

Gypsy's Riddle

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Cara turned her head and listened once more, listened for some sound of her father returning. She sighed; all she could hear was the storm. As she put more wood on the fire in their simple hearth, she hoped her father had decided to stay another day with his brother on the other side of the valley.

As the storm billowed and howled outside, she was thankful for the time her uncle had spent with them earlier in the year, repairing the thatch on their cottage. Now it was her father's turn to repay the favor, helping his brother with his barn. She hoped he'd decided to stay another day at least. The thought of him traveling during a storm worried her.

She poked at the fire absent mindedly. No, that wasn't what worried her, and she knew it. It was almost the full moon. What had it been, three weeks since it happened?

Their cottage wasn't the last one on the road leading to the mountain pass, but it was the last at which travelers were welcome. Travelers seemed to know it, as did their animals. She smiled as she poked the fire, losing herself in the flickering warmth. That's the way her father was; that's the way her mother had been, and that was her nature as well. As her father said, "Some of us are put here to help."

But a few weeks ago, it had been different. She helped her father secure the last of the harvest, mending, preparing for the approaching winter. Both of them heard the sound of an old cart creaking up the road for some time. They heard the sound of a cart that wouldn't make it over the mountain. She remembered looking at her father, early that morning. He smiled to her and nodded, then started walking to the road.

He returned a while later, leading an old gypsy couple and their old cart, pulled by an even older donkey. As Cara looked at the left wheel of the cart, her father shook his head, and said, "No, that won't do, not for this mountain. Well, let's get to work."

The old man didn't speak their language, but his wife did. She thanked them for their help. They were returning to their own land, far on the other side of the mountain, and had met few people willing to help travelers from afar.

Her father grunted as he started piling blocks under the wagon so the wheel could be removed and repaired. Cara fetched their few tools from the barn.

As the men worked during the day, the old woman helped her. Cara remembered her wrinkled face and hands; wrinkled but strong and eager, wrinkled yet smiling and laughing, filled with joy.

As it became clear the men would not complete their task in time for the travelers to continue during the day, the women prepared a meal. The old woman fetched barley and a bit of meat from the cart. Cara went to her special cupboard and took out some willow bark, and started making tea. The old woman commented on that; Cara told her it would help with the aches and pains the men were sure to

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have from their hard labor. The old woman told Cara she would make some man a very good wife. Cara sighed -- most of her friends were married already. The old woman laughed and gave her a hug. Her hug was warm and strong, reminding Cara of the mother she'd lost a few years ago.

The men completed their labors as the sun went down. They cleaned up for dinner. To a simple meal, lit by hand-made candles, Cara's father explained what they'd done, repairing the wheel, and putting it back on the cart.

The old woman exchanged words with her husband in their own tongue. As they cleaned up after the meal, the old woman said they would bed down in the barn for the night.

Cara's father would have none of that, and neither would she. The travelers would sleep in the cottage with them. They moved the table to the side, and the travelers set up their simple bedding by the hearth. They finished off the day with another cup of the willow tea, its bitterness cut by honey from a friend down the road.

It was the next morning, just before the travelers departed, that it happened. The old woman thanked them again for their assistance. Cara's father, as usual, simply replied, "Some of us are put here to help."

The old woman gave Cara a strange, searching look. As the men secured the cart and hooked up the donkey again, the old lady went out for a moment, and returned.

The table was back in its spot in front of the hearth. From a small cloth bag, the old woman took a small glass dish. Cara had never seen anything like it. It was as big around as both her hands together, smooth and shallow. The old woman bade Cara to sit. She put the glass between them, filling it slightly with water. She opened a small bottle and let a few drops of something dark drip into the glass. The glass filled with blackness. The old woman sat down across from Cara, and took her hands in hers.

As the old woman stared into the glass, Cara stared as well. Cara couldn't see anything but swirling blackness. But the old woman stared intently. She stared and grimaced. She looked as if she would cry at one point, but when she raised her head, she smiled, almost laughing, but still with a puzzled look in her face.

She picked up the glass, and drank down its contents, to Cara's surprise. She put things back in her bag, and went out to the cart again, bringing Cara back to the table.

"This," the old woman said, handing Cara a small bag, "is for high fevers. Brew it in a broth. And this one," she said handing her another small bag, "is for bruises. Steep it in hot water, and wash the wounds with the liquid."

She took Cara's hands again, looking into her eyes with wonder, joy, and some sadness.

"You are a special woman. It is hard, but I will tell you what I saw. When you next see the full moon, your life will end. But if you hold your head high, and do as your heart bids, without fear or hesitation, all will be worthwhile."

Cara was stunned. Her life would end? But it would be worthwhile? "I don't understand," she said, "What do you mean?"

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The old woman smiled as she stood, hugging Cara. "I don't know what it means, my child, but that is what I saw. I know your life will end, but I also know it will be worthwhile if you do as your heart bids. You will understand when it happens. Tell this to no one. I will see you again in two years. But for now, goodbye."

Cara stumbled with the old woman to the door and out to the cart. The old woman hugged Cara's father; they departed waving their thanks, like old friends or family.

Now Cara hadn't spoken of the old woman's words, and she hadn't forgotten them. She hadn't figured them out, either.

She turned her head at another sound. She stood up and went to the door -- that last sound wasn't the storm. She opened the door a little, not wanting to let in the blowing and now freezing rain. She saw the outlines of a horse, and a man slumping forward on it.

She grabbed her warmest shawl and ran out into the storm. She led the horse closer to the cottage and helped the man down. He was half frozen, and injured. She practically carried him in, and put him on her father's bed. She ran back outside, and led the horse to their barn, securing it inside where it had something to eat. It was a fine animal, with a saddle finer than any she'd ever seen.

She hurried back to the house. He was a young man, and when he was healthy, he must be tall and strong. Now he was weak and injured. He was battered and bruised, and soaked and frozen from the storm. He must have come across the mountain. He was either very brave, or very foolish to attempt a crossing in such a storm.

While his hands and feet were very cold, his brow was burning -- a high fever. Cara remembered the package the old woman had given her. She dumped it in some broth to heat. She started seeping the other in hot water.

He was bruised, especially along his left side. The mountain was treacherous for rock slides; she would have to check his horse for injuries, but only when he was attended to.

She dried him, and wrapped him in blankets to warm. She hung his clothes by the hearth to dry. They were simple, but very well made. The boots he wore had to cost more money than she'd ever seen in her life. Around his neck he wore a medallion on a fine chain.

The aroma of the broth was soothing. She sat the young man up a bit, and started spooning it into him. He was delirious, but hungry, taking about half of it before collapsing back. She had a few sips herself. It filled her with warmth, and calmness. She tended to his bruises next. He was lucky to be alive.

She took a candle out to the barn to look at his mount. The left foreleg was bruised. She tended to the horse's bruises with the same attention and tenderness she'd shown its rider. She left a strip of cloth steeped in the old woman's brew wrapped around the injured foreleg.

She returned to her other guest. His head was still hot to the touch, but his hands and feet were now warm. He moved restlessly, mumbling and almost crying out. He calmed at the touch of her

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hands. She smiled, and sat at the head of the bed, holding his head gently, and singing the soft sweet songs her mother had sung to her as a child. He finally settled into a fitful sleep.

He woke twice during the night, suddenly, crying out. She held his head, and sang to him again, calming him. His fever decreased.

She woke early. The storm had diminished. She was stiff from sitting up most of the night. She tended the fire, and heated more broth for her guest. His forehead felt much closer to normal this morning.

As he mumbled and tossed once more, she helped him sit up a bit and fed him more broth. He took it without a sound. While his eyes opened, she could tell he was still far away. He smiled, then fell back into deep sleep.

She checked once more on his mount. As she looked over the animal in daylight, she realized this was not a good animal, this was a royal animal. She cared for it as best she could.

Her guest slept through the day, more peacefully that night, and into the next morning. As she helped him sit up for more broth, his eyes opened with awareness. With a weak voice he asked where he was. She explained how she had found him. He told her he had crossed the mountain in the storm. She gave him a look she knew all too well from her mother, telling him that he was either very brave or very foolish to make such an attempt; he was lucky to be alive.

He had been surprised by a rockslide. He'd been unhorsed and pummeled. He gave Cara a lopsided grin as he told her he was lucky that his fall had been broken by a few feet of fresh snow. Cara told him he should be strong enough to travel after another day's rest.

When she told him he'd slept a day already, he became very agitated. He had a message that had to be delivered to the king. He had to go, and now. He tried to get up, but fell back. She told him no matter how much he wanted to go, he couldn't -- he didn't have the strength.

Cara held his head again, as he tossed anxiously on the bed for a few minutes. Finally he stopped tossing and looked up at her. He put a hand weakly on her arm. She must go, then. Take his horse, and ride to the castle -- it was only an hour's ride.

He wouldn't listen to her arguments. She had to do it. She finally agreed. He gave her the medallion he'd worn. She was to show it at the gate, and tell the guardian she had a message for the king. She needed to go, and now.

Cara put out more broth, and some bread and cheese. She tended the fire and left enough wood to keep him warm. She told him she would return with help as soon as she could.

She saddled his horse, shortening the stirrups for her shorter stature. He must be at least a head taller than she was. She took his bags and headed off.

He'd told her how important this was; his horse needed no convincing. The ride was more invigorating and exciting than anything she'd done in her life. She felt as if she were outracing the wind, thrilled at the power under her.

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But nothing prepared her for her reception. She knew she was breathless as she rode up to the castle gate. Two men rushed out; one held the horse, and the other came up to her. She showed him the medallion, calling out, "I have a message for the king!"

One man ran into the castle. He reappeared with three other men. An older, larger man rushed to her side. She held up the medallion again, and started to speak.

The man pulled her off the horse, throwing her to the ground, pulling the medallion off her neck, breaking the chain.

Cara pulled herself up, and started to speak. "I have a message..."

The man grabbed her hair, pulling her to her feet. He struck her across the face with a gloved hand, screaming, "Where is he?"

Between his blows she managed to tell him where she lived, and that the man was recovering. He dropped her to the ground, yelling out, "Take her below!" before racing off.

Two men carried her roughly down stairs, and threw her into a dark, dank, cell.

It was there, huddled crying in a corner, that she remembered the old woman's words. So this is how it was to end. Her father would never know -- and that saddened her the most.

Some light came in through a narrow slit far overhead. She felt her face -- it was swollen, bruised. Her clothing was torn. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she made out a wooden platform in one corner. She moved over and sat upon it.

Some time later she heard the door rattle. She huddled in the corner, but remembered the old woman's challenge: to hold her head high, and follow her heart. At least she could sit straight.

One man entered, carrying a candle and two bowls.

He approached slowly, setting the candle and the bowls on the rough wooden platform. She saw that one contained soup and a piece of bread, the other some water and a piece of cloth.

"Here," he said softly, looking back to the door. He saw her torn clothing, and took off his own shirt, giving it to her. Before she could thank him, he left the room and closed the door.

She washed her face; she hurt, and could feel each indignity. The bread and the soup she ate. The light of the candle held back her companions in the small cell, a group of rats who smelled her food. She left a little in the bottom of the bowl and put it at the opposite corner of the cell. She went back to her corner while they squealed and fought over her gift. She put the shirt around her to protect her from the dampness and the cold. But the cold was a coldness of the spirit, and cloth could do little to drive it away.

Hours later, she heard the door again. She looked up in hope. But two men rushed in and grabbed her by the arms. She would have walked, but they preferred to drag her. When she tried to tell them she could walk, she was struck in the head with a force that sent her reeling.

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She was dumped on a floor. She managed to push herself up. Her vision was blurred. She was in a large hall, lit by torches, their light reflecting off windows. She had never seen such finery. Near the hearth, on a raised dais, sat a large man in a large chair, both richly decorated -- he must be the king. He was surrounded by other men. Then she saw sitting in a chair to the side, supported by a man and a woman, the man she had tended in her cottage. She reached out to him, and was struck from behind.

"Stop!" the young man cried out. Then he said, "Bring her here! Gently!"

Rough hands grabbed her and carried her forward, dropping her a few feet from his chair. "I said gently!" he shouted.

She wanted to cry, but she remembered the old woman's words. She raised herself up and looked in his face.

"What happened to you?" he said, anguish on his face.

"I..." she said, interrupted by a cry of, "She lies!" from behind her. She recognized the voice as the man who had struck her.

"Silence!" called out the king. "Let her speak!"

She pushed herself to sitting, holding herself as straight as she could. She looked at the man she had cared for, then to the king. "My Lord," she said, gathering strength in her voice, "May I speak?"

"Yes!" he shouted. Then, softer, he said, "Please tell us how you came to be here."

She recounted her tale, telling of finding the young man half dead on his horse in a raging storm, and of caring for both of them, and his pleading that his bags must be delivered to the king. She stopped.

The King said, "And when you arrived?"

She looked the king in the eye. She told him of her greeting; of showing the medallion she had been given, and announcing her mission. She spoke of being pulled off the horse when a voice called out again, "She lies!"

The king pointed and shouted out, "Silence!" She could feel his anger as he looked at her. Cara continued, telling of her beating, being dragged to the dungeon, and of being thrown into the cell.

The king interrupted her. "Can you identify this man?"

She looked up and answered, "I believe so, your majesty."

"Then do so!" he bellowed.

She struggled to stand. The woman who had been at the side of the messenger she'd cared for came to help her. Cara turned to her. The woman was immaculately dressed. Cara smiled, as best she could with a swollen and battered face, and said, "Thank you."

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With assistance at first, then on her own, she walked before the crowd of men. She saw the man who had pulled her off the horse. She pointed and started to speak.

"She lies, your majesty! Nothing but lies!" he cried out.

"Silence! Bring him here!" the king shouted out.

"He is the one who pulled me from the horse and beat me." She recognized another face as well, but before she could speak, she heard another sound.

The first man was being drawn on his knees to the middle of the room. The king stepped forward, drawing his sword.

"No! Stop!" Cara called out, stepping between the man and the king.

The king said coldly, "How dare you!" and stepped forward.

Cara determined she would follow her heart.

"Repaying him in kind only makes it worse. Let me tell you of one other man." She took the surprised king by the sleeve, and pulled him to the other face she recognized.

"This man, this kind man, came to my cell, and brought me water to clean myself, and food to eat, and a candle for light and protection. He gave me his own shirt to cover me. Which of these men represents your kingdom?"

The king looked at the man, then at her. His face was still full of fury, but it softened, if only a little. He nodded, and stepped back to his throne. Cara followed.

When he came to the man on his knees, he shouted out, "Take him below!"

Cara said, louder than she thought possible, "Your majesty!"

He turned and looked to her. "Yes?"

Cara was ready to die. "Your majesty, that place is not fit for men."

She saw his hand on the hilt of the sword tremble. Then she saw him smile, a fierce smile. "Throw him out! He is banished from the kingdom!" The man was carried off.

The king stepped onto the dais again, and called out, pointing to Cara, "A chair!"

A chair quickly appeared, and was put next to the messenger she'd cared for. She looked at him and smiled. She knew she was no beauty, especially after what she'd been through.

He took her hands, and raised one hand to her face. He cried as he touched her gently.

"Don't cry," she whispered.

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The man smiled and sat up straight. In a clear voice, he said, "Father?"

The king said, "Yes, my son?"

Cara saw strength returning to his eyes, and she saw something more. The young man smiled as he said, loud enough for all to hear, "Father, this is the woman I would have as my bride. Her actions have shown her more worthy than any of us."

Cara couldn't believe her ears. Her tears stung as they rolled down her battered face. She heard the voice of the king answer, "So it shall be. Bring her here."

Cara was led before the king. She started to kneel, but the woman on her side held her upright.

"What is your name, my child?" the king asked.

"Cara, your majesty," she replied, her head high.

The king nodded and smiled. "Cara, we beg your forgiveness for how you have been treated. As my son and you to rule this kingdom with me, and then as king and queen, we beg for you to do so with the same courage and compassion you have shown us today."

And rather than bow her head, Cara raised her head higher. And through one of the windows, she saw the full moon. She smiled, and her understanding overcame her pain. As the old woman had said, her life had ended, but a new life had begun.

FIN

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