

TO THE RESCUE

“Mind if I join you?”

She looked up. Sitting across from her on the other side of the tiny pub table – she’d chosen it because it *was* tiny – was an enormous man. He stank of outdoors and rum and something else – salt? seaweed? she didn’t know and didn’t much care either – and he had a massive beard, the kind you could lose a hand in if you weren’t careful.

“Yes,” she said. Then, when the man – who also had, she noticed, a long white scar across his cheek, like a dragon had clawed him – said nothing, she added:

“I do mind if you join me.”

He grinned, revealed a mouth filled with two kinds of teeth: gold, and none.

“Thought you’d say that,” he replied, but made no move to go.

“I’m waiting from my friend,” she said.

She could see her reflection as she spoke, tense in the tinsel-decorated pub mirror. To her annoyance, he shook his head.

“Heard that before.”

She cast her eyes around for help but nobody was looking her way. Everyone was laughing, chatting, drinking, lost in their own Christmas outing.

“Lonely time of year,” said the man.

“I like it that way,” she replied, thinking *don’t engage, don’t engage*.

“I’ll go in a moment,” the man said, seeing her expression.

She rolled her eyes. She didn’t need this, not tonight. Tonight she had plans. That’s what people do at Christmas, she thought, have plans.

“No, you won’t,” she said. “You’ll say you’re going to go, then you’ll think of one more thing you had to say, then you’ll tell me I look nice, and if I don’t say ‘thank you’, you’ll get nasty. And it’ll just get worse from there.”

In answer, the man took something from his pocket. It was a coin, but unlike any coin she’d ever seen before. It was very flat, for a start, with uneven edges, the face on it (no face she recognised) half worn away by centuries of fingers, and it was made of gold.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“For your time,” said the man. “Nothing else,” he added. “You pocket that, you listen to me, I leave.”

“What if you don’t?”

“I will,” he said. “On my oath.”

On my oath. That was what did it for her. The word was strange, stranger even than the coin.

She picked up the coin, put it in her pocket.

“You’ve got five minutes,” she said.

The man nodded. He picked up his tankard – she thought, *that wasn’t there a moment ago* – and took a swig. He wiped his beard with the back of his hand, and said:

“I have not always been the man you see.”

She laughed, despite herself.

“It’s true,” he said. “Once I was a lad, and before that a boy. And before even that, I was a baby.”

“That’s what happens,” she said.

“Not always,” the man replied. “Some never get past being a baby. Some never get to be babies. I was, at least, lucky in that. My mother bore me to term, she was allowed that by her people. Whether she loved me, I cannot say. But I know she could not keep me.”

She fingered the coin in her pocket. Any minute he was going to ask for it back, or ask for something else, she knew it. She thought of her plans for the evening. All she wanted to do was slip away.

“I can’t listen to - ” she began.

“Five minutes,” he said, and this time there was an edge to his voice. “We have a deal.”

“All right. Get on with it,” she heard herself say, and for some reason regretted it. “Sorry,” she added.”

“I was lucky to be born, as I said,” the man went on. “But as soon as I came into this world, my mother abandoned me. There’s no other word for it. Not to be wanted is a terrible thing.”

He stopped, drank a mouthful, and looked her in the eye.

“But then you know that.”

Before she could answer, he went on.

“The moment I was born, I was given up,” he said. “Handed in, like lost property. For that’s what an orphanage is, is it not? A lost property office where all the property is human, and not so much lost as thrown away or wrested from its rightful owners. And there’s more chance of an umbrella or a hat being claimed than an unwanted child.

“I spent the next few years in that orphanage, treated neither well nor badly, like all the others. And all I wanted was - ”

She leaned in, despite herself.

“To be rescued,” he said. “For my mother to come for me, or if not my mother, my father – whoever he was – and if not them, then... someone. Oh, I dreamed of it. I would be standing in the playground, or sitting in the classroom, or lying in my bed and then they would come in – whoever it was – and they would say, ‘Edward’ – for that is my name, ‘Edward, I have come to take you away.’ And I would be *saved*.”

She said nothing. A voice at the back of her mind was whispering *it is time to slip away* but for now she wasn’t listening.

“I would be saved,” the man repeated. “And I would be free. I knew it was a dream, but it was my dream. To be rescued. I saw children arrive like a constant tide, and sometimes I even saw them go. They found new parents – and a very few returned to their old parents – but I remained. I was alone. I had some friends, but not many. How can you have friends when nobody stays? I became myself, because there was nobody else to become.”

He smiled, the corners of his black beard bristling like a thousand whiskers.

“I was solitary, I did not play games, but I read. There was television, sometimes there were films. And then one day I was rescued.”

The voice in her head was louder now.

Slip away.

“I’m glad,” she said. Then: “I have to go.”

“There is a minute left,” he replied.

“I don’t care - ”

He slammed his mug onto the tiny table. Ale went everywhere.

“We have a deal,” he said.

She sat down, one eye on the clock. There was still, she couldn't help noticing, a minute to go.

"When I say that I was rescued," the man went on, "I do not mean that my mother, or my father, or a kind family, arrived to take me away, because no-one ever did. I mean that one day I opened a book," he said. "Or I saw a film, or I turned on the television set. I forget. And they were there. Beckoning to me. They had swords, and flags. Muskets, and lasers. They were knights, and warriors. Aliens, and pirates. Creatures, and fair maids."

"Did you drink a great deal as a child?" she asked. "Or was it –"

Slip away

"– drugs?"

He ignored her.

"I was frightened," he said. "Books don't beckon to you. They just stand there, waiting to be opened, and when you do open them, they're only great clumps of words. Aren't they?"

"You tell me," she said.

"TV," he went on. "It's wallpaper, they say. It makes you stupid."

"Maybe it does."

"Films. They don't talk back."

"I would hope not."

The man wasn't listening to her. He was looking in his pint mug, as if seeing something. For a moment, she thought she could see it too: a puff of cannon smoke, a flash of red light.

"One day I was more alone than ever before. Completely and utterly alone. You know how it is. I was too old to be there. Everyone was young, or gone. I had nowhere to go."

"Talking of which –"

She looked at the clock. A minute to go. *Really?* she thought.

"I started thinking of ways to get out but there were no good ones. Find someone who liked boys, maybe. But as I say, too old. Oblivion was a possibility. I don't have to tell you where that leads."

She said nothing, scratched the back of her hand.

“I was isolated. There’s a word. It means you’re on an island. And I felt I was on an island. I was a castaway, and there was a tidal wave coming towards me. I mean, literally. I could see it. A huge tempest crashing towards me like a herd of elephants.”

“Look,” she began.

“And I saw them. They had a ship. Or a plane. Or a spacecraft. Or they were riding a leviathan, I don’t know. But they were there, and they were real, and they rescued me. And here I am.”

There was a loud *clunk* from the clock.

“Five minutes,” she said.

“You seem like you need rescuing,” the man said.

“Thanks.”

He laid a cutlass on the table. Nobody else seemed to notice this.

“Join us.”

“Join - ”

She looked up. Behind him stood a terrible crew. A squire in chainmail. A pirate lad. A thing with tentacles and a cheerful expression. A maiden fair with a bloody broadsword. Something that was both silver and vapour at the same time. A wise child.

Outside it was snowing, A choir was singing.

She examined her glass.

“Did you put something - ”

“We are real,” the captain said. “And we are here to rescue you. If,” he added, “that’s what you want.”

She remembered a moment, one she had carried with her, as if in a bubble. A girl, reading. She thought of what she had planned to do, of slipping away.

“When do we leave?” she said.