

Salt Bride

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Famine comes for coastal towns last, though hunger has already made itself an unwelcome guest.

Nets come up empty. Nets come up with bones and half-eaten carcasses. Nets come up with the sludge and detritus of fishes long dead. **Some nets have stopped going to sea altogether.**

We eat in shifts with what little the sea and our neighbor's scant gardens provide. No one hungry; no one satisfied. No resentment, only towards the militsiya, who decided we maritime peasants should be tilling the soils of the collective farms instead.

They didn't take us all, but the militsiya did take Irina, my partner in fishing and so much more. They came on a dreary, gray morning while we set up our stall. I protested, begging to be taken with her. They refused. In fact, they threatened to spill my blood against the rocky shores. If I didn't care for my parents, I'd have let them.

Irina had kept her dark brown eyes on me, even as she was clapped in manacles, even as they led her away. My jaw had ached from swallowing hysterical cries. The first time the militsiya made a collection, weeping and shrieking had been allowed.

This was the second time.

I also didn't want to be another sacrifice for the Motherland's greater glory.

#

Nails skittering on my wooden floor awaken me from grief-soaked slumber. Peering into the darkness, my eyes land on a crab very far from its briny home. Pale light glints off its carapace. Fist-sized claws sway above its head.

It's larger than anything I've caught in weeks.

Its round eyes balance on stalks, shimmering as they search the room. I don't think it sees me. I lean over and turn on the room's single scone. Irina's delicate visage of freckles and short, brown hair floats above the creature's armored carapace. Ghostly, except for how shadows play in the light.

Terror seizes my jaw so tightly that I cannot scream.

It scuttles towards me, leaping onto my bed. Irina's head falls off, slapping the floor. I kill the light. The weight disappears. My heart thunders in my chest.

I steady my frantic breathing in time with distant, crashing waves. Mama always said that grief does strange things to the mind. Much like a deep-sea trench, life flows through and around the absence, the only sign of its presence the current weaving around it, mad with disruption. That's all it is—madness.

It will pass.

#

Tears streamed down my cheeks until sunrise. Instead of her cock crowing, my neighbor Lada's screams pierce the dawn.

Dazed, I put on my boots and my coat, not changing out of my sleeping slip. Mama and Papa remain fast asleep while I go outside.

Dimitri, a guard just starting his dayshift, runs past me. I follow him, our feet slapping the damp, morning gravel.

“Comrade Lada, whatever is the matter?” Dimitri shouts.

Her screams come from behind her hut, where she keeps a chicken coop. We follow the sound through her unlocked gate and towards the back of her yard. I catch my own shrieks. Scarlet leaks from beneath the coop’s door to the tiny hut as the older woman’s yelling grows louder and louder. It’s frantic and incoherent—I’m not sure which dialect she speaks.

But she is upset.

“Comrade Lada, are you in there?” No response.

Sighing, Dimitri punches through the flimsy wood. Chickens escape, bleeding as if gutted. But it’s not the familiar viscera trailing behind them. Tendrils and ropes like octopus and squid arms drag along the filthy ground. I stomp on an appendage. It squelches beneath my boot. The chicken keeps running and a mass of briny flesh pops from its birthing hole. Sickened, I crouch to inspect the bloody mess. An eye opens and fixes on me.

With a yelp, I step off the arm. It writhes in the hoarfrost.

Lada, face covered in blood and streaked with tears, grabs Dimitri by the collar. “Do you see what has become of my darling chickens?” Graying hair sticks up like a nest on her head. Her crystal blue eyes land on me. “And you. What have you done?”

“I wanted to see what was distressing your hens. My apologies, Comrade.” The new honorific sluices off my tongue thick as my spit.

Lada holds onto Dimitri like he's a cane for her trembling legs. "I had woken up to go collect the eggs. There were no eggs, comrade. Only..." She shrieks again.

"Comrade," Dimitri says, his morning-gruff soft like a breeze. "I will send for someone to clean up the mess. I will also see what I can do to replace them."

"Replace? Replace?" She laughs. And laughs. And keeps laughing. Her chickens run around screaming until they die, collapsing in the puddle of smooth, slick mollusk flesh trailing behind them.

Dimitri tries to calm Lada down, to no success. When neither of them notices, I bend down to pick up the creature I had my foot on. It does not blink anymore, but it doesn't reek. I slide its body into my large coat pocket. If we won't have eggs, at least we'll have this.

Once home, I rinse it with water and shove it into the back of our meager fridge. All the morning's commotion should have woken my parents up, but no footsteps echo from upstairs.

I go to check their room. Between last night's crab and this morning's octopuses, I have no interest in any more darlings from the sea. I brace myself for whatever piscine surprises lay behind their plain door. With an exhale, I push it open, only to find their made beds empty.

Impossible. I would have heard them stirring. Unless my mind had drifted off somewhere beyond my waking life such that all sounds faded away beyond my consciousness. Possible.

I look underneath the frame and find nothing.

I glance inside the empty closets—our clothes pawned off in exchange for fuel—and find nothing. They vanished like morning dew.

I take off down the road, towards the shore and its pier.

#

Mama and Papa sit still like stones along the shores. Sand gathers around them like a cushion. Salt rests in the tangles of their hair. Cold nips at my exposed skin. I shiver thinking of how frigid they must be.

I cannot lose them as well.

They make no indication of hearing my approach, despite my boots crunching against the frost. I come beside Mama, whose curly blonde hair has woven around her head like a nest of seaweed. Papa leaves his bald head unprotected.

Their necks turn and our eyes meet. Theirs twinkle; not like stars, more like the opalescent sheen of a clam's inner walls.

"We are waiting," Mama says, lacking the music I'm so used to hearing in her tone. "Won't you join us?"

Her gaze roots me. My muscles twitch but I cannot shift into any position, except for the one that has me lowering myself to the sand, setting off subtle fires in my nerves.

My eyes follow theirs, staring at the horizon. All I see is ink black water and bleach white foam as it breaks.

#

The sun sinks into the horizon. Hours have gone by. Finally, my eyes are free from the trance which held me in the dark. I'm not sure I blinked, not even once. My lids flutter, trying to remember their own movements.

I look to my left. My parents disappeared, leaving behind prints of their pajamas, creases and all.

Instead of concern, something like acceptance fills me. Warm gathers in my stomach and in my joints, keeping me in place, relaxed and at peace.

The feeling tells me to keep looking to the horizon.

#

The last sliver of sunlight fades. In its place comes a young woman with pale skin shining as bright as the moon. My eyes, free to move as they will, recognize that heart-shaped face: Irina.

This cannot be possible. She had been taken from our town in broad daylight away from the ocean. She might've escaped, seeking her own ending in a watery grave, instead of a demise amid agricultural refuse.

The trance frees my legs, and I stand, urgently needing her softness. Her naked skin rises from the shore inch by unblemished inch. Not even algae or some other sea grass clings to her. This is no fairy tale siren; this is Irina.

But once the water fills and empties the small indent of her belly button, she stops. She's far from shore, and I'm not confident in my swimming after this vigil day.

I gather my remaining energy and step into the ice-cold sea. The shock awakens me, but the chill soaks through my boots, burning my skin like tiny embers. I cannot go further, despite my fabric absorbing frigid water.

Irina grins and takes one large step forward, revealing her torso attached to a crab's body the size of a tank and just as protected. She wears it like one of those western bell-shaped skirts, though her heavy breasts are bare.

The sight terrifies me and arouses me. I don't know what militsiya cruelty had befallen her that she sought the depths and the waves. But she is here, naked, and mostly returned.

I lift my legs high, carrying myself deeper and deeper into the ocean. Water laps against my hips, my stomach. At shoulder height, I slip as the ground beneath me shifts. The crab's claw catches me in a kind of seat. It lifts me up into the night and brings me close to Irina, who smells sharply of salted lemon and honey.

I whisper her name, desperate.

"I cursed the officers," she whispers back, demure.

Her warm, too-soft human hands gently cup my goose-bumped face. Chapped lips press against mine. Her edges are sharp like broken shells. I don't care. Irina returned from the sea. She kisses me like she's kissed me so many times while we waited to catch something, anything.

My body rocks as the crab's legs scuttle against the seafloor. For purchase, I hold onto her soft breasts, hearing only the sounds of our lips smacking and the ocean's shush. A swelling cacophony of chittering, squeaking, and lowing surrounds us as step onto shore. A veritable army of sea life rises on carcinized legs broken through soft underbellies. The ocean's undulation rinses away the rancid fish gut smell.

I pull away from Irina. My wet lips taste of sea salt and iron. The crab's legs scrape against the shore, sand hopping with each heavy step. I lose my balance, and Irina catches me in her other crab claw. She laughs; it's not her trill and it's several sounds overlapping at once. Fear keeps me malleable like a doll.

Our town awakens. Several women and men come screaming, calling for the militsiya. Dimitri and the other guards ready their weapons. I don't see who fires the bullet that hits me right between the eyes. Darkness swallows me, obliterating sight and sound.

#

When I come to, there is no advancing battalion of sea creatures. There is no human hysteria. Softly yowling winds are the only sound. The hard shell that carried me has been replaced by soft sand, my body in the same seated position as when my parents had disappeared. In my lap, there is a lethargic crab, healthy and unmarred. It's enough to feed my family for at least the day; the chitin can be seasoned for broth.

The dying fish spilled all around me are fresh enough for eating or cooking. It's a bounty that makes even my best fishing days look scarce by comparison.

Salt sticks to my elbows and limbs. It takes grunting and effort to break the crust and free myself. I have no notion of how long I spent on the beach. Was it a day? Was it a few hours?

I don't see any signs that anyone had sat beside me. A mountain of sardines sits as tall as me, ready for eating then canning or canning then eating.

Are these both a dream? Is this a new nightmare? I don't think I'm asleep—the pain in my extremities and the way salt and sand chafe my every bend and orifice tell me otherwise.

I gather some of this unexpected catch and carry it home.

#

My parents work in the kitchen. Mother has water boiling for coffee. Father reads his post while a pipe hangs from his lips. This scent of ashes and bitterness is as familiar as the sea's brine.

"You've returned!" Mother says. "And with what a catch! We tried this new fishing technique that allows for greater catches."

Father looks at me and smiles. "You were so skilled already."

My head spins. My parents had just sat on a beach. I had just sat on the beach—no boat, no nets. Perhaps I had returned with a great catch and forgotten? Some kind of fleeting lack of awareness like the hyperactivity which plagues others? Perhaps in my grief, my frenetic finishing made a mess on the shore.

It doesn't explain the salt preserving my limbs.

I look at the slimy sea foods in my arms. Could this be a curse? It cannot be: there is already one curse on this land—the militsiya.

Mother takes the fish and crab from me and starts cooking. I've never seen her so focused on her cooking and making food for us. She usually reserved that focus for guests, not the daughter and husband which live alongside her.

Our household goes to bed with full bellies for the first time in too long.

#

I wake up on the shore, lying on my stomach, facing the water. As I lift myself, sand tosses off me like a blanket. Standing ankle-deep in the shallows, I see the officer who had taken Irina. His militsiya uniform glows red like a blood moon, a brutish, man-shaped horror who despite calling others comrade, has no respect for his fellow people.

I will show him the same lack of reverence.

With a shriek, I charge at him. No discipline, no training with any kind of armed forces or security services. My arms are as firm as crab shell, my fingers point like its triangular foot.

The officer fires at me, but I dodge the bullet. Injury will not interrupt my vengeance. He fires again but misses. I punch my grainy, white crab arms at him. Water sprays around us. One foot goes over the other as we circle each other in a steady, deadly khorovod. He slows first.

I snatch his weapon. Shooting him would be too neat and too easy.

Instead, I kick him off his feet. He falls, back thudding into the sand bed. I kneel on top of him, bringing down the gun's heel as if stabbing him with a blade.

#

A statue carved from salt now stands shoreside. It resembles a girl kneeling, arms raised up in prayer, but some say in violence. She is the salt bride, who watches over this seaside town.

In the trench around her lie fish ready and still safe to eat. The hungry take freely from this trough: clams to be eaten raw; shrimp and squid only needing a scant fire and some seasoning. Daily bread to be found when there otherwise is none.

The government had tried to remove this cornucopia of ocean's bounty, but it returns the next day, as long as someone somewhere curses the militsiya.