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The Well of All Ideas

“The king is at the well again,” Cora said excitedly to her father as she glanced out of their shop at the square where their ruler had just arrived. Her father glanced up from his work of repairing the sleeve of her torn dress to send a sharp glare towards where she sat perched near the window sill.

“Nevermind that,” he said as he often did when she spoke of the well. Her enthusiasm receded at his expected bluntness, and she pouted slightly as she turned back to view the proceedings.

In the center of Cora’s town sat the well of all ideas. Every great scholar or artist in history is said to have stuck their head in to hear the echo of the solution to their own desires. It formed the very foundation that the kingdom was built on, and, in turn, was what it relied on. People traveled far and wide to the site of the well, desperate for a solution to their boundless problems. In turn, the king’s own stock of riches flourished due to the wisdom that could be given by the well at a price.

As she watched from her seat by the window, the king removed his jewel-studded crown momentarily from his head, handing it off for safekeeping to his waiting footservant. Bending, regally over the side of the well, Cora held her breath in anticipation as his lips moved to form the words of that day’s wish. Few townspeople stopped what they were doing to watch the sight like she did, but of those who did, Cora could see barely concealed envy in their eyes.

The well was not just available to anyone to unlock its secrets. The king very firmly saw to that. Sovereign rulers of neighboring kingdoms were banned from ever learning of any of the well's mysteries in fear that they would be given proper guidance on an invasion. Commoners were also forbidden for a similar reason. There was a fear that they too would attempt to seize power in a spur of revolution. Cora had seen few actually use the well despite the large pilgrimages that journeyed to their village. The king himself was its most frequent user with only a few dignitaries and dukes being allowed to gaze into it in his stead.

As the king straightened his bent stance and retook his crown, the crowd scattered. A few lingered, muttering to each other in hushed voices with eyes burning bright with ire. The baker lingered longer than most. Cora could understand.

The people of the kingdom were angry. They were enraged at the fact that such a precious treasure located in the center of their community was out of their reach upon the threat of death. Some tried to partake in the well despite the risks, and they quickly met their demise. Without any ideas to guide the people, they could do nothing to rise up against the king, and so, they stayed destitute and oppressed.

As the morning passed into the afternoon, Cora wandered outside to sit down against the wall of her and her father's tailoring shop on the sole patch of grass that could be found in the town square. It was her favorite spot despite the hustle and bustle of the townspeople going about their day as it was the only passable sitting area with a clear view of the well. As usual, she took her notebook out of the folds of her skirt and opened it to the first page.

It was blank.

Cora had spent countless hours staring at that single page. The staleness of it stared up at her, taunting her lack of insight and creativity. She yearned to fill the book's pages. The thought

of the white pages turning black with writing and drawings often sent her off to sleep, the starkness of the blank page fading away and leaving her mind with blessed inky darkness. The same vast darkness that she imagined laid inside the well.

Her father often scolded her when he caught her doing this daily ritual. He knew all too well what temptations the well possessed. Her mother had snuck out at night under a moonless sky when Cora was young. Cora had heard the creak of the floorboards as she had slipped through their back door. As the sun began to rise over the horizon, a villager had spotted the site of her crumpled form by the well .

There was no mercy shown to those who attempted to meddle with the well. Guards were posted at all hours of the day to catch those who dared to defy the king's rule. A ring of brown stained the stones surrounding the base of the well from these attempts. The color only grew deeper as Cora grew older.

A shout from a passerby drew Cora's attention away from where she had been studying the texture of the notebook in her lap. It was from the baker's wife. Her eyes tracked the baker's wife's own gaze to the opposite side of the square to see her husband vaulting the carefully constructed fence surrounding the well. Even from her spot yards away, Cora could see the crazed look in his eye. The small bakery had been flagging due to the cost of wheat rising in the ongoing drought. It did not help that the luxury of fresh bread and other such goods were now a luxury and not a commodity as taxes climbed in the village. It seemed that the lack of business had gotten to him and, expectedly, so did the lure of the well.

With a *thwip* piercing the air, the baker's head split open just as it began to bow over the well's opening as an arrow pierced through it.

Screams rent through the air as people raced back into the safety of their shops and homes. A teary-eyed butcher dragged the screaming wife of the baker into his own shop near where Cora was still sitting. The sound of a lock clicking was heard behind them. Cora sat and stared transfixed for a moment as she watched the brown stones of the well turn a glistening red with new blood. Through squinting eyes she turned her gaze upwards to look at the guards' tower. She could just make out the sight of a congratulatory pat given by one guard to another as the first strings of copper met her nose.

The sound of a slamming door just behind her made Cora jump.

“Cora, get inside!” It was her father, wide eyed and gesturing frantically to the doorway. With one last look at the slumped over body of the baker, she stuffed her notebook back in her skirt and followed him.

That night, in the darkness of her own room, for the first time in her life, she feared the well. Not for the powers it possessed, but at what its lure possessed people do. Lighting a candle, she grabbed her notebook from her bedside and opened it to the first page.

There was a faint splatter of red droplets.

The following morning, there was an announcement made by a representative of the king.

“In an attempt to expand the resources of the people,” the crowd grumbled at the true meaning behind that, “the well has imparted on His Majesty the idea to negotiate with the neighboring kingdom of Bello. Thus, he will be gone for a fortnight to follow the well's wishes,”

At this people grew unsettled. The sovereign of Bello was notoriously known for their animosity towards their kingdom. It was a mystery why the king was trying to form any sort of

relationship with them now when their envy and greed over the well was obvious. It would be an undoubtedly tense diplomatic meeting, so it begged the question of why?

This is the question that haunted Cora until the sun began to paint the sky orange instead of blue. She did not sit in her spot in the square today, and instead loitered in the back of her father's shop in her bedroom. Her notebook sat untouched on her cot. Her sole attention was focused through the window at the well itself.

It should have scared her. How quickly the curiosity at the concept of the well had turned into an obsession. Were these the same thoughts that had consumed her mother? So many decisions were made due to its imparting of knowledge but none of that knowledge was known to Cora or anyone else in the kingdom. Reasoning could not be reasoned with as there was no basis to go off of. It was like jumping off the edge of a dark chasm and not knowing if the fall was long enough to leave you dead when you meet the ground.

It was like looking down a bottomless well.

With a jolt, she realized what the departure of the king meant. Since it was a trip to Bello, it would not be a venture where the king would like to take any chances. If there was one thing that the king cared about more than his riches and his possession of the well it was his only personal safety. This meant that the watch would be lighter, and thus the well would be less guarded.

As the last traces of the sun fell below the horizon, Cora made her decision.

Dinner with her father that night was a silent affair. He was drawn and pale, She noticed he was always more somber in the days following an execution. The whole village was with good reason.

“I love you,” Cora whispered as he moved his hand to his mouth to take a bite from his bowl of stew. The haunted look in his eyes softened a bit around the edges.

“And I love you,”

Getting out of the house was easy. Cora’s father had the unfortunate ability to sleep like the dead. It seemed he would not be hearing her like he failed to hear her mother. The moon was bright tonight. She could not rely on the cover of darkness to get to the well. She would need to find another way. She glanced up at the tower from her position hidden behind the shop. Two guards.

Taking off at a sprint, but keeping her footfalls light, she raced away from the center of town and the well and stopped in front of the bookshop whose owner was likely the most well off of the townspeople. Still, with a silent apology to the kind book clerk, Cora picked up a large pebble from the road and threw it at the shop window. Cora was sure the shattering of glass could be heard for acres, and it seemed to do what she intended for the sound of shouting from the direction of the guard tower was heard soon after.

Knowing her time was short, she raced back towards the direction of the well. Not bothering to silence the pounding of her feet as it matched the pounding of her own heart, she jumped the fence.

Cora felt like she had just stepped onto holy land. The very cobblestones seemed to emit a sort of raw power that she could not explain as anything other than ethereal. Trembling, she inched closer to the well and brushed her fingers against its lip, feeling the coolness of the stone. With shaking hands, she grasped it fully. Bending her elbows, she leaned down.

To her surprise, the well was not a bottomless chasm of the unknown, but a rather shallow pit where the end was clearly in sight. It was also not empty. There was a gaunt looking man sitting in the bottom, and as she absorbed her own shock, she realized he was looking right at her, his eyes holding a spark that Cora had never seen before in anyone besides the king himself.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I am man,” he replied.

And Cora realized that she had ideas of her own all along.