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The Killing Mountain

They called it the killing mountain. It was a time when no organised justice system was necessary; people overcome with guilt for whatever they had done would leap off the cliff at the end of town unto the dagger-tipped peak of the mountain. You could not miss it. The guilty always observed the courtesy of allowing the impaled corpse before them rot or most likely get eaten by large vultures before their turn. They did it at night for censorship and privacy; gone were the barbaric eras when people watched executions for entertainment and people these days preferred to die alone. There was a man who did not die properly on the killing mountain. People thought that maybe it was because he did not feel guilty enough.

This is not a story of why he was on the killing mountain. In truth nobody thinks of what they did on the cliff before soaring unto the killing mountain below. They think of what lies beyond it – the other side. The only way to know is by dying. Well, he did not ponder for long at the edge of the cliff before leaping and instead of running himself through at the chest, the tip pierced his shoulder. He spent about five minutes cursing out in pain and wriggling on the sharp edge of the killing mountain like an unwanted piece of meat in between molars. In one moment at the end of the five minutes, he had clamped his legs round the mountain body and heaved his upper body from the dagger peak and in the other he was falling, truly terrified this time that he was going to die. He did not fall too far down. The next level of rock had a bed of cool sharp sand, so his body did not hurt too much. But he did not stand up for a long time. The edges of the vast uninterrupted sky started darkening and he sprung up in panic; night was coming and he had not died. Unable to think of another way to die, he dedicated himself that night to scaling down the mountain of death. Before him, it was unheard of, its sides were too steep. He would learn this over the coming months, feeding on vultures that had come to his mountain level to rest, overcome with human flesh.

His sleep that first night, the most peaceful in his life, was interrupted by someone that had died properly, the roar of pain drowned his own roar in his dream and grew too loud and beyond his consciousness that he had to wake up. At first he was furious; whoever it was had not given him the benefit of death, at least three days before coming to use the mountain, just because the person had not seen his corpse. Besides within the few hours he had spent here, he was beginning to gain a sense of ownership of the rock.

Go and find your own mountain to die on!

He fell into a restless sleep during the remaining hours of darkness and only settled when the warmth of the sun settled on his face like soft feathers. He almost regained that heavenly slumber, but for the rivulets of liquid that splattered on his face.

Water!

He rejoiced in that portal between dreams and consciousness. When he opened his eyes, some of the liquid found its way into his lips and gained a metallic salty taste.

Blood! Dropping from the dead body above as the vultures tore it apart!

He quickly rinsed his mouth with the sharp sand on the ground. He would never know if it was a man or a woman. He was still heavy with rage when a vulture swept down to his level to digest, unaware of him. That was the day he started eating vultures.

He fell in love with a dead woman. She did not know she was dead yet. He never saw her face; the sun was above her head at day, and the nights were too dark to see. She had come to die on the very evening he started eating vultures. Sated with the blood and flesh of the carnivore that had devoured his fellow man, he was ready to attempt a new level of mountain, till he leaned over from the edge in the afternoon to peep, and found that it was not too far, but the descent was too steep. Raw fear twisted his intestines, but eating the vulture gave him some perspective. He could either spend the rest of his life here eating vultures or try scaling down the mountain.

If he died along the way, excellent – that was the original purpose of coming here in the first place! He stuck the bones of the vulture into his pocket and crouched down on the edge to start his descent and heard the scream of a woman. The resonance of the scream almost startled him into falling, and he hurriedly backed to the mountain wall, sucking in deep gusts of air. The woman's screams were peppered with commands.

"Get off! Leave me alone! I just wanted to die, please leave me alone!"

"Are you alright?" He yelled up to her when his heart steadied.

The screaming stopped to his astonishment.

"Do you need help?" Maybe she, like him had not aimed the sharp peak of the mountain properly. The possibility of companionship excited him. "I can come and bring you down."

"No, no, don't worry I'm fine. I can't even feel anything, but these birds. Can you stop these birds?"

First, he exhausted the bones he had salvaged, throwing them at the birds before flinging the birds that had come to rest on his level at them. They finally left, engrossed in mid-air battles with their kinsmen who had distracted them from consumption.

"Thank you." She said.

"Do you want to eat anything?" The words fell out of him before he knew them, from a desire to please his visitor. He laughed at the ridiculousness of the question before amending. "Can I offer you vulture meat? Perhaps over the coming days I'll find a way of having it cooked but for now I eat it raw and I don't know if ..."

"I'm fine."

"You have to eat!"

"That will defy the purpose of coming here. Will it not?"

He did not talk to her that day again. She had reminded him of his original reason of coming here. If he really wanted to die, why could he not simply jump down from where he was? What was he climbing down the mountain for, a second chance at life? The questions gave him stomachache, which gave way to sleep, for he was exhausted trying to answer them. Something knocked his head, gently. He opened his eyes to see a woman's hand. It had a ring on it.

"Hey! Are you still there, are you alive?" He yelled, throwing himself up, almost forgetting that a few feet from him was nothing but air. "Hey!"

"Yes, I am." She laughed. "Good morning to you too; I slept well thanks for asking. |

Relief almost doubled him over. He was coming to terms with how much he needed this woman. "I saw your hand and I thought..."

"Oh!"

"Your ring? You were married?" He coughed and corrected himself. "Sorry, you *are* married!"

She laughed again, a little girl's laugh. "I don't want to talk about it."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"This specie of vultures that can eat a man's bone ... How do you kill them?"

And so it went for the rest of the day. They talked about the mountain, the minerals that made its tip so sharp it could impale body after body without breaking, what the base of the mountain could possibly look like, and what waited on the other side. They did not talk about the lives they had lived, or what

brought them to die. He talked much more than she did, having found a listener in her. He talked so much that he did not notice that her replies and comments had become monotonous.

“Okay!”

“Really!”

He did notice her replies were waning and decided that in this weak state she would be more willing to share his communion of flesh and blood. He had heard that in ages past, prisoners on the death row were served their favourite meals before being injected with a lethal fluid or ushered to the electrocution chair. One must eat even though he or she has come to die. So, he embraced the narrow peak of the mountain, heaving up his body as he dug his fingers and toes into the grooves wound round it by wind and time, until he got to her. He had conquered his fear of the mountain but not entirely discarded his fear of dying, for when he found her dead, face and other body parts eaten off by the vultures, he let out a scream that would have frightened away the vultures forever if they were sentient enough.

She had been talking for as long as she had a mouth and tongue and now that she had neither, her heart was the only thing that functioned. He broke off her other arm and used the end hewn by the hunger of vultures to stab her heart. He removed the body somehow and buried it on the broader, sandier portion of the next mountain level.

He spent the next weeks ignoring the companionship of other dead people, mourning her and perfecting the drying of vulture meat. He found their blood refreshing on hot afternoons when there was nothing in the sky to veil the sun. Soon, he had accumulated enough feathers to form a bed and some more to knit a cape that would protect him from cold. When impaled people did not die after some hours, he climbed up to kill them before they would be killed.

“You are the angel of death!” Declared an old man, blood dribbling out of his grimace, or was it a chuckle? “A good one!”

If he were self-conscious enough to regard what he looked like, with his overgrown beard and cape of black feathers he would have agreed with the man. One frightful night, he realised that a jaguar miraculously climbed up the height to eat the bodies. He had woken up to find its gaze upon him, onyx eyes glittering from the small head half-turned to him before it leapt up to devour a man complaining about his unfaithful wife. He had not killed the man because he found the talkativeness soothing. In fact, in the past days he had let those that did not die until night live till the next morning and in this way he got news from the town. He had slept off during his evening news that day until instinct woke him up to behold the jaguar. When the jaguar came down and paused on his level before leaping onto the next, he understood – with such clarity that stilled his heart, as if the animal had opened its jaws to speak – that humans who lived on the dagger-peak of the mountain till dusk were his to take.

It was a delicate agreement. At first he imagined that it had been imagined and that the jaguar would somehow not find its way up again, so he left a teenage girl alive. He had to watch with impotent fury as the jaguar silenced her cries for help with his hunger. It still glared at him before leaping down. He woke up the next morning surrounded by vultures. Since he had stopped them from satisfying their insatiable hunger for dead bodies, they had come to eat him alive. First he shooed them away with his cloak of wings, but they only multiplied until his entire level of mountain was black with them. Then he let out one last cry of exasperation. He had come to the killing mountain to die, but not like this.

The first vulture to leap at him was snatched mid-air by the jaws of the jaguar.

He sat back, stupefied as the jaguar fought this war for him, twisting its body this way and that, leaping here, striking with paws and snapping with jaws, never falling off the mountain level until the only vultures that came back to retaliate were wounded, barely able to fly. Noon passed and all that was left of the vultures was blood, decapitations and feathers. The jaguar sprawled down to rest, breathing heavily. The man had never seen a more beautiful creature. He realised it was not all dark; it actually

had silver spots. It sat up and looked at him, the setting sun big enough to contain it. Its golden eyes did not glow. It was hurt – a scratch across the left eye, deep, bleeding. The man crawled to the jaguar, slowly, never breaking eye contact with it, then stretched his hand to stroke its face, to touch the wounded brow. The Jaguar exhaled and closed its eyes at the man's touch, its breathing ice-cool on the base of his palm. The man did the same. When he opened his eyes it was pitch black before him. The jaguar was gone.

By now, he had forgotten the taste of water. He spent the next two days drying the dismembered flesh and polishing bones. On the third day he told himself that the jaguar was not coming back and tried to descend to the next level, after dropping the meat wrapped in a sack made from vulture feathers as incentive. This descent was the hardest. There was nothing to hold onto and the distance was almost three-times the height of a building. When he reached half of it, he slipped and fell, but the next mountain floor rose to catch him. From here he could barely see the top, the sharp peak of death. This new mountain level had some grass and for some reason it gave the man joy. But he vowed never to chew it. He decided to start marking time so he used one hewn bone to chart a calendar on the mountain wall. He was shocked to find that his days there had added up to three months.

Cold came on the seventh month with such severity that he was certain his death had come. He gave into despair and stopped eating after six cold days. He had descended more three mountain levels over the last four months and there was no base in sight. He had finally lost sense of time and slept there waking into restless nights and sleeping forever in the sun. He fell into one of those daytime slumbers certain he would not wake up. Night came and he did not. A heavy blanket of warmth roused him sometime before dawn. He opened his eyes to see the silver spotted jaguar snuggling even closer to his chest and nearly jumped out of his body in surprise. Joy brought tears to his eyes, but the steady breathing of the animal comforted him and lulled him back to sleep.

When he opened his eyes in the morning, the jaguar was gone.

Had it been a dream? Was the jaguar, the woman and the last couple of months real? What if he had gone crazy from loneliness and imagined these things?

What if I am already dead?

He snapped himself out of this train of thought and straightened himself up for the first time in a long time. The depths before him were too real to be an imagination. So was the battle with the vultures and what he had started to feel for the dead woman.

But is that not the point of an imagination? Is it not supposed to feel real?

There was only one way to resolve it. If he could figure out how long he had stayed there, or what day it was, then he could get his sense of reality back and continue scaling it down. His joy at the discovery of this solution passed as morning brightened to noon for he had lost count of the days when the cold came. Yes, he knew that until then he had spent seven months, but he could not make those comatose days of hypothermia irrelevant because they could have lasted even up to a month. When a vulture flew down to rest at his mountain level by evening, he was bolstered with new resolve. He would not surrender to cold again. He gorged on the flesh of the vulture in murderous hunger and smeared its blood on his body so he could spend the night scratching it off to keep warm and trying to fathom the time. His days would be spent sleeping.

He did not know he had fallen asleep until the blanket of warmth woke him. It was the jaguar in his arms again. He swallowed his mixed feelings and fell back to sleep. He focused on not wondering about the jaguar the next day. He did not try to sleep; now understanding that as long as he lasted on the mountain the jaguar would be there to keep him warm at night. He did not descend further either, knowing that until he figured out what day it was, the descent would never end. He succeeded in recovering the six cold days after which he stopped eating. He was making progress. That night the jaguar turned in his arms, yawning in sleep. His heart melted at the sight of the sleeping jaguar's face,

content as a cat. Something was wrong! The next morning, the jaguar was still there when he woke up. It snarled at him and tried to circle him, but he stood up, turned and bent forward, trying to calm it down with his eyes. He turned back for a second out of instinct and found a black mamba also locked in their circular choreography.

They rotated through half-finished circles clockwise and anti-clockwise. Soon the man was exhausted, so he sat down all of a sudden. As if that was all the jaguar needed, it leapt over his head and rushed to the mamba, jaws snapping. The man did not suffer any fit of delusion; he knew this was not his fight. But the snake lunged at him and struck him on the shoulder. In a brief moment of paralysis and pain, he did not know when he went over the mountain cliff or when the jaguar seized him by the cape. Realisation of this came when his body slammed against the mountain wall sending a fresh wave of pain, so that the bite was almost forgotten. He mustered his strength and tried to hold onto the mountain wall, but it was too smooth, like its dagger tip. He grabbed the cloak at the mouth of the jaguar and pulled himself up, surprised at the strength of the vulture wings and jaws of the jaguar. What he saw made him cry. The black mamba was striking the jaguar again and again, and its golden eyes glistened with pain, saliva and blood dribbling freely from the jaws that would not let go of his cape.

That was when he knew his time had come!

He closed his eyes still seeing the eyes of the jaguar as he loosed the cape from his neck and fell, his mind finally resolving the conundrum he based his existence on in his last days. Six days of cold plus two and a half weeks of trying to figure out the time plus three days of going without eating; for three days was the maximum amount of time a human could go without eating before death came and he falling now to it, could recognise it was the certain he would not wake up that dreadfully cold night even if the jaguar brought its heat. It made up a total of eight months when put together – the same amount of time he had been said to spend in his mother's womb.

People had camped at the base of the mountain for months waiting for the only man to ever survive The Killing Mountain. When he tumbled down past tree branches to them, he was already dead. They wondered why a man falling to his death would smile and close his eyes. But he did not need to open them for he knew the jaguar would win.

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