

THE WISHING WELL

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Seaworth was small, even for the standards set by other hamlets. It had a butcher, one inn, a guard house, the town hall from which the mayor made his decrees, and enough farmers that nobody went hungry. By being situated in close proximity to the coast it also had access to a constant supply of fresh fish. However, Seaworth was not famous for the fish, but rather, the strange sight located about half a day's walk outside the town.

His father being ill, it was just Johan manning the butcher's on a relatively quiet day. Due to the lack of business he found himself peering out the window, drifting into daydreams. Through the grimy glass panes, Johan could just make out the tops of the hills where Seaworth's unique sight lay. He remembered in his earlier years when, along with a few other kids, he had visited it. They had all been so excited to see it that none of them had actually expected to find it so terrifying, leading them to leave as quickly as they arrived.

He was stirred from his thoughts by the shrill ring of the front door's chime and he turned to address his customer. He was mildly surprised when he saw Alice walking through the door. Having never actually seen anyone in her family ever buying produce, Johan assumed they always got other people to do it for them.

"Good afternoon Alice. What can I get you?"

"I'm not here to buy any of your wares Johan."

Surprise...

"But rather, I have something that I need your help with."

Johan raised his eyebrow. He was well aware how Alice and her posse viewed him. After often seeing them drinking at the inn, he tried a few times to join in their revelry but after the third attempt, it was very clear they wanted nothing to do with him. He wasn't sure if they looked down on him. It's not like he cared anyway. Already reluctant, Johan decided to hear her out; without any real high hopes.

"Well what is it?"

"I have figured out the answer to the wishing well."

No one actually knew who built the wishing well. An elderly traveller had wandered through Seaworth, an event not too unusual, but made a point of alerting everybody to the well that had seemingly manifested overnight in a forest glade on a nearby hill. Its random appearance would have sparked a couple conversations but it was when the man explained the well's properties that people started visiting it. Upon arriving at the well, one would be offered a riddle. If answered successfully, you were rewarded with riches beyond your wildest dreams but you had only one chance to answer. Or so the old man said.

It was this spectacle that caused Seaworth to receive an influx of travellers, aiming to make their way to the well and receive unimaginable riches. The only consequence was the punishment that accompanied an incorrect answer to the riddle. It varied from person to person

but the effects were always permanent. You might have a cold for the rest of your life, you could go bald. Or you might never walk again.

When the range of punishments became apparent, it was widely viewed as having a risk that far outweighed the rewards and the amount of people visiting the well dwindled until only the extremely desperate were making the journey. Anyone who lived in Seaworth would see these people pass through looking for the well. They received their warnings but when their determination became apparent, they were given their directions and headed straight for the well. The following day they would be seen creeping back into town, always worse off than when they arrived. Sometimes they never came back at all.

Johan examined Alice and her oozing confidence as she stood straight, making an effort not to touch any of the grubby surfaces around the shop. It was obvious she thought she was right, but that was nothing new.

“You’ve gone up to the well yourself then have you?” Johan asked half-jokingly.

“Of course not. I’d have already left town if that were the case.”

“So then you don’t know if you have the right answer to the riddle.”

Alice scowled as an irritated look crossed her face.

“No, I haven’t tested my solution yet, but I’ve practically got it. You see unlike everyone else in this town I am not content to spend my entire life here doing absolutely nothing, so a while ago I set about changing that. I’ve been questioning everybody who has come back from the well, listening to their experiences and noting down every single answer. Based off of my report, I have shortlisted a select number of answers that have an extremely high likelihood of being correct.”

“Ah, I see.” John answered causing Alice’s face to perk up slightly. “You still don’t have the right answer then.”

She shot him a nasty glare and leaned over the counter into his face.

“Look Johan, you and I both know I’m the smartest person in Seaworth, and probably the county. If anyone is going to get it, it’s going to be me.” She seemed to remember herself and moved back from the counter while straightening her posture.

“It’s only a minimal risk really. What? A sore foot for the chance of more wealth than you’ll ever possess in your entire life? I can understand though if you don’t want to go, not everyone is brave enough.” Johan treated her to a cold stare. “But you should know that if you don’t, someone else will, I only need one more person.” She turned her back on him and was making her way out.

“If you do decide to come, you can meet me at the signpost around midday tomorrow.” Alice stopped just before opening the door and looked around the small single room butcher shop, making no attempt to hide her disdain.

“The question you should really be asking yourself is can you afford not to?”

Johan had a long, contemplative night. Having still not come to a solid conclusion by the morning, he decided he would at least travel with them to the well, leaving plenty of time to make up his mind along the way. If he really decided he didn’t want to do it, they couldn’t force him.

The signpost Alice had been referring to was one that stood at the crossroads a short walk outside of town. Its frail wood pointed to the turn for Seaworth, continue straight on for Albrett,

and a fresher wooden pallet leaned against its pole, stating in painted letters: *wishing well past hill*.

He had expected that Alice would have brought Horatio and Judd with her but it was when he heard Horatio's shrill pitch - long before he actually caught up with the group - that he immediately regretted his decision to come.

They saw him coming and Johan could just make out a discreet elbow from Alice, causing Horatio's speech to drop into a murmur. By the time he was right up to them, the murmur had died completely but was shortly replaced by Horatio's regular tone.

"It's about time Johan. We've been waiting out here, I don't know how long." His blond quiff slightly out of place, Horatio took great care to reposition it before adding with a smirk, "We almost left without you."

"Regardless..." A cross glance shot from Alice's eyes. "You're here now, so we can set off."

And so they did. The day was cool and as they were in no particular rush, they moved with leisure. The four of them reached the large forest surrounding the well, a safe area but for the wolves that prowled at night. If they had been in any way quiet, the group would likely have noticed the odd lack of birdsong and other sounds of life that accompanied most forestry. Instead, their entire walk was filled with Horatio's incessant chatter.

"So what are you going to do with your riches Alice? Hmmm?"

"I believe that is an entirely private matter that only I should be concerned with."

Horatio's attention quickly bounced to Judd.

"Well, what about you Judd?" He said this in such a mock-slow accent that it seemed as if Judd's name had gained another syllable.

"Hmmm..." The sizeable fellow grumbled for a couple of seconds to himself before answering.

"I don-"

"You don't know." Horatio opened his mouth and addressed to group with exaggerated surprise. "Who could have *possibly* guessed?"

Johan didn't see the wisdom in openly insulting who was most likely the strongest individual among the town guards but Horatio had been doing it without receiving any blows for the entire journey so far. Instead, Judd just released a groucher grumble and when Horatio realised that conversation had ended, he sprung back to Alice, acting as though theirs had suffered no interruption.

"You Prenderghasts are always so private, aren't you though? No one's got a clue what actually goes on inside the walls of that big house. Or how in the world your mother became the mayor's *personal advisor*." He punctuated the occupation with a variety of lewd gestures.

"Could it be that we are just vastly more intelligent than the rest of the town?" Alice retorted in her own mocking tone. "It certainly seems extremely likely to me."

"Smarter than I? Perhaps... But I know you cannot sing my songs so well!" As he ended the sentence, he took a deep breath and belted out a single, extended note.

"Well they aren't really your songs, are they Ray? I mean, you certainly didn't write them." Horatio's melody was cut short in an instant as his lips pressed into a tight line. Alice turned away from him with a knowing smirk but stopped shortly after.

"There it is."

Just ahead of the group, the rows of trees were starting to become less frequent until a single stone monument stood in an empty clearing. It remained unchanged from when he had seen it as a child, not even moss or ivy had braved itself to crawl up the stony feature. Johan found the fear attached to the memory beginning to slowly form a knot in his stomach.

The well itself was no different than one found anywhere else. It was made of stone, with a circumference of about two metres. Clear water rested within arm's reach of its top but no one knew how deep it went. Just behind it stood a statue constructed of the same stone. The woman depicted was a complete mystery to everyone but her kind smile and formal habit led to the popular theory that she was an age-old saint of some long-forgotten religious order.

"Right then." Alice turned to the group. "We all know what we should say so I see no reason to drag this out any longer than we had to. Judd, I believe we agreed that you would go first." The towering man gave a slow nod before lumbering up to the well.

Johan was just about to inform everyone that he didn't actually know what he was supposed to say but found his voice cut short by another.

What is the single most important thing in this world?

The nonchalant tone of the mysterious voice was offset by its ominous echo that travelled around the silent glade. It was only a voice yet the air of anxiety and unease Johan had felt when he first heard it was ever-present. He looked to Alice and Horatio, both of whom's eyes were glued to the spectacle, and then to Judd. His brow was furrowed low between his eyes and he was very slowly mouthing a sentence. The silence of anticipation was broken by the hesitant question.

"Alice, what am I supposed to say again?"

This caused both roaring laughter in Horatio, and a frustrated sigh from Alice who swiftly picked a small piece of parchment from her pocket and shoved it into Judd's hand. He unfurled it, peered very close, and then in an unsure voice read.

"Ultimate strength, so... you can protect those who need it the most."

They waited with bated breath, the seconds seeming to drag on until finally they were given an answer.

Wrong.

There was a tense pause as the group stood still, waiting for the punishment to fall. Johan's gaze was locked on Judd when he noticed him starting to wobble and falter. In response, Alice strode up to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder, turning him to face her as she did so.

"Judd, how do-" Her voice hitched for but a moment. "How do you feel?"

He mumbled a hoarse whisper but despite being only a few paces away, Johan could not make it out. Horatio breathed an exaggerated sigh of frustration and trotted up beside them.

"How much longer are you going to keep us waiting, hmm?"

When he reached Judd, Horatio gasped before turning to share a look of astonishment with both Alice as well as Johan who was now hurrying to join them. Upon seeing Judd clearly, it was Johan's turn to stare.

The strongest and hardest member of the town guard had disappeared and been replaced by some sickly doppelgänger. If he saw this man in the street, he would have assumed he was a poor vagrant with a terrible illness. If he saw him asleep, he would have presumed him a corpse. Where once a full, flushed face had stared back at him, Johan was now looking at a ghoul, with sunken eyes, pale complexion and skin that hung so tight it made his cheekbones look painfully

pronounced. Judd had also seemed to half in stature, being at least several feet smaller than before with clothes that, while once fitted snug, now hung loose over his frail frame.

"I...feel...dizzy..." Judd started to mutter, barely audible even to the three standing over him. Alice caught his drooping shoulders and straightened him up.

"Judd, tell me exactly what happened, everything you felt, what kind-" She was cut short as his unconscious form collapsed forward and Alice was forced to catch Judd. Both Horatio and Johan moved to help, aiming to lay him down in the cover of a nearby tree. It was during this time that the transformation was truly proved to Johan, as the weight of Judd's body seemed almost lighter than a child. After laying him down, Alice examined Judd closely, pulling up his sleeves to reveal twiggy arms wrapped in bulging veins, and laying her head against his chest.

"Well he's only unconscious. His heart is beating quite rapidly and his breathing is very uneven. I honestly don't know what to think but I'm inclined to say that it's some kind of shock, seeing as his body just underwent a drastic change."

Horatio squatted down beside Judd and gave him a few generous pokes.

"Drastic, indeed." He let out a small chuckle. "Judd is not going to be happy when he wakes up, not at all." Another smirk. "Neither will his dad." He whirled around to Alice. "How are you going to explain that one?"

Alice, with complete assuredness and neutrality replied. "Well we'll each be walking home with unfathomable riches, so somehow I think people are going to care more about that than they will about Judd."

Johan had always viewed the trio as being a close-knit group but the utter lack of sympathy Alice showed towards Judd's condition was nothing less than a total shock.

It was this such revelation that caused Johan to ask.

"So you don't have the right answer then?"

Alice tutted and gave a dismissive shake of her head.

"Like I said, I have a shortlist of answers, with one of them being the solution. I just have to figure out what the statue's answer is by using a few final questions. I gave Judd the weakest question, for obvious reasons." Her and Horatio shared a knowing glance. "And now I have more information to work with."

The more Alice told Johan, the clearer the situation became. She needed test individuals. Alice would get as many fools as she could gather to ask her questions for her until she found the correct solution.

"Well I've definitely made up my mind now," Johan exclaimed, drawing a quizzical look from Alice. "I'm not giving that thing," he jabbed a finger at the well, "any answer of yours, Alice."

They stood staring at each other for a long time, both waiting for the other to react. Alice broke the silence with a shrug.

"No riches for you then."

This was followed by a smug grin and subsequent tittering from Horatio.

"So much drama, my goodness. How about we get this moving again?"

With more swagger than Johan thought possible, Horatio waltzed up to the statue where, once again, it asked.

What is the single most important thing in this world?

After a dramatic cough to clear his throat and with so much flourish he almost broke out into song, Horatio recited.

“To preserve the tales of heroes so their legacies may never diminish, and spread their stories to others, inspiring a new age of valiant souls in their stead.”

Horatio waited. The statue hadn't answered incorrect, but in fact it hadn't answered at all. Standing for a while, beginning to feel more awkward as time passed, Horatio looked back at Alice and Johan. The two were regarding him with worry. He shrugged his shoulders, seeing no cause for concern but frowned when they started mouthing at him. He asked them why they were acting so peculiar. Or at least, he tried to. Horatio found that no words were coming out of his mouth either. He spoke again and again but was making no sound.

It was then the horrid realisation struck.

In order to be sure, Horatio brought a trembling hand to his ear and snapped his fingers.

No sound.

He had gone deaf.

As a look of horror crawled across his face, Alice and Johan realised the punishment Horatio had received.

“So he is deaf then,” muttered Alice to Johan but never facing him; her eyes too transfixed by Horatio.

“It seems he cannot speak either.”

Horatio watched their mouths flap silently, a cold rage bubbling inside him. He had found the idea of exploiting Judd so hilarious that he never even thought for a second that Alice would try the same with him. Fists shaking, he marched towards Alice. Despite his lack of vocabulary, both Johan and Alice had no trouble interpreting his next words as he mouthed them slow and focused.

You bitch.

Alice was midway through some attempt at an excuse but Horatio cut her short as both his hands clasped around her throat.

Her eyes widened in shock and terror. She flung a clawed hand towards his face but Horatio was already using his height advantage to force her down to the ground. She then attempted to pry his hands loose, but the more they dug into the flesh of her neck, the more vice-like his grip became.

She looked to Johan, who up until this point had stood unmoving, the sudden and visceral action intimidating him too much. Her gaze locked with his and even as her face turned hideously swollen and a dangerous red, her look managed to convey exactly what she wanted to say and how she would have said it.

Help me you useless idiot.

Horatio was so consumed by his rage, Johan reckoned he didn't even realise he still stood beside them. He watched the scene unfold before him, conscious of the precious seconds it cost Alice.

But he didn't help her. He slowly backed away - much to her incredulousness - and moved to pick up Judd. Horatio didn't seem to notice or care.

The self-assured part of Johan's mind told him it was for good reasons. If he saved Alice, she would only rope in more fools, over and over, punishment after punishment until she got her answer. He was saving a lot of people sorrow and hardship at her hands. But he knew it

wasn't true. His honest-self thought this was exactly the kind of thing Alice had coming to her. Thinking back, he was surprised something like this didn't happen sooner. Despite acting haughtily towards most everyone in town, Alice never seemed bothered to apologise. She probably thought her scorn immune to any repercussions of the common folk.

Yet here she lay, having the life wrenched out of her in the middle of the forest by the village bard.

Johan hefted Judd's semiconscious form onto his shoulder and started what would be a long trek back to Seaworth. If he was lucky, someone in town might have a way to help Judd, or at least ease his pain. Before he lost sight of it completely, he threw a glance towards the well for the sake of morbid curiosity.

Horatio was still choking Alice but Johan was sure she must be dead.