

Rauz, show magician of the low marshlands

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Florence, Italy. October 1489

A bright sun warms the tiled open streets of Italy's coziest city, Florence. It is a noisy saturday, early afternoon, and people are out and about performing chores and groceries and whatnot. The alleys bustle with activity. Street merchants try to sell the year's last produce. You find yourself amidst the citizens of Florence, as one of them, allowing the autumn sun to warm your exposed arms. You walk the city with no set goal - just a stroll. Sometimes you are approached by a beggar whom you kindly turn down. Once you walk into a group of courtesanes, and even them, as innocent as you are, you turn down with a smile.

You pass a number of great landmarks of that time. Palazzos built by influential Italian families, squares and open piazzas. You take a moment at Capelle Medicee to breathe in the vast greatness of the structure. It strikes you as impossibly large. Such incredible architecture. You walk along the chapel's walls and occasionally touch one of the white bricks - just softly - wouldn't want to damage this sublime work of art. As if entranced you make a loop around and end up at the front.

It comes to mind that this part of town is not that busy. Less noisy merchants and more locals. You overhear a conversation between a group of well-dressed noblemen- and woman and listen in keenly to what to have to say.

"...that is good news, Rosina! Of course I have seen the posters." One man says, a chubby possum wearing the most eccentric coloured clothing - pink and purple.

"So it is true, Maerro? About tonight?" The woman answers, supposedly Rosina. She is a slender fox, robed in black, red and white. You connect her tone and appearance with posher, arrogant nobility.

The opossum seems to have noticed you and clears his throat audibly. "Scoundrel! Eavesdropping on our chit-chat, are we not?" He approaches you in a slow, waggling manner, bearing a stern expression. The idea of fleeing comes too late and Maerro grabs your shoulder firmly.

"Ha-ha! Jolly young, this one. I was only mocking you!" The opossum's tone changed to a more merry one. "Come, come." He shoves you towards Rosina and a third, still unknown man. He is a buck, taller than Maerro and dressed in grey and white military-style leather. "Goo'day. I'm Rafael! Have you heard of the Dutch Magician?" The stag asks.

Meeting people in big Firenze is not that difficult after all, you think. There is good vibe around these three despite their social status. However, you have never heard of the Dutch Magician, or any magician at all. You shake your head.

The vixen rolls her eyes. "Well, give him the story Maerro. Cristo knows how much you adore that jester from the salt marshes of The Netherlands."

Maerro seems offended - his cheeks turn red and he balls his fists. He starts to explain who the Dutch Magician is either way, that much is his excitement.

"We heard about him for the first time three years ago. A real magician he claimed to be. This marshlander travelled western Europe solo, giving shows wherever he could. After a year or two he became more famous and was invited to larger theatres. Nobody knows his real name or where he comes from exactly. His magic is real, I tell you! And tell you what..."

The opossum pulls you close. So close you can smell the mead he drank this afternoon.

"He's in town, today! There is a grand show tonight at the Ponte Vecchio. Can't miss it. And the best part for you - it's free!"

You turn your head and realize you have missed the posters despite their abundancy.

Hundreds of them, all bearing the same mysteriously robed so-called magician. You hadn't considered going to such a show before but now seems a splendid opportunity. The sun is starting to lower and there is still some preparation to be done if you want to make it in time to Ponte Vecchio. It will be crowded - that much is certain. You thank Maerro for the suggestion and bid the three farewell. Through narrow, twisting alleys you make your way to an inn.

The mystic

After downing a tankard of French dark red wine and helping yourself to a freshly baked focaccia, you step out of the inn. A pleasant evening breeze brings all sorts of scents with it. You distinguish the aroma of perfume - rosy and faintly sweet; the heavier odor of beer breweries - sour with a tinge of alcohol; and then there is the smell of any city of the Renaissance age - a thick and ubiquitously pungent fume that is especially strong in run-down alleys. Your nose wrinkles at the different perfumes. Then, by looking for landmarks and asking fellow pedestrians, you navigate yourself through the main streets of Firenze. It does not take long until you reach the impressive overpass. The Ponte Vecchio was constructed many centuries ago yet gives you the idea it was finished only yesterday. Such pristine, grand architecture. Beautiful arches lined from left to right, about three storeys tall. The bridge is lit with oil lanterns and lampions. No crowd has gathered yet, you notice, so you decide to have a look around. There are many small shops on the Ponte Vecchio. Mostly artists and art sellers, but also a tailor, a drug store and a mystic - a traditional healer of old times. Purple incense fumes creep lazily up the sides of the beech door. A painted wooden sign is attached to the wall above the door. It reads *Mystica Eyva da Firenze* in white. Below you read *Healer and herbalist* Before you realize your hand reaches for the cast-iron handle. You pull.

Dingdingding! Opening the door triggers a small bell, startling you.

"Come in, come in!" A creaky yet welcoming voice beckons you to come further.

You close the door behind you and find yourself surrounded with brass trinkets, wooden incense burners and countless folded scrolls. You glance ahead and see an empty table adorned with a lace garment and a black, lit candle. Three cups are on top, the contents of each steaming idly.

"Be right there young fella! Right there!" You discern a woman's voice now, unmistakably older than you are.

You tread further into the tiny boutique and are careful not to knock over any of the ancient-looking wares. It is noteworthy silent for one of Florence's busiest streets. Rather tranquil and timeless, really. You take off your coat and hang it over the back of a chair, then sit down. You eye around for the source of the voice - none around. Then you peer into the cup in front of you. The liquid inside is onyx black, shiny on top and turbid. You take a curious whiff. The aroma makes you think of roast spices but you cannot recall having smelled this before. Then, without a warning, two hands grab your shoulders.

"Don't you like the beverage? Or is it still too hot?" A new, unfamiliar male voice addresses you. Before you get the chance to look behind you, he takes the seat left of you without an introduction.

The stranger sits cross-legged, eyeing you with a grin. You take the liberty of examining his attire briefly. Young man, oddly dressed and swift of tongue. He is a kangaroo, wearing shoulder-to-calf robes and a top hat. A tuft of well-kempt hair emerges from underneath the top hat and his nose features a patch of red fur. Face-paint perhaps? Your first idea is that he must be a jester. But then you realize black and white and the top hat probably do not suit a jester. A-ha! May this be the famous Dutch Magician the nobles mentioned this morning? As if the Magician could read your mind, he gives you a confirmatory nod and a widening smile, then brings the cup to his lips.

A third person strolls into the room, a goat. She eyes impossibly old. You and the Magician both look up. It is the kangaroo that initiates the conversation.

"Dear, dear mystica Eyva! I seem to have caught you amidst business with this interesting... individual! Forgive me for my intrusion."

The woman you assume is named Eyva rubs her hands together. She wears multiple

golden bangles around her wrists and a strange circular necklace that captures your interest. Eyva joins you and takes the last vacant wooden chair in the room. An enigmatic air surrounds her and you fail to formulate an introduction.

Suddenly it strikes you as absurd - to be sitting amongst a magician and a mystic! You never even considered their existence as much as acknowledging it. Instinctively you feel silly for having walked into such a preposterous boutique as this. However, you recall the conversation you had earlier with Maerro, Rosina and Rafael. They seemed to have a simple sort of reverence for the Magician, at least. Perhaps staying a bit longer to dig deeper into the Dutchman's backstory can provide some interesting tales. Either way, magic and mysticism is *bullshit*, right? Nothing out of the ordinary could happen. You choose to approach Eyva and The Magician painfully sober.

"I heard you travelled all the way from the low salt marshlands, sir..." You suggest.

The kangaroo responds with a frown. "I do not usually share my name with strangers - for security reasons. It would not suit my profession as trickster, would it?" He bumps your shoulder and utters a snicker. "But, yes. I hail from The Netherlands. Below the river delta to be precise. Darn jolly folks down there I must admit! Pay it a visit sometime if you can. Got the best ale brewers in civilized Europe".

Eyva shakes her head as only mothers can do when they see their child behaving naughty.

"One day they will find you at the bottom of a vat of brown ale, silly marsupial..."

The Magician bursts out in brief laughter. You can't help but to chuckle.

"No, my dearest mystica. I will be put in stockades for a lifetime for public jester before I ever get my hands on a vat of ale that humungous!" The Magician winks at you.

"They speak highly of you - the nobles I mean. They hold a small amount of reverence for you, even. What is your secret? What makes you so popular?" You inquire. While watching the kangaroo you help yourself of to the beverage set out before you. It tastes slightly bitter and has the tang of alcohol. You down it in one go.

The Magician turns his eyes away, tapping the table with his gloved fingers. Is he hiding a smile? He then puts his hand down flat in front of himself. Eyva sighs out and reaches out to the marsupial. She snatches something from his robe's pocket before he can catch her.

"Oh - you impish goat, you! Now the whole surprise is -". The Magician is interrupted.

"Dare name me impish again, impudent hare!" She calls out, leering at The Magician.

The elderly goat unfolds her paw in front of you. You see an unremarkable metal ring wrapped with a black cord. Eyva holds the ring by its cord and dangles it from side to side after noticing your lack of understanding.

"Our hopping friend here is practices show hypnotism. He is what you become if you do not make it through Mystic freshman year!" She cackles out, answered by an audible sigh from the kangaroo.

"I'm laughing my tail off, dear old ungulate! You see, our customer doesn't even believe in my magic, or in your quack medicine for all that matters. Do not make a fool of yourself." You feel The Magician is spot on with his remark and hesitantly nod in confirmation. It is clear you have offended them, however. In an attempt to save your hide, stimulated with whatever stimulant you just downed, you propose the following: "Um, I'm more of a 'first see then believe' sort of people. I am convinced hynpotism is utter nonsense. Don't get me wrong! Succeed to control me and I will never deny your profession again. Deal?"

Eyva sits back, silently sipping from her own cup of spirit, grinning to herself. She slides the ring back to The Magician who then turns to face you. A pair of shimmering blue eyes meet yours. His other facial features seem blurred in contrast to those stark, piercing eyes. The Magician rolls up his sleeves and rises from his seat.

"Stand." He suggests.

You shove your chair back and get up in one smooth motion, not failing to lose eye contact with The Magician for even a second. You are certain that was all your own doing and are

still set on disproving hypnotism.

The kangaroo brings his pendulum up to face height. He subtly imposes it to dangle from left to right.

"Please follow the movement of this metal band -". The Magician does not have to finish his sentence; your eyes follow the motion of the pendulum precisely. You find yourself enthralled by the simple ornament and its unfaltering rhythm.

The magician

"Focus just on my voice. Relax, dear friend. This is... natural. Let me take you on a journey... You feel heavier. Your feet... they anchor you to the floor. Stop balling your fists... Loosen up those arms, your shoulders... and finally your neck."

There is some activity to the left of you - is that Eyva moving? But you cannot break your gaze from the ring and The Magician's eyes behind it to investigate. You feel very fine where you are right now. Your tummy flutters - is this how it feels to be hypnotized? How innocent, you think.

"Va bene. Good... Keep focussing on the ring. You feel safe here. Now, listen carefully. I will snap my fingers at the count of three. Pay attention once I start counting." The Magician's words seep into your mind like ooze. Still you watch the pendulum sway from left to right.

Back and forth. From side to side

One.

The Magician's eyes flash once the pendulum reaches its maximum displacement. You are dazzled, paralyzed, and momentarily lose focus of vision.

Upon recovering you find the room dark and absolute silent. Except for the voice of The Magician. He is still there, firmly pinning you down with his captivating stare. This must be part of the play, right? There must have been something in his drink, unmistakeably. A fleeting hint of terror strikes you, but it dissipates before it releases your sealed mind.

Another flash of the Magician's eyes eliminates any doubt you may have had.

Two.

No thoughts run through your mind anymore. Sheepishly you follow the ring's movement, hear that demanding voice inside your head. Are you drooling? Two eyes pulsating with azure light guide your senses and thoughts, leading them away from any subconscious urges you had. A third cleansing gleam removes all your sense of self. *You* are erased, your body but an empty husk. A clean canvass.

Three.

The snap of the Magician's fingers is as loud as thunder. Your wobbly legs fail to support you and you drop to your knees. Then all goes pitch black. The last you hear is the voice of a male and female in heated *Italian* debate.

The conclusion

Satin touches your face, caressing your cheeks and hair gently. Then a hand under your chin forces you to look up. A stranger towers above you, scanning you top to toe. It's a marsupial and you vaguely recall him from somewhere. Perhaps if your mind was not so fuzzy you would be able to identify him. Then you realize you are completely stripped of any garments you were wearing. Your first reaction is to shy away and move from the intruder, using your hands to cover your private bits.

"W-what is this? Who are you?" You hesitantly inquire.

The kangaroo performs a deep bow. "Rauz. Or... The Magician, if you will". His nickname faintly rings a bell, but you cannot remember having heard of a Rauz before.

"Why am I here? I take it you brought me here. Can you return my clothing to me?"

You blush and huddle against the planked wall behind. Rauz approaches you. His leather boots squeek with every step. Then he raises his right hand...

SNAP!

A warmth glows within your body and mind. You feel perfectly safe. There is nothing to worry about anymore. Your arms fall limply to your sides. Rauz walks up to your incapacitated body and his voice echoes through your mind.

"Kneel." He demands.

There is no struggle in your body nor your spirit. You do as is commanded and crawl up to your knees in the best posture you can produce. The Magician snickers and gives you a soft petting.

"You will refer to me as *master* from now on. Your sole purpose is subservience to me and anyone I entitle your service to. You wish only to fulfil this purpose. You will be addressed as *slave*, *pet*, *toy* or similar by whoever controls you at that moment." The laws of Rauz the Dutch Magician are imprinted on your blank, suggestive subconscious mind. You resonate impeccably with them now.

Until the next snap of The Magician's fingers you are nothing but a tool for fun and pleasure. To be publicly humiliated by performing tricks.

To be used as a plaything for Rauz and anybody he lends you out to.

Forever linked to The Magician by a subconscious trigger.

"Now, my new little circus animal... I've got a show to give and Firenze is expecting the magnificent Dutch Magician on stage soon. You will be the centerpiece of today's show. To make it more exciting... Perform well tonight and I will consider a permanent position for you as my personal slave. What an honour! But before I tread with you unto the stage, I might want to put a tack and muzzle on you. And most importantly the tail buttplug. What is a puppy without its tail?!"

You get unto all fours and bark enthusiastically. Tonight you are a puppy.

But what brings tomorrow? Cleaning feet with your tongue, or perhaps footgear? Serving as Rauz's personal fucktoy? Paraded through the streets in embarrassing attire such as in a diaper or pony gear? Or to be installed as a public toilet for everybody to use... and misuse?

One thing is absolutely clear, however. There is **no escape**.