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The Raven and The Dove

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The heavy silk slips between my fingers and collapses back into a sea of crimson fabric. My boney hand grazes the silk and traces the elegant golden embroidery that is stitched on the upper part of my wedding gown.

“Zhu Mei Li!” My head jerks back at the sound of my mother’s menacing tone. Her petite figure and round sparkling eyes may convey the affectionate persona of a cute puppy, but her harsh voice and tight jawline gives away to her real personality. She was born into a poor peasant family of farmers, yet was able to marry her way into the Chinese royalty. I am under tremendous pressure by all the royal family to marry an ally prince, but I’ve never even met him once before.

“My dearest Zhu Mei Li looks like an angel. You are a beauty that matches your name!” she exclaimed. My name ‘mei li’ means beauty in Chinese, but as I glance into the mirror my eyes are not greeted with beauty; instead they are met with wild hair and a pallid face void of emotions. Beauty isn’t a greasy temple and a gaunt frame. My eyes bare into me, cold and dark like the raven that I am.

As long as I am trapped in this palace, my dreams of leading a normal life will also remain trapped. Sometimes, a group of young teens are visible from outside my window. The camaraderie that I see whenever they sing, dance, and socialize with each other makes me realize how lonely I am in my pathetic life. My parents constantly remind me of how privileged I am, but seeing those kids my age having the time of their life while I am all alone makes me doubt what they are saying. Despite the fact that working several hours per day must be extremely laborious, these teenagers still get to enjoy their personal lives after work hours. I never have the opportunity to enjoy my own life, because my mother is always pulling my strings and directing like I am a mere puppet.

I look out of the window now, but the kids must be working or at school because the only thing I can see is the vast ocean in the distance. My family’s home is situated at the edge of a promontory, so I can see the cliff hanging over the ever-swirling tides in the sea. Crystal clear water forever gliding and lapping against each other in harmonious splashes...

It is a day before the princess's grand wedding and her dazzling gown is hanging on the wall. My delicate hand grazes the silk and traces the elegant embroidery as I ponder what it must feel like to be the princess. She has all the luxuries in the world while I am stuck here with no meaning to my life. Every day I wake up to perform the same task of washing the princess's clothes, and every night I consume the same tasteless meal.

My mother also worked as a servant to the royalty, so my future was written into the stars the moment I was born. The princess takes on whatever adventures she chooses. Traveling all over the country and dining with the emperor is her everyday schedule while I am stuck in a prison and sentenced to be a slave for life. The princess doesn't have to complete a single chore in her life, because she has all the money in the world! Suddenly overcome with anger, I rip the dress off of the wall, almost tearing the fabric, and scrub the life out of the dress. I'm gritting my teeth and holding back tears as I scream to myself about the unfairness of this whole system.

Once when I was younger, my mother told me that I was a beautiful dove, who could fly all the way to the sun if I wanted to. But now that my mother has died, the naive child inside me has also passed away; I realize that my monotonous duties will never end and there is no way out of this deep hole that I am stuck in.

I hear the birds chirping and singing their song of freedom, and I turn my head to stare longingly at the outside world. The princess's home is situated at the edge of a promontory, so I can see the cliff hanging over the ever-swirling tides in the sea. Crystal clear water forever gliding and lapping against each other in harmonious splashes...

The moment I step out of my window I can feel the cold wind brushing against my face. My feet slowly tiptoe towards the forest to my right, trying not to make any sound because surely there are guards at the front of my palace.

For the first time in forever, I actually feel quite energized. As I'm stalking towards the wooded area where I will be safely concealed, I can hear the howling wind urging me on and pushing me to my destination. *Calm down wind*, I thought to myself, *I know where I'm going, and I know that I'll never come back.*

Stumbling on stray branches and shivering as the wind cuts to my bone, I must look like a moron, yet I continue on my journey because I am determined to prove to my mom and to myself that I can persevere through hardship. My parched throat is screaming for water but it is too late for me to turn back now, too late for me to quit.

After a couple of minutes of trekking across the wooded area, I allow myself a moment of rest, and I gently lean my back against a large oak tree. The fresh smell of pine needles pervades the forest, and this foreign scent sends goosebumps up my slender arms. Closing my eyes, I envision myself as one of these trees. How easy it must be to stand all day without any worries or cares in life!

A sudden hoot from a nearby owl reminds me that I am on a mission and I don't have time to dawdle. I am on my feet in a second, and I quicken my pace as I notice that the trees are becoming sparser; I must be nearing the edge of the promontory.

The moonlight pouring through my window indicates that it is midnight and the time has arrived for my trip. I push away my bed covers and slip into a comfortable wool jacket that will keep me warm when I go outside.

The old wooden door groans softly as I push it open. Almost immediately I feel the cold night air tickling my hair, and I smile like I always do in the comfort of the forest. As I cross the green grass and head for the trees, I recall the first time I had stumbled into the vast forest.

With my mother gone and very few friends left in my life, I needed to escape the suffocating place that had killed my mother. Whenever I broke down in tears in front of the other laundry workers, they would send me back to my room, claiming that I was a distraction in the work environment. Fatigue was constantly dragging me down, sorrow was always tormenting my heart, and I was just so sick and tired of the daggers in the others' eyes.

Before my brain could process that I was leaving my room, my legs were rushing out the door and taking me as far away from the nightmare as possible. Sobbing and choking on my own tears, I had sprinted straight into the welcoming arms of the forest. From that day on, the forest became my new family, and the trees became shoulders I could cry on when I was feeling down. There were no rude remarks or chastising commands coming from the innocent trees. They

would listen to me quietly as I spilled out all my anger. The forest became a replacement of my dead mother, and they kept me sane.

I'm strolling through the forest now, and I gently graze the bark of one of the smaller trees as I think about all the times I ran into this place because I was in despair. Well, I'm not running or in despair tonight; I'm calm and composed, because my mind has finally cleared the mist that used to fog up my vision. I have made a decision that nothing could change, a decision that nothing *will* change.

Finally, I am reaching the edge of the cliff, and the rhythmic beat of water is growing in volume. I peer over the edge of land and stare into the abyss...for a few seconds I can feel myself leaning over the edge, but my heart is pounding out of my chest and my legs suddenly can't hold my weight, so I catch myself before I fall. A wave of terror immobilizes me as I realize how close I am to the water...how close I am to death. I shut my eyes and tell myself that this was my destiny and this is what I want, because I can't breathe and live under the pressure of my family. Ironically, I can't breathe now. I'm not yet in the water but I can't breathe with the thought of actual death hanging over me. I push myself off the ground and take a couple of steps away from the ledge, just to give me a moment to collect my composure.

As I'm backing away from the cliff, I hear a rustle of leaves behind me, not the wind blowing in my ear, but the distinct sound of feet crushing the fall leaves. My eyes fly open, and I swivel my head around like a mad lion looking for prey. About thirty feet from where I am standing is another figure stalking towards me. The momentary peace I had collected is now flying out of reach again as panic sets in. But I just stand there, because I don't know what to do, and I'm a coward who can't even run away...

"Princess?" a soft voice calls to me. Since this girl has moved closer to me, I can make out the simple maid uniform that she is wearing and I know she must have heard me sneak out and came to foil my plan.

"What are you doing here alone at the middle of the night?" she asks.

I actually laugh, because that was the same question I had been pondering to myself before she arrived. All my life I've been taught to lie about my true feelings, and I could not

confide my secrets to anyone. I turn back and look out into the water, knowing that tonight will still be the night that I had planned it to be, so why not be honest for my last conversation?

“I came here to jump,” I replied.

“Me, too,” the maid whispered.

And suddenly all my previous thoughts come tumbling out of my mouth, and my brain for some reason isn't stopping it.

“I was born as an ugly raven with no talents, but I was masked to become an elegant dove and given many privileges that I don't deserve. I just can't fit into this mold!”

The maid walked until she was by my side, she linked her hand into mine.

“I was born as a beautiful dove, but my precious feathers were plucked off, and I was forced to live the low life of a raven.”

With mutual understanding between the tears streaming down our faces and us, together we jump off the cliff...

As our bodies are plummeting further downward, our souls are flying further upwards to heaven, like two birds reaching for the sky.