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Honey Bones: A Fable

by

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There is a jut at the northernmost point along the headlands of the Isle of Susay where it is said, if you look hard through the shadow mists, you can see past the edge of time. But no one goes up to the headlands, not for eight hundred years, not even to harvest the lightning blossoms which grow nowhere else in the world, and whose properties are necessary for the most powerful magics. The purple flowers with bloody hearts circle an odd hunching lump of black stone on the edge of the cliff. The bones of Merwin of Romail at one time rested beneath this stone, once a porcupine oak, its trunk carved with arcane symbols of great power. The queer carvings remain sharp as through freshly cut on the tree's petrified remains, but the underside of the cliff exists no longer. Gnawed by storm and years, its stone belly at last crumbled into the angry sea below, carrying with it an old sorceress's ancient bones.

When her bones escaped into the depths, some whispered that Merwin of Romail, her soul harnessed above by the power of the oak, had the last laugh.

Merwin had been a worker of the blackest magics and many was the village child who went missing on a full moon night. It was never told how the seven wise women of Heble countered her power, but it is said that they buried her alive and planted the porcupine oak over her heart to capture her spirit for all eternity. And so even to this day her soul remains locked within its implacable grasp.

But her bones are gone.

Turned by time and nature to honey colored stone, her bones shattered against the jagged rocks at the foot of the cliff. Eventually, rubbed smooth by salt and wave, a few bits began to wash up here and there on a beach, or on a rocky shingle; found clasped within the pearly grasp of an oyster; and then too, set out like a jewelled offering on an island bare.

On the day of her seventh birthday, Zalia's mother took her to the beach. It was her only gift for they were poor and Zalia's father had been killed when he had gone to fight against the raiders from the south. That day lucky Zalia found seven stones in a tidepool. They looked like amber but when she took them home and put them in a pouch, each held within its heart a golden spark. She did not tell her mother but hid them under her pillow, a special gift from the spirits, not to be sold. She played with them, as poor children will, sometimes naming them, sometimes throwing them like marbles into pretty patterns on her rough hewn floor. But as she grew older and her mother grew tired and weak, Zalia forgot about the pretty stones. She began to help earn their keep by running errands for the merchants along the docks. Sometimes they gave her a bit of bread or now and again a penny. Many of the men leered and smiled invitingly as their gazes ran up and down her budding body.

When she was sixteen her mother died. Zalia sold her mother's clothes and shoes to pay the ashman to take the bent, worn out body to the crematorium.

Zalia was alone.

The girl had grown up pretty in spite of rough work and too little food, or perhaps because of it, for she had a haunting grace and delicate quality that spoke of a fragility born not of gentility but of fire and pain. Like the tiny arctic glowflower, she flourished in the severest of conditions. So when the taxman came to the door, she paid him with the only currency she had left to give.

Zalia discovered the stones again when she moved into a fashionable pleasure house on the crown of the hill near the palace. Successful in her trade, she now dressed in elaborate brocade and velvet gowns, adorned with gold and jewels from wealthy patrons. But in the afternoons when she wasn't receiving them into her bed, she dressed in simple silks and wandered through the sun dappled gardens looping about the royal residence like a fragrant necklace, a plain silver circlet set with seven golden stones about her neck.

This is where the king first saw her and wanting her, sent men to find out who she was. One of those procurers came to her in the salon of the pleasure house one night and took her with him to a private house where the king awaited his delight.

He was generous and soon fascinated, and he required her more and more often, demanding that she be at his beck and call, and never again for any other man. This suited him for awhile, but eventually he moved her into a house of her own where he could visit when he wanted, where he could be absolutely sure that no other man could

touch her. He showered her with money and servants and invented for her a name that she might come into the palace and be even more at his leisure.

Any of those former lovers who might frequent the palace and recognize her were exiled on some pretext. So Zalia, the daughter of a laundress from the lower west wharves, came into the palace. If the queen knew of her husband's errant ways, she gave no sign but welcomed Lady Zalia of Prediscar as serenely as any queen should. With her beauty and quiet grace, Zalia was soon a favorite of the court and the king was frustrated to find that his scheming had made it nearly impossible to see her through her swarm of admirers.

As might be expected, the king and queen had a son. He was as young and handsome as any prince should be and very much coveted by all the ladies of his acquaintance. None of those beauties tempted him for he was far more interested in his horses and dogs and falcons. But from the moment he saw her, Prince Arent was fascinated by the lovely Zalia. He brought her flowers and led her in every dance that manners allowed. He was delighted by her blushes, caused, he thought, by feminine modesty. But Zalia blushed with the shame of her profession, knowing herself to be tainted and unworthy of his artless admiration. She gave her body to the king, for he paid her and he was the king. But she adored the prince. She longed for his love, but shrank from even his most innocent touch, knowing that she must go to his father's bed, and perform those bestial acts which were all that enabled the jaded monarch to achieve his pleasure, and which made her cringe from herself.

The king, seeing the attentions of his son toward his own mistress, grew jealous. He wanted Zalia for himself and began to imagine a life with her. The more he saw the

way his son kissed her hand and hovered over her as he could not, the darker his thoughts grew. At last he convinced himself that he could have an heir with Zalia, that all that stood in the way of his happiness were his queen and his son.

He plotted.

One starless night, Zalia dreamed of Arent. He stood before her, tears falling from his eyes as he stretched a beseeching hand to her. Suddenly he fell into a black abyss and she could see him screaming, though there was no sound but the beating of her heart. She wore the necklace made of the stones from her childhood, of that birthday when she could remember herself as unsullied and happy. The stones at her throat glowed warmly and she laid her fingers on them for comfort. As she did she reached desperately for Arent and from her hand ravelled a streamer of light, wrapping Arent in a golden cocoon. She pulled him to her. On his face she did not see joy but shock and suspicion. He turned from her and she reached out her hand to call him back. The streamer of power curled about her fingers, but she could not bring herself to force him. She watched him go.

Zalia was crying when she woke. But it was only a dream. Just a dream.

She could not return to sleep and instead dressed and went to the kitchen for a cup of tea. Thus it was she who answered the door when the king knocked. He was jubilant, his glee barely contained as he danced her around the room. He kissed her deeply, pushing at her bodice and nuzzling her neck. Zalia let him, wishing, as always, for Arent. When he had sated his desire and she had dressed herself again in a fresh, untorn dress, he told her of his accomplishment. He expected praise and gratitude but Zalia wore a mask of horrified shock.

The king had sent his wife and son to visit his brother.

On the way they would be attacked and killed by marauders.

He would then be free to marry again.

To marry Zalia.

Zalia turned from him, ran upstairs and locked herself away from him, retching in a chamber pot. Arent! Not her beautiful Arent! She remembered the night's dream, the way he fell from her, the tears in his grey eyes. And she remembered what she had done to save him. Had it been a true foretelling? A message from the spirits?

The king was knocking at the door, his voice cajoling as he promised her clothing and jewels, promised her his love and faithfulness. He had promised those things to his queen. Zalia scabbled through her bedtable for the circlet of sea stones. The fire within them was already burning brilliant yellow as she wrapped her fingers around them.

Zalia did not know what to do but her fear for Arent called up the power of the stones, the power of the long-dead Merwin. Zalia's skin crackled with scorching heat and she cried out, dropping the circlet. Without a thought she snatched it up again and felt the stones burn like coals in her palm. Far away she heard the king and then she called Arent's name. Suddenly she saw him, far below her as though she floated in the sky, but she could hear no sound but her own ragged breathing. An arrow protruded from the prince's shoulder and she could see blood running down his chest. He pulled his mother from her horse and ran toward the slim safety of a thin line of trees as a bristling swarm of assassins attacked. Arent's tiny honor guard battled the marauders but to little avail.

The king had planned well.

The assassins overwhelmed the defenders and converged on the trees. Clutching the stones Zalia reached out her hand. The steamer appeared, but now it was more like a whip. She snapped it and where it touched, the attackers burst into silent flame. She could not hear their screams but saw how the flesh of their faces bubbled and ran. She tore her eyes from them and turned to Arent. He searched for the cause of their salvation, but could not see Zalia. For that she was grateful.

The power from her hand was the steamer now and it wrapped both Arent and his mother in a net of golden gauze. Zalia lifted them and pulled them back to the city, depositing them beside a mermaid fountain in her favorite garden. Then she found herself standing again in her room, her body trembling in violent reaction as she crumpled to the floor.

The king still pounded on the door, shouting her name. She did not answer and after a long while he went away. When he had, Zalia fastened the circlet around her neck and then splashed her face with water from the basin. Whitish liquid tinged with red oozed from the blisters on her palm. She wrapped her hand in linen with shaking fingers, then combed her hair and swung a cloak about her shoulders. Her lips trembled and it was all she could do not to crawl beneath her bedcovers and sob.

She took nothing else with her when she returned to the pleasure house where the king had discovered her. Aleana was the matron who ran the house and seeing Zalia, she hesitated before swinging the door open. She asked no questions, for the only one that mattered to a woman in such a business could be read on Zalia's face. She and the king had had a falling out and Aleana could only hope that taking the girl back in would not

jeopardize her continued success. But the girl had always been popular with the clientele and Aleana was not one to pass on the profit such a cyprian would produce.

Zalia did not go back to work right away. She got sick. A fever set in and the doctor could do little to assuage it. She burned for a week, her green eyes staring and frenzied. Aleana tried to remove the circlet to make Zalia more comfortable, but oddly enough, could find no clasp. But she had little time to worry on such things for there were strange happenings in the palace, and with the rising gossip, her parlors filled and with them, her coffers. There were scandalized rumors of a duel between king and prince and some whispered nervously of magic.

By the end of the week Zalia's fever had broken, but she was gaunt and too weak to sit up in bed.

Another week passed without word of king or prince. Zalia did not get better and the fever threatened to return. She replayed in her mind the rescue over and over again, appalled at what she'd done, terrified of what she had become. She cringed from the king's lust that she still felt on her skin and could not keep food in her stomach. If she dreamed she did not remember, but at times she woke with streams of tears soaking her pillow, her stomach cramping.

Finally word came from the palace that the king had died choking on a plum seed. He was buried in state in the family crypt following a magnificent procession through the city. That same night grave robbers broke in, stealing the body of the king. It never was found, but late that same night four rough roustabouts brought the body of a naked man to the crematorium. His body was soft and white, his hands long fingered and fine. He bore a wound near his heart where he'd been stabbed through by a blade. The soot-faced

firemen stacked him on the waiting pile of bodies and sent him into the furnace, after which they returned to their game of dice. Prince Arent was the next day crowned king and the people both mourned and rejoiced. If the new king and his queen mother appeared worn and drawn, it was deemed only fitting.

Four days after the coronation Zalia woke to find Arent at her bedside. He slumped in a chair, rumped and unshaven, red-rimmed eyes fixed upon her face. When he saw her looking at him, he sat forward, bracing his forearms on his knees. Zalia could not find any strength to speak. Her eyes flickered to his shoulder where the arrow had entered. He wore no bandage. But then it had been weeks since the attack. Arent caught his breath. His voice was gravelly when he spoke.

“Father is dead. He tried to murder mother and me.” He paused, his jaw working, and then he looked at her. “But you know that. Somehow it was you— What are you?”

Zalia looked away, closing her eyes against the ache in her throat. Arent made a sound and gently tugged her chin around. When she spoke her voice was little more than a breath of wind and he had to lean down to hear her.

“You know . . . or you wouldn’t be here.”

“Yes, I know what it is you do here, what you were to my father.” His lips twisted and his hands clenched. “But not the other. How?”

Zalia touched a trembling finger to the stones on the circlet and they flared like tiny stars and then faded when her hand fell away. The power rose with her touch and then died. Arent exclaimed and started back.

“You’re a witch!”

Zalia's head shook almost imperceptibly. Then stomach churning, "maybe."

Silence lay like a heavy snow over the room and Zalia felt her mind wandering, felt herself slipping away into the sea of dreams. She became aware of a weight on her shoulder and across her waist. And insistent sound prodded her to wakefulness and her throat felt as though it were on fire. With great effort she wrenched herself from the soothing oblivion of her dreamworld. She heard her name.

"Zalia! Come back to me. Come back!"

Zalia opened her eyes though she could hardly keep them so. Arent's face was but inches from hers and she could feel his ragged breath on her lips. She blinked and realized that his face was lit from the glow of the stones.

"I love you Zalia. I've been looking for you for weeks. When I found out about you and father— I thought I hated you but I can't. Please, please don't leave me." He said the words over and over and at last they began to register on Zalia's dull mind. Her head shifted back and forth, denying him. But he took her face between his palms and held her still.

Zalia looked into his eyes, looking for the suspicion and betrayal that must be there, for it was in her dream, and her dream had been true. She sought avidly for the expression of repulsion to match the one she'd dreamed of so many weeks ago. But the radiance of the stones was tricking her for all she could see was a glowing warmth mixed with frightened desperation. She brushed her tongue over her cracked lips. Could he really forgive? He brushed the lank strands of her hair from her forehead and she saw that his fingers shook. It said all she needed to know. She touched her fingers to his and he clasped her hand and raised it to his cheek.

Merwin of Romail's bones turned to honey colored stones and shattered when they fell into the sea. They believe that the porcupine oak holds the darkness of her spirit within its ancient embrace. But there are those that wonder if her bones still possess some of the magic, free now from the taint of her black soul. But only the spirits will ever be certain. Because Merwin of Romail's bones fell into the sea and the tides never relinquish the gifts of the dead.