

One Night After 12:30

Few human beings are so pleasantly surprised by the stumbling across of sour meat. Pleased though, is Coco Orngojine, helped along by her luck at not being a human being at all. She loves the browns and old reds of the upturned flesh; a day-old deer leg—probably torn by some of her distant cousins the hyenas but abandoned when some greater power bullied them off. Old waste. Old grudges of haughty lions. Let these idiots burn off in the sun one of these days!

Pigeon feathers and fox bones, scrap of porcupine hide and quills, sack of hot termite dust, acala tidbits with string-holes burned through with iron. Hard ox-hide plate bearing violet-tinged stone, striped like an okapi. The soft hide strips hold it in place like a Queen's crown; a fan of owl feathers frames the rest of the headdress. She is not a Queen, not in the traditional sense. Her bloodline—hazy. Coco Orngojine herself believes she was born out of the uncertain corners of a human's mind, where visages are wont to become twisted, demonified. Perhaps that was where the idea "hyena" was stored, before that hyena was reduced to clay and reshaped into a reality its creator dreaded. Coco Orngojine does not care for origins; only meat and treasures can catch her amber and red eyes up. Grinning at the discovery of the obelisk, roots of acacia hugging it tightly. Laughing to find some village maiden has left her tiny blue star-blooms as a tribute to her shrine.

She doesn't care much for the premise of a physical description. This is only fair; consider her predicament well—a creature of imaginative power, hidden in darkness for maximum effect. Any mugshot would not do her infamy justice. And her suspicious sniff suggests you would most likely find her ugly anyway.

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I was once the goddess in the dark menstrual bunk waiting to hold the minds of the maids and old matrons still for them. To rip the marrow out of a bone cage of distress is no easy task; thankfully my jaws are built for such work.

Nowadays the women are just as cowardly as the men. They have no ability to giggle in the face of impending madness anymore, not since the pale humans mixed their degenerate customs with this land's people. Of course, humans will be humans—these Maasai elders sucked up only the foulest bits of unpraise that the foulest of the invaders had to offer. The dark guides, comforts of the dark nights, bat and owl, became dark hunters; the coil of warning became the coil of death; the omen of patience, python, became omen of doom; the spider wove webs of fear instead of the stories of the planet.

And of course the fear overtook them. They lost even their healthy dose, as the ferocious golden gargoyle became a slovenly object king—to be worshipped, then slaughtered, then framed.

What, you think the lions liked this change?

Arrogant as they are, when respect is shown by the stalking and skinning of their families, even they cannot accept such a tribute.

But my cousins are more patient, ready to wait for our time to come again. We are content with the humble pieces strewn across the plains. At least, for now.

The worst part for him about waking up was finding out he was handcuffed to the steel rail of the bed. After that, most everything molded into his usual expressions of bland distaste and

condescension. The nurse that kept checking his room, though hot, was aggravatingly terse. Weren't nurses supposed to be pitiful and nurturing? Come on, his head was busted from where the bitch had shattered the vase on his head. Not that his own injuries had helped the police see who was really at fault in the brawl.

Speak of the devil, he could just barely make out the edge of navy blue pant leg and dark boot sticking out beyond the threshold. Probably a fat pig, slouching in the folding chair, gut so big the legs splayed like a scalded turkey.

They had changed him into one of those god-awful vomit-green gowns, he noticed. Why not an orange jumpsuit? That was less embarrassing. Might as well, he was screwed already.

The hot nurse was back, but not for him. She was checking on this veggie'd-out woman beyond the screen next to him. She'd come in shortly after him, half-nude and drooling. Her eyes were half-open too, but probably not seeing much. Probable crackwhore O.D.ing the night away, though what clothes she was wearing didn't seem quite nice enough for a hooker's uniform.

"Doctor Abelson," the nurse was clattering around behind the curtain; some static buzzed—probably a call light or a radio or something. "Doctor, can you come see the Jane Doe in 302? Her HBP is starting to drop."

They didn't say "S.T.A.T.", so it was safe to say Mrs. Crackwhore wasn't dying just yet. He thought it creepy they'd put him in the same room as a woman who was likely to turn corpse; he hadn't assumed his head was that smashed.

The doctor, a real paunchy guy with a pornstar mustache and graying-mouse hair entered minutes later. The two professionals muttered a bit, changed a setting on some machine or other, then grunted in satisfaction. And proceeded to walk out.

“Hey,” he called the nurse, “what’s the matter with her?”

“I’d think you’d best worry about yourself,” she smiled, stiff-eyed. God, did she ever look like she wanted to smash a second vase over his head. Just like every other bitch in existence, he chuckled to himself. Then again, it was no surprise they tended to back each other up in little gangs.

He woke up a while later—no bother asking how long. Long enough for the rooms to have been darkened and the halls to be quieted. A steady beep emanated from Mrs. Crackwhore’s side of the room.

He almost missed the figure seated on the stool by his bed. First sweep he’s mistaken it for a heart rate monitor covered in a sheet. Whoever it was was hooded and cloaked in something dark and ragged.

“The fuck did you come from?” What unease! “How’d you even get in here?”

“You certainly woke up lively.”

The voice was parched and cooing, like that of an old woman. There was something discordant in that coming from the dark, blurry blob sitting there. As far as he could tell her arms were tucked in the opposite sleeve, his head declined towards where he lay. Staring.

“Who are you..?”

“Your grandmother.” The cloth rustled about the base of the hood, carrying with it stale breath and reedy chuckles, “I’ve come to congratulate you on finally finding some comeuppance. Eve was such a good girl today.”

“My grandmother’s dead, you crazy bat,” he said, shuffling away, hiding on the other side of the bed. “Did Eve set this up? Is this a prank? There’s a cop outside, you know.”

“I know, I bid him a pleasant evening and gave him some coffee to help him through his shift.”

He wasn’t sure how he felt this, but beyond the hood there must have been a toothy grin.

“If you don’t leave right-fuckin-now, I’m calling for help.”

“I’ll leave when I’m good and ready.” The voice rasped; the hunched bundle seemed taller, oppressing, “I wanted to show you something before I go.”

“Alright, that’s enough—who the fuck—”

He lurched, straining against the handcuffs, stretching his other arm. One finger brushed the edge of the hood, and it flew back like a wisp of smoke-made-fabric.

It sat still, paralyzing him with its permanent smile, red lines of dry and jerkied muscle lacing its way across the hyena skull. The skull cocked to the side, quizzical. The yellow light of eyes bore into him.

“Goodbye.”

He screamed.

Doctor Abelson discovered the body of Timothy Hardwick while tending the nameless rape victim in the next bed. He appeared to be locked in a gape of screaming, though nothing out of the ordinary had been reported by the officer outside the door. Investigators were incredibly puzzled,

and for good reason. Mr. Hardwick's pose gave cause for suspicion but medical examination could uncover only natural causes for his death—specifically a cardiac event, possibly a combined heart attack and ministroke. Whatever had eventually done him in, it was ordinary, not unheard of for a 35-year old male, and sudden. Though there was the matter of the care basket left by the bed. It had taken quite a while for the lead detective to realize that “Coco” (left on the To:/From: tag) was not the name they were looking for, but rather the Maasai word for Grandmother. Mr. Hardwick was whiter than sour cream, so it was chalked up to senile misplacing from another visitor.

The Jane Doe made a startlingly fast recovery afterwards. She was soon conscious and seemed to be undamaged from the toxic drugs she'd been subdued with by her attacker. I hear her real name was Carolyn Potter, and she went on to become a peace activist, shuttling milking goats to Nigeria instead of machine guns. The human body has a strange range of strengths and fragilities, yes? Odd how the terribly beaten, violated, and envenomed frail girl grows back stronger while the lightly wounded wife-beater withers. Odd, but fortunate.