



THE QUEEN, THE FISHERMEN AND THEIR TREASURE

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On a lake in a land some once called Mesopotamia, in a time known (somewhat vaguely) as pre-history, a small fishing boat stopped on the surface of the clear, still waters. The day was quiet, the sky a dazzling blue blemished only by scattered flecks of high white cloud.

The fishermen were happy with their catch. It was bigger and better than they had known for many moons. They would soon return to the shore, but first there were three final nets to retrieve.

The first net was full, bulging with twisting, writhing fish, their scales creating rainbows in the bleached sunshine. The second net was poor, a catch of near-spratlings which they returned to the water. But the third net was heavy and took all of their combined strength to pull on board. At first it looked empty, but it was too heavy for that. When they looked closer they saw there was a solitary object in the base of the net and nothing else.

“It’s a useless stone,” said one fisherman with disgust.

“No no no, it’s an anchor,” muttered another. “Throw it back in the water.”

“Wait,” said a third. “It shines so brightly. Let me see.”

He took the object from the net and it was not a stone, nor was it an anchor. It was a casket. When he rubbed it, a brass colour shimmered through the dirt as bright as the full moon. And then he felt the casket move in his hands, as if it were alive. Startled, he put his ear against it. Music filled his head, pure and sweet, a thousand haunting voices in rich complex harmony. His eyes shone and his body responded to the sound, weaving from side to side and unable to resist its call.

The other fishermen watched with amazement, convinced that he had gone quite mad in the heat of the sun. But then they demanded to take and hold the vessel themselves. And as they held it, each in turn was affected in exactly the same way, their eyes shone and their bodies moved.

However, one of the fishermen waved it away and refused to touch it. Instead he pointed at it with fear and anger and not with curiosity and love.

“This is evil. It’s not natural,” he warned. “We should cast it away. Such a thing as this was not meant to be found. It was put into these waters and must stay in these waters.”

The others laughed at his superstition and turned the boat towards the shore. When they landed and showed their prize a large celebration party gathered on the beach. A feast of a hundred fish was cooked. Drink was quaffed and food was consumed in huge quantities and music and dancing spilled across the sands. The brass casket was passed from hand to hand, held against ear after ear like some magical sea shell.

An old man took the casket. He too heard the music and moved as the others had moved. But then he heard more. He heard a voice — a young, innocent, childlike voice. And it said “Open me. Please release me. And then I shall teach you three wise things.” And the old man seized the top of the vessel and pulled at it with all his strength, but the top was sealed fast and his aged muscles trembled and shook, weakened by his attempt.

“Read the words,” suggested the voice.

“What words?” asked the old man irritably, regretting that he had eaten so much of the very hot chilli sauce and drunk so much of the rather sickly mead.

“The words around the top of the vessel. The words will break the seal and release me.”

The voice sang, pure and sweet, and the old man forgot his irritation and hurried to read the words. His mind didn’t understand their meaning but as he spoke the seal burned and flamed, bright as a distress flare.

At that moment the old man dropped the casket in his excitement.

“Oh damn!” he said rudely.

Before he could pick it up again, a hand reached from the crowd and took it from his grasp.

“Well, well, well, what have we here?” the owner of the hand asked.

The crowd suddenly became very quiet and the music stuttered and stopped. For the man who had spoken was none other than the Grand Vizier, the Queen’s most important court official. No-one dared to annoy the Grand Vizier (even though he wore a silly big hat) because

he was in charge of collecting taxes and when he was in a bad mood he always demanded twice as much.

“Er, it’s nothing. Just some old bit of junk,” the old man said. “It belongs to him.” And he pointed wildly at one of the fishermen.

“Is that true?” the Grand Vizier asked, stepping towards the fisherman and staring at him with his intense, threatening eyes.

“Who? Me?” the fisherman replied, pointing at himself with an expression of innocent surprise. “Oh no, it’s definitely not mine. I’m a humble fisherman. What would I want with some old casket?”

“Well, how very mysterious. So who does this object belong to?” the Grand Vizier demanded, looking with suspicion at the crowd.

Everyone attempted to look as innocent as they could and pretended never to have seen each other before, despite the fact that they had been partying together for the last four hours. Within a few minutes the crowd had quietly dispersed and the Grand Vizier found himself left alone, apart from a stray goat which nibbled slowly at the hem of his tunic.

“Get away with you!” he shouted, shooing the goat away. But the goat, who did not have to pay any taxes, took no notice of him and the Grand Vizier stormed away in a bad temper, taking the brass casket with him.

His bad mood did not last long because he was very pleased with himself. The Queen had seen the fishermen’s party from her chambers in the Palace and being a very nosy Queen with a pair of powerful binoculars, she had demanded that the Grand Vizier find out what was happening. Although he did not know anything about the casket, he was certain that the Queen would reward him for his excellent work in acquiring it from the villagers.

The Queen was waiting when he entered the Palace and waved for him to come up to the ballroom. He hurried up the marble staircase and entered the room with a great theatrical flourish, intending to impress the Queen, but instead she snatched the casket from him and impatiently tried to pull off its lid.

“What is it?” she asked. “What have you brought me? I hope it’s chocolates, those nice melty ones I like with the raspberry centres.”

“Actually,” said the Grand Vizier uneasily. “It isn’t chocolates. I’m not sure what it is, but it must be very important.”

“Nonsense,” said the Queen. “There’s only one important thing around here and that is me. Me! Oh damn!” she exclaimed, which was not a very royal sort of thing to say at all but

then the Queen was not a very royal sort of Queen. “I can’t get the top off this wretched thing, why don’t you help me?”

The Grand Vizier was about to take the casket from her when the Queen suddenly let out a loud exclamation.

“Ooooooh!” And she started to move to the music she heard, just as the fishermen and the villagers had moved.

The Grand Vizier was very disturbed by the Queen’s behaviour, concerned that she might be turning as mad as her father had been before her. The old king had become completely cuckoo in the last days of his reign, increasingly convinced that he was a hedgehog. Each evening he would head off into the forest for a late night snack of ants. Until one night he didn’t return and was never seen again.

The Queen was swaying with the casket in her hands, a wide child-like smile on her face as she listened to the beautiful sounds. And then she too heard the voice:

“Open me. Please release me. And then I shall teach you three wise things,” the young voice said.

The Queen grabbed at the top of the vessel and twisted and turned it, but it stayed stubbornly shut.

“Don’t just stand there, you grand mop-head!” the Queen shouted irritably at the Grand Vizier. “Give me a hand with this, will you?”

But even with the Grand Vizier’s assistance, the top of the casket refused to move.

“Read the words,” instructed the voice.

“What words?” asked the Queen irritably, still annoyed that it was not a box of chocolates (her favourite ones with the raspberry centres).

“The words around the top of the vessel. The words will break the seal and release me.”

And the voice sang such an enchanting song that the Queen and the Grand Vizier redoubled their efforts. Together they recited the strange words written around the top of the casket and as the words entered the air the seal burned and flamed, bright as the striking of a thousand matches.

There was a loud crack, a sound as if the earth itself had been torn open. The vessel shook and the Queen and the Grand Vizier fell silent, shocked as a deep purple vapour poured from the neck of the vessel and grew in size, snaking upwards and into a twisting tornado that blocked out the light and turned the ballroom as dark as the darkest winter’s evening.

There was a flash, brighter than lightning, and suddenly there before them was a small golden bird, its feathers glittering with more colours than exist in a rainbow. Sunlight, as bright

as the brightest midday sun, burst into the room although it was still deepest night outside. The bird picked fussily at its plumage with its large silver beak and sang another of its wonderful songs and even the Queen smiled in a way she had not smiled for years.

Some of the fishermen who had quietly followed the Grand Vizier into the palace and stood watching through a crack in the ballroom door now stepped into the room and revealed themselves, so captivated were they by the sight they saw.

“That bird is mine,” one of the fishermen said, surprised to hear himself saying such bold words in front of the Queen and her Grand Vizier.

“Nonsense,” interrupted a second fisherman. “It’s mine.”

The fishermen started to squabble amongst themselves like young children until the Queen stamped her foot impatiently.

“Oh do be quiet you stupid, stupid men!” she demanded. “The bird is mine of course. I am the Queen!”

The bird stopped singing and looked at them all with its head on one side.

“Oh? I don't think so,” it said.

The room fell silent because it was the first time that anyone had heard the bird speak. In fact, it was the first time that they had heard *any* bird speak, particularly to a Queen.

“You see,” the bird continued. “You have released me and now I can fly away free. I belong to no-one.”

“What? What?” shouted the Queen angrily, stamping her foot, which had become something of a bad habit. “Just like that? You fly away? How ungrateful can you get!”

“But I will hold true to my promise first. I shall tell you three wise things in return for my freedom,” the bird said, looking a little hurt by the Queen’s accusation.

“Oh, big deal!” the Queen replied sarcastically.

“Wait,” the Grand Vizier said, because although he collected taxes and had not brought the Queen any chocolates, he was still the wisest man in the Queendom. Which perhaps reveals more about the sorry state of the once great Queendom than anything else. “Let us hear these three wise things.”

The Queen glared at him angrily, but the bird sang and fluttered its feathers.

“First,” the bird said. “Never regret what you do. Second, never believe the impossible. Third, never be too ambitious.”

There was silence.

“What! What! Is that it? Pathetic!” scowled the Queen. “I’ve read wiser things than that in the silly jokes inside party crackers!”

The bird nodded and flew up onto the balcony around the edge of the room. “Yes. But you should never have set me free. You see my feathers are made of the purest gold and my beak holds the treasures of Solomon.”

“Seize the bird!” cried the Queen. “Ten sparkling diamonds for whoever brings me that bird! Dead or alive!”

The room erupted into a frenzy of wild activity, rather like the crazy New Year sales in the Grand Bazaar. The fishermen fought with each other in their desperation to secure the bird and even the Grand Vizier scaled the wall of the room and grabbed wildly at the air. Hearing all the commotion, more villagers started to arrive to join in the attempted capture of the bird while it flew increasingly desperately from one end of the ballroom to the other. The fishermen became more and more frustrated. But whoever came closest to the bird and on the point of grabbing it from its latest place of refuge in the room would suddenly fall to the ground and break their legs. It was not long before the floor of the room had become a strange carpet of moaning injured villagers.

“Come on! Come on! You can do it!” the Queen shouted, for she was accustomed to having her own way.

The Grand Vizier was once again closing in on the bird. For one moment he even felt its feathers brush his hand and the breeze from its flapping wings whisper across his cheek. And then he fell. From a great height. But he was lucky for his fall was broken by the Queen who had been standing right below him shouting words of encouragement and whose fondness for chocolates (the ones with the raspberry centres) had turned her into a wonderfully plump cushion.

The Grand Vizier’s descent, however, was not so lucky for the Queen.

“The Queen is dead! The Queen is dead!” shouted one of the fishermen.

And everyone in the room fell silent and looked and saw that it was true. The Grand Vizier, who had survived his fall with only a slightly bruised big toe, had landed far too heavily on the Queen. Everyone was shocked. Although they had not liked the Queen, she was still *their* Queen and a Grand Vizier falling from a great height onto one’s head is really not how anyone would choose to go.

“It’s the bird’s fault!” shouted the Grand Vizier, who knew he was in big big trouble for landing on the Queen.

The bird looked very insulted. “Not at all,” it said. “If you had taken my advice none of this would have happened. I told you never to regret what you do, but you regretted releasing me. Second, I said never believe the impossible, but you believed that my feathers are made

out of finest spun gold and that my beak is full of the treasures of Solomon. How silly can you be? Third, I said never be too ambitious, but you tried to be like a bird and to climb too high to grab me.”

And with that the bird turned and flew through a small gap in one of the palace windows and was never seen again, although some villagers claim to have occasionally encountered just such a golden bird riding on the back of a hedgehog — a hedgehog who wears the crown of a king.