on the coffin, and knew she had gotten no phone call.

'Just things,' said Karou, and Zuzana let it drop, knowing from experience that she'd get no specifics.

Karou had things to do. Sometimes they took a few hours; other times, she was gone for days and returned weary and disheveled, maybe pale, maybe sunburned, or with a limp, or possibly a bite mark, and once with an unshakable fever that had turned out to be malaria.

'Just where did you happen to pick up a tropical disease?' Zuzana had demanded, to which Karou had replied, 'Oh, I don't

know. On the tram, maybe? This old woman did sneeze right in my face the other day.'

'That is *not* how you get malaria.'

'I know. It was gross, though. I'm thinking of getting a moped so I don't have to take the tram anymore.'

And that was the end of that discussion. Part of being friends with Karou was resignation to never really knowing her. Now Zuzana sighed and said, 'Fine. Two strudels for me. Any resulting fat is your fault,' and Karou left Poison Kitchen, the shadow of an almost-crow darting out the door before her.

ELSEWHERE

Kishmish took to the sky and was gone in a flutter. Karou watched, wishing she could follow. What magnitude of wish, she wondered, would it take to endow her with flight?

One far more powerful than she'd ever have access to.

Brimstone wasn't stingy with scuppies. He let her refresh her necklace as often as she liked from his chipped teacups full of beads, and he paid her in bronze shings for the errands she ran for him. A shing was the next denomination of wish, and it could do more than a scuppy – Svetla's caterpillar eyebrows were a case in point, as were Karou's tattoo removal and her blue hair – but she had never gotten her hands on a wish that could work any real magic. She never would, either, unless she earned it, and she knew too well how humans earned wishes. Chiefly: hunting, graverobbing, and murder.

Oh, and there was one other way: a particular form of self-mutilation involving pliers and a deep commitment.

It wasn't like in the storybooks. No witches lurked at crossroads disguised as crones, waiting to reward travelers who shared their bread. Genies didn't burst from lamps, and talking fish didn't bargain for their lives. In all the world, there was only one place humans could get wishes: Brimstone's shop. And there was only one currency he accepted. It wasn't gold, or riddles, or kindness, or any other fairy-tale nonsense, and no, it wasn't souls, either. It was weirder than any of that.

It was teeth.

Karou crossed the Charles Bridge and took the tram north to the Jewish Quarter, a medieval ghetto that had given way to a dense concentration of Art Nouveau apartment buildings as pretty as cakes. Her destination was the service entrance in the rear of one of them. The plain metal door didn't look like anything special, and in and of itself, it wasn't. If you opened it from without, it revealed only a mildewed laundry room. But Karou didn't open it. She knocked and waited, because when the door was opened from *within*, it had the potential to lead someplace quite different.

It swung open and there was Issa, looking just as she did in Karou's sketchbooks, like a snake goddess in some ancient temple. Her serpent coils were withdrawn into the shadows of a small vestibule. 'Blessings, darling.'

'Blessings,' Karou returned fondly, kissing her cheek. 'Did Kishmish make it back?'

'He did,' said Issa, 'and he felt like an icicle on my shoulder. Come in now. It's freezing in your city.' She was guardian of the threshold, and she ushered Karou inside, closing the door behind her so the two of them were alone in a space no bigger

than a closet. The outer door of the vestibule had to seal completely before the inner one could be opened, in the manner of safety doors at aviaries that prevent birds from escaping. Only, in this case, it wasn't for birds.

'How was your day, sweet girl?' Issa had some half dozen snakes on her person – wound around her arms, roaming through her hair, and one encircling her slim waist like a belly dancer's chain. Anyone seeking entry would have to submit to wearing one around the neck before the inner door would unseal – anyone but Karou, that is. She was the only human who entered the shop uncollared. She was trusted. After all, she'd grown up in this place.

'It's been a day,' Karou sighed. 'You won't believe what Kaz did. He showed up to be the model in my drawing class.'

Issa had not met Kaz, of course, but she knew him the same way Kaz knew her: from Karou's sketchbooks. The difference was that while Kaz thought Issa and her perfect breasts were an erotic figment of Karou's imagination, Issa knew Kaz was real.

She and Twiga and Yasri were as hooked on Karou's sketchbooks as her human friends were, but for the opposite reason. They liked to see the normal things: tourists huddled under umbrellas, chickens on balconies, children playing in the park. And Issa especially was fascinated by the nudes. To her, the human form – plain as it was, and not spliced together with other species – was a missed opportunity. She was always scrutinizing Karou and making such pronouncements as, 'I think antlers would suit you, sweet girl,' or 'You'd make a lovely serpent,' in just the way a human might suggest a new hairstyle or shade of lipstick.

Now, Issa's eyes lit up with ferocity. 'You mean he came to your school? The scandalous rodent-loaf! Did you draw him? Show me.' Outraged or not, she wouldn't miss an opportunity to see Kaz naked.

Karou pulled out her pad and flipped it open.

'You scribbled out the best part,' Issa accused.

'Trust me, it's not that great.'

Issa giggled into her hand as the shop door creaked open to admit them, and Karou stepped across the threshold. As always, she felt the slightest wave of nausea at the transition.

She was no longer in Prague.

Even though she had lived in Brimstone's shop, she still didn't understand where it was, only that you could enter through doorways all over the world and end up right here. As a child she used to ask Brimstone where exactly 'here' was, only to be told brusquely, '*Elsewhere.*'

Brimstone was not a fan of questions.

Wherever it was, the shop was a windowless clutter of shelves that looked like some kind of tooth fairy's dumping ground – if, that is, the tooth fairy trafficked in all species. Viper fangs, canines, grooved elephant molars, overgrown orange incisors from exotic jungle rodents – they were all collected in bins and apothecary chests, strung in garlands that draped from hooks, and sealed in hundreds of jars you could shake like maracas.

The ceiling was vaulted like a crypt's, and small things scurried in the shadows, their tiny claws scritch-scratching on stone. Like Kishmish, these were creatures of disparate parts: scorpion-mice, gecko-crabs, beetle-rats. In the damp around the drains were snails with the heads of bullfrogs, and overhead,

the ubiquitous moth-winged hummingbirds hurled themselves at lanterns, setting them swaying with the creak of copper chains.

In the corner, Twiga was bent over his work, his ungainly long neck bowed like a horseshoe as he cleaned teeth and banded them with gold to be strung onto catgut. A clatter came from the kitchen nook that was Yasri's domain.

And off to the left, behind a huge oak desk, was Brimstone himself. Kishmish was perched in his usual place on his master's right horn, and spread out on the desk were trays of teeth and small chests of gems. Brimstone was stringing them into a necklace and did not look up. 'Karou,' he said. 'I believe I wrote "errand requiring *immediate* attention."'

'Which is exactly why I came immediately.'

'It's been' – he consulted his pocket watch – 'forty minutes.'

'I was across town. If you want me to travel faster, give me wings, and I'll race Kishmish back. Or just give me a gaviel, and I'll wish for flight myself.'

A gaviel was the second most powerful wish, certainly sufficient to grant the power of flight. Still bent over his work, Brimstone replied, 'I think a flying girl would not go unnoticed in your city.'

'Easily solved,' said Karou. 'Give me *two* gavriels, and I'll wish for invisibility, too.'

Brimstone looked up. His eyes were those of a crocodile, luteous gold with vertical slit pupils, and they were not amused. He would not, Karou knew, give her any gavriels. She didn't ask out of hope, but because his complaint was so unfair. Hadn't she come running as soon as he'd called?

'I could trust you with gavriels, could I?' he asked.

‘Of course you could. What kind of question is that?’

She felt his appraisal, as if he were mentally reviewing every wish she’d ever made.

Blue hair: frivolous.

Erasing pimples: vain.

Wishing off the light switch so she didn’t have to get out of bed: lazy.

He said, ‘Your necklace is looking quite short. Have you had a busy day?’

Her hand flew to cover it. Too late. ‘Why do you have to notice everything?’ No doubt the old devil somehow knew exactly what she’d used these scuppies for and was adding it to his mental list:

Making ex-boyfriend’s cranny itch: vindictive.

‘Such pettiness is beneath you, Karou.’

‘He deserved it,’ she replied, forgetting her earlier shame. Like Zuzana had said, bad behavior should be punished. She added, ‘Besides, it’s not like you ask your traders what they’re going to use their wishes for, and I’m sure they do a hell of a lot worse than make people *itch*.’

‘I expect you to be better than them,’ Brimstone said simply.

‘Are you suggesting that I’m *not*?’

The tooth-traders who came to the shop were, with few exceptions, about the worst specimens humanity had to offer. Though Brimstone did have a small coterie of longtime associates who did not turn Karou’s stomach – such as the retired diamond dealer who had on a number of occasions posed as her grandmother to enroll her in schools – mostly they were a stinking, soul-dead lot with crescents of gore under their

fingernails. They killed and maimed. They carried pliers in their pockets for extracting the teeth of the dead – and sometimes the living. Karou loathed them, and she was certainly better than them.

Brimstone said, ‘Prove that you are, by using wishes for good.’

Nettled, she asked, ‘Who are you to talk about *good*, anyway?’ She gestured to the necklace clutched in his huge clawed hands. Crocodile teeth – those would be from the Somali. Also wolf fangs, horse molars, and hematite beads. ‘I wonder how many animals died in the world today because of you. Not to mention people.’

She heard Issa suck in a surprised breath, and she knew she should shut up, but her mouth kept moving. ‘No, really. You do business with killers, and you don’t even have to see the corpses they leave behind. You lurk in here like a troll—’

‘Karou,’ Brimstone said.

‘But I’ve seen them, piles of dead creatures with bloody mouths. Those *girls* with their bloody mouths; I’ll never forget as long as I live. What’s it all for? What do you do with these teeth? If you would just tell me, maybe I could understand. There must be a *reason*—’

‘*Karou*,’ Brimstone said again. He did not say ‘shut up.’ He didn’t have to. His voice conveyed it clearly enough, on top of which he rose suddenly from his chair.

Karou shut up.

Sometimes, maybe most of the time, she forgot to *see* Brimstone. He was so familiar that when she looked at him she saw not a beast but the creature who, for reasons unknown, had raised her from a baby, and not without tenderness. But he

could still strike her speechless at times, such as when he used that tone of voice. It slithered like a hiss to the core of her consciousness and opened her eyes to the full, fearsome truth of him.

Brimstone was a monster.

If he and Issa, Twiga, and Yasri were to stray from the shop, that's what humans would call them: monsters. Demons, maybe, or devils. They called themselves chimaera.

Brimstone's arms and massive torso were the only human parts of him, though the tough flesh that covered them was more hide than skin. His square pectorals were riven with ancient scar tissue, one nipple entirely obliterated by it, and his shoulders and back were etched in more scars: a network of puckered white cross-hatchings. Below the waist he became *else-thing*. His haunches, covered in faded, off-gold fur, rippled with leonine muscle, but instead of the padded paws of a lion, they tapered to wicked, clawed feet that could have been either raptor or lizard – or perhaps, Karou fancied, dragon.

And then there was his head. Roughly that of a ram, it wasn't furred, but fleshed in the same tough brown hide as the rest of him. It gave way to scales around his flat ovine nose and reptilian eyes, and giant, yellowed ram horns spiraled on either side of his face.

He wore a set of jeweler's lenses on a chain, and their dark gold rims were the only ornament on his person, if you didn't count the other thing he wore around his neck, which had no sparkle to catch the eye. It was just an old wishbone, sitting in the hollow of his throat. Karou didn't know why he wore it, only that she was forbidden to touch it, which, of course, had always made her long to do so. When she was a baby and he

used to rock her on his knee, she would make little lightning grabs for it, but Brimstone was always faster. Karou had never succeeded in laying so much as a fingertip to it.

Now that she was grown she showed more decorum, but she still sometimes found herself itching to reach for the thing. Not now, though. Cowed by Brimstone's abrupt rising, she felt her rebelliousness subside. Taking a step back, she asked in a small voice, 'So, um, what about this urgent errand? Where do you need me to go?'

He tossed her a case filled with colorful banknotes that turned out to be euros. *A lot of euros.*

'Paris,' said Brimstone. 'Have fun.'