

The Rakshasa

The boy lay dying in the heart of Dalh. His sandy hair stuck to his scalp in matted clumps, dried in place like bark to a tree. Half-naked, his skin was sunburnt and cracked despite the cool late afternoon breeze, and it stretched taut against his bones so that one could count each of his ribs. Back pressed against the cold marble of the city's most prominent fountain, he starved to death slowly amidst the milling crowds of market goers. Around him hawkers touted their wares, a performer played the flute, and most villainously of all a handful of street carts sold their morsels to hungry laborers as they made their way home. The scents of searing lamb and grilled flat bread, of cardamom, turmeric and pepper had tormented the child for days, but now he had been embraced by a reliving state of senselessness. Around him the market thrived as it always had, but the torpor that had sized him diluted its presence in the boy's world.

The same could not be said for the people of the market, and their averted collective gaze declared their awareness of the starving child. He was not wasting away in the shadows of an alley but rested in the center of the market square. The crowds parted around the boy, as water around a rock, and although they went about their usual business there was a tension in their eyes whenever they drifted to close to the child. The people of Dalh tried their best to ignore the boy before them, but in doing so they only carved his presence into their minds. No matter how unnerved the boy made them they still needed food and other goods from the market, so they closed their eyes to the atrocity. Despite the averted gazes the evening market progressed as it always did, and likely always would. The adults bartered viciously with the merchants, and the children played and watched the street performers' acts. Not a single person approached the dying boy.

All the warning they needed was carved into the forehead of the boy. It was a crude mark that at a glance was merely a cross--cut deep with a blade--but the people of Dalh knew better than to dismiss the mark. It was the crossed scimitars of the Rakshasa, the tyrannical crime lord that ruled Dalh unchallenged from the shadows. The boy was no beggar merely dying in the street; he was being publicly executed. Any doubt was dispelled by the manacles that bound his feet and their chains that stretched off to both of his sides. Death by starvation was the method favored by the Rakshasa; it was slow, agonizing, and above all visible. No one knew the face of the Rakshasa, but through demonstrations such as this his presence was never lost upon Dalh.

Everyone who called Dalh their home had born witness to the Rakshasa's executions in the past, men, women, or children it did not matter, any slight against the man was a death sentence. No one knew what he looked like, despite the statues of the man reigning over every fountain. The grandest of which stood here in the market square. A towering warrior cast in marble; an idealized image of masculine beauty marred only by its smooth featureless face. In one hand he carried a curved blade, and in the other a mechanism spewed forth crystal clear water to rain down into the fountain's basin. Water and death, these were the tools the Rakshasa used to control the people of Dalh. Nowhere but here would one see statues glorifying a criminal, but he owned all the clean water and magnanimously provided it for free. It was this that made people tolerate him, some even holding a respect for the mysterious villain, but it was the boy and those who died before him that made every last citizen fear the name itself.

Rarely was the nature of the sin worthy of such a punishment made known to the people, as the unknown was the stock-and-trade of the crime lord. In the case of the boy, it was theft. He had worked for an insignificant underling of the Rakshasa as a cutpurse and had been caught hiding a portion of his illicit earnings. He had squirreled away twenty-seven Dak, a veritable fortune to the street urchin but in truth it amounted to about twice what a day laborer might earn in a week. Insignificant or not it was still coin belonging to the Rakshasa, and he had needed an example. It had been a few months since the last execution and by his measure the populace was becoming complacent. The boy had suited his needs as a child's death always had a greater impact than that of an adult.

There was a nuanced, deliberate cruelty to how the Rakshasa killed beyond the obvious horror of starvation. The faceless monster did not let his victims die easily, and he chose the middle of spring as the ideal time to hold his executions. The summer was far too hot, and the winter too cold, but there were a few weeks in the spring where he struck the perfect balance that death by exposure was a mitigated risk. Spending days chained out in the elements was still an ordeal, but it was a calculated one that had driven the boy to the brink of death without pushing him across it. The issue of thirst was a simpler issue, all the Rakshasa needed to do was chain his victim to a fountain and they would have all the water they could drink. Dehydration would kill days if not weeks faster than starvation, but so long as a source of water was readily available survival instincts, however illogical, would force an animal to drink. Sometimes the stronger willed ones would bite out their own tongues to speed along their deaths, but the Rakshasa corrected this oversight after the first by preemptively cutting them out. Fortunately for the boy, the crime lord only felt such measures were necessary for the adults instead finding

that children simply wasted away in silence and confusion. There were also some of his men posted around to keep an eye on the proceedings, and to douse the sinner with a bucket once a day to keep them from smelling too much.

However, these watchers primarily served to facilitate the Rakshasa's second, and perhaps greater, cruelty. No matter how sadistic the man was, these executions were never about killing those who had wronged him. They were a shackle to bind the people of Dalh. Fear kept the Rakshasa and his men in power as much as their control of the water did but fear alone would only lead to persecution. He needed them to accept his presence as a fact of life, so that none would even contemplate resisting him. He would be as the rain or sun, unknowable, vital, and terrible. To this end there was a trick to his public executions. The chains that bound the boy in place lead off to the east and west sides of the fountain, where each length was affixed to a hook hammered into the marble for this sole purpose. The chains were cut to a length that left enough slack for the boy to stand and drink from the fountain, but each was short enough that he could never reach to opposing hook before it was drawn taught. There were no locks upon the chains, nor were they especially heavy or cumbersome, so even a child could simply lift them off their hook to free the captive. Anyone in the crowd surrounding the boy could free him at any time, and each and every one of them was painfully aware of this. The people of this vibrant city would watch him die over the course of days, all the while knowing that they could save him at no cost to themselves. No cost save the ire of the Rakshasa. The fear of reprisal from their hidden overlord formed an impassible wall between the people of Dalh and those hooks.

In the beginning some had tried to help the Rakshasa's victims, either through freeing them outright or at least tossing them some food, but these acts of kindness came to a quick and violent end. The Rakshasa had eyes everywhere and they marked everyone who disobeyed him. In return for their kindness the Rakshasa butchered not only those who acted but also their families, friends, even marginal acquaintances. Resistance quietly faded away after that, and none of the locals attempted to interfere again. Occasionally a traveler from afar would still make an attempt, their humanity crying out at the injustice, but they are most often dissuaded by the people of Dalh. The only recourse the people had was to begin rationalizing the deaths, and their own inaction. What good would it do to get involved when all it would accomplish is more death? In every case the victim had died regardless so why bother? In asking themselves these questions the people of Dalh became silently complicit in the actions of the Rakshasa, finding it better to accept the monster's presence than to incite his wrath.

Years of such conditioning led to the present state of Dalh, where the market continued unabated around the dying boy. Women even filled jars of water from the very same fountain he lay against, although they pointedly moved to the opposite side of the wide basin. They paused for a moment as the boy stirred, and with stiff unsteady movements rose to his feet. Barely more than a skeleton in rags, the wires of what little muscle remained to him straining to support his diminished weight as the boy bent to drink what would likely be his last from the fountain. The women returned to their work as he slumped back to his seat, resting his head against the lip of the fountain. By now the market was quieting, what had started as a flood of bodies now reduced to a trickle. The merchants snapped at their servants as they filed away their remaining stock, and the street musician finished the last notes of his song letting the

stragglers scatter as he packed away his flute. The sun touched the horizon and cast the city in its final shadows, a crimson prelude to the coming night. The boy let the cold-water drip down his chin as he closed his eyes and drifted away.

His rest did not last long as footsteps in the silence roused him from his shallow slumber. The sound stopped as his eyes struggled to lift their lids, but with effort the boy forced them open. In the hollow twilight a tall, lean man stood before him, only a pace before him and far closer than anyone had come since his punishment began. The man wore black vestments, accented with scrolls of intricate silver thread, and although they were not ostentatious the robes were the finest anyone in Dalh, much less a dying street urchin, would have ever seen. The Boy believed the figure to be a man because his thin frame lacked feminine features rather than manifesting notably masculine ones, but it was only a guess as a fine black silk veil obscured the face of the man. The veil's material was delicate and sheer, but it nonetheless obscured all the features of the man's face, even when viewed from the boy's seated position. The man idly reached into the folds of his withdrew a short knife, the glint of the steel made the boy tense even though he was too exhausted to move much at all.

However, the veiled man made no move to strike the boy with the blade, instead reaching his other hand into his robe to withdraw a ripe persimmon. Wordlessly the man set about segmenting the fruit, the sweet fragrance sending a pang of emptiness through the boy's stomach beyond all those he had endured from the spiced scents of the market. Once the man had finished cutting the fruit into even wedges, he knelt and proffered it to the boy on an outstretched hand. The tang of the aroma was more than the boy could bear, but he did not

reach for the fruit. Instead, the boy slowly shook his head in refusal, his neck was stiff and the movement unsteady, but the intention was still conveyed.

“Fear not child there is no trick to my gift.” The stranger said. He pushed the hand closer to offer the fruit once more.

Still the boy did not take it, tears of frustration welling up as he shook his head again, more vehemently this time. The man did not seem to understand his meaning, and the boy gestured a tired hand to the nearby alley.

“Eyes.” The boy had not spoken for over a week and his voice came out as a pained whine, but the man did turn to look towards the alley. The boy realized that this man must be an outsider and did not know the ways of Dalh. This was a kind, if odd, stranger and he did not want to see him die. The boy was born and raised here, and as such he knew just as well as any other what the Rakshasa would do to the stranger if he took the fruit he offered. In truth the boy feared it was already too late, but hopefully if the men watching him saw him refuse the food, they would spare the black robed man. The man turned to the alley, and after a moment let out a soft gentle chuckle.

“Ah I see, you were not afraid *of* me, but *for* me. You are a kind child indeed, more so for your circumstance. But no. You need not fear for my safety, your self-proclaimed Rakshasa holds no sway over me. A mere pretender can never truly inspire fear. Please take the fruit, the sweetness will do you good.” And once again the man offered the persimmon.

The boy was growing impatient, clearly this man did not understand what would happen to him, but it was hard to get the right words out. The boy turned to face the alley where the

Rakshasa's men watched him to try to better convey the danger but was shocked to find it empty. Ever since they had chained him to this spot there had been at least one man watching him from the alley, there to note if anyone approached the boy, but now there was no one. A moment later the boy realized in his preoccupation with the stranger he had failed to notice that the entire market was empty. He could not find a single soul in sight, save for the kind man before him, and the strangeness of it stunned him for a time. The sun had set and the sky was held in twilight, but it was not so late that the streets would be empty. He had been in this spot for over a week, and the streets of Dalh were never truly empty. He looked back to the man and felt a fear rise up that had not been present before. The city's peaceful silence took an ominous cast, but the man showed no signs that he was at all uneasy. As the man once again pushed the fruit closer, the boy's hunger finally overturned his reason.

He took a piece of the persimmon and ate it greedily, and it was wonderful. Sweet but not cloying so, tart but not sour, and behind it all danced hints of a peppery spice. Never in his life had the boy eaten something so delicious, and now that he had started, he devoured the rest in a ravenous panic. In seconds it was gone, and before the boy could even begin to regret his haste the man withdrew a second from his robe. The man tossed the new fruit to the boy without cutting it, but the boy did not mind at all tearing into it with a renewed vigor.

"That is more like it! you are far too young to be so concerned about others, and don't worry I have more than a few of those. I know how hunger effects the body and mind, so I made sure to take enough with me. Now let us see about getting you out of those chains." The odd man said, and as the boy consumed his second prize the man bent and took up a length of chain in his hands.

He pressed his silvery knife against the iron and with the same efficiency that he used to divide the persimmon, severed the chain with a single stroke. This stopped the boy for a moment, even in his furor, the knife had cut cold hard iron as if it was cloth. Without pause the man repeated the feat with the second chain leaving the boy free to move about unrestricted.

“Now do you think you can stand?” The tall man asked.

In answer the boy dazedly shook his head. He was in a much better state having eaten for the first time in days, but he knew he was in no state to move around.

“I suppose that is only to be expected. Nothing for it, come here.” The man said offering his arm, and upon the boy taking it swung the child up onto his shoulder. He then made to leave the market square, but the boy managed to force out a question.

“Who?”

“Who am I? I suppose that is a fair question, although it has a rather complicated answer. In short, I am the person who came to rescue you. To wax poetic, I came to retrieve my name from a cretin who dared to steal it. You see names have a certain weight for those like me, and it is nauseating to have someone disgracing mine. I worked for a very long time to build my name, and it to have all that ruined by a little, petty man is unacceptable. So, I decided to first ruin *his* plans, and *his* works, starting with you and this city. Now I am going to go have a little talk with the thief.” The Rakshasa said.

From his seat on the man’s shoulder the boy caught a glimpse of what was hidden behind the man’s veil. His face had no discernable features, save for a wide mouth that

revealed rows of fangs as the creature chuckled to itself. The boy saw this, and having only just escaped certain death, found the sense to say nothing as the Rakshasa carried him through the winding streets of an empty Dalh.