

The King's Serpent

The King's Serpent lay coiled at the base of the Tree of Life, awake and watching Dezeck as he approached. Massive cords of muscle shifted and turned beneath the scaly, iridescent blue skin as the snake unspooled and slithered. The King's Serpent had molten gold eyes beneath thorny brows, like a crown denoting the serpent itself royalty. Pink peaches swayed in the tree above the snake, always at risk of falling if the wind ever blustered too much. The sentinel serpent slithered around the roots, lacing itself within the very core of the trees.

"One peach," his beloved Jerria had said. "Get me one peach from the Tree of Life and I will be forever yours."

It was risky. Not breaking into the royal gardens, not sneaking passed the battalions of guards. They didn't bother guarding the Tree of Life, not with the beast that lay waiting for any would-be thief. Dezeck could see the bones and skulls of thieves who had only succeeded in getting themselves swallowed and digested. It was risky, but she had to be worth it. He'd hoped to catch the snake while it slept, but the creature's eyelids were transparent.

Dezeck walked into the garden, careful to remain behind the golden chain that marked the snake's perimeter. From what he heard, as long as he stayed outside that line, the serpent would not attack. The moment he stepped into the line of gold, he made himself a target. The serpent eyed him as he walked around, lazy, but alert. The snake was three times as long as Dezeck was tall. The reptile was probably trying to decide whether he'd be worth eating or saving for later. Waiting for the snake to start another lap around the tree, Dezeck looked up and tried to find a peach that looked ready to fall. No ground peaches would do, only the finest for his beloved.

“Why do you hesitate?” A voice asked, smooth in his ears. He turned and saw a woman, older than Dezeck’s mother. She had long braids of dark hair streaked with lines of silver. The wrinkles around her eyes and mouth fit her easy smile as the woman sat on the stone bench that faced the tree. Queen Novos was regal without the silver circlet on her brow.

“I’m...planning, your majesty,” Dezeck said, bowing when he met her eyes. “Why haven’t you raised the alarms?”

“I’m more curious than anything,” Queen Novos said, “but come and sit with me for a moment. I was out for an evening walk when I noticed your quandary. We can puzzle this out together.”

Dezeck looked back to the tree and then at the queen. Of the two, the queen’s offer was certainly more inviting of the two. Dezeck sat next to the queen, staying on the far opposite side of the bench. Queen Novos looked at the serpent, admiringly. The snake unspooled a little and its head raised. Stars glittered on the snake's blue scales and turned the reptilian skin into a living constellation. The long, red tongue flicked and tasted the air.

“For all the terror she causes,” the queen began, wistfully, “she does have a beautiful look in the moonlight.”

“She?” Dezeck asked, looking at the serpent.

“Indeed, she...it’s always about a woman when it comes to these things, isn’t it? You’ve been watching her for some time. I take it you aren’t interested in snakes? Who are you taking the peach for?”

“As you said: a woman...Jerria. She said if I brought her one of the peaches from the Tree of Life, she would be mine for always.”

Queen Novos smirked a little and shook her head. “I used to tell suitors the same thing, but none of them were foolish enough to try such a thing. Take it from an old woman...if she sends you on a death quest? She won’t be yours forever.”

“She would never—“

“Do you know what the peaches from the Tree of Life do?”

Dezeck furrowed his brow and shrugged. “I’ve heard rumors. They can turn people into winged humans or...cure any illness...”

“But you don’t know? I do. The fruit from this tree makes the eater forget.”

“Forget what?”

“Anything...everything. Your name, if you aren’t careful with it. Your Jerria was probably going to offer to split it with you and then not eat her half. We discovered the effects by accident when ancient nobility kept eating it. The first power struggle began when King Waldrus forgot where he lived and wandered off. His brother took the throne and there was near civil war. After we realized the fruit's property, it became a punishment for boorish suitors. If they wouldn't leave the family alone, they would give him wine made from the peaches. It’s a cruel punishment that the kingdom disbanded decades ago. We used to have men watch it before we found the King's Serpent to watch it.”

Dezeck looked up at the fruit tree, admiring the ripened peaches. Inevitably, his gaze drifted down to the coiled serpent waiting at the bottom of the tree. “Why keep the tree at all? If it’s so dangerous why not cut it down and get rid of the fruit in the first place? Why go through the trouble of a dangerous snake?”

“Ah, the true irony. The tree itself is integral to the health of the kingdom’s fields. For a while, we used to pull the fruit off the tree and destroy it, but the farms yielded no fruit that spring. We attempted to cut it down. You can see the first few cuts we made at the base, right there, see? The woodsman was part of the way through the trunk when the farmers came. Their crops had started dying as if by some sort of plague, wilting and shriveling up faster than they grew. As much as we would like to destroy it, we cannot or it would destroy everything we hold dear. The Tree of Life, it seems, reaches further than the length of its roots. The King’s Serpent was the most logical solution. She doesn’t want to eat the fruit or use it against others. She only desires to stop people from approaching. She treats the fruit like her eggs and viciously guards them.”

The King’s Serpent flicked out a long, red tongue that looked like a streak of blood in the dim light of the garden. Dezeck sighed and put his chin in his hands. “I guess there’s no winning then. Run in and get eaten or succeed and forget everything.”

“You think that ridding yourself of a girl who tried to steal your memories is a loss? Forgive me if I misunderstand, but how is that a loss?”

“She’s the only girl who...she’s perfect.”

“Perfect?” Queen Novos asked. “It sounds to me like she wasn’t as perfect as you thought. Believe it or not, I was young once and I know the thralls of romance and what it can do to a person. Come now, what’s so special about this girl?”

“She’s...beautiful and rich! If I could win her heart, I’d be able to survive in this world. I’m a butcher’s son and she deemed me worthy enough for her attentions. Any man would be lucky to have her.”

“Well, that would be a very lucky man,” the queen considered, “and her heart? What is she like beyond the riches and beauty?”

Dezeck shrugged. Jerria wouldn't tell him simple facts and dodged Dezeck's rare questions. Queen Novos sighed and looked at the snake.

“When I was a young girl,” the queen began, “I always dreamed of marrying a heroic knight. I wanted warriors who broke through battle lines with swords on horseback as one reads about in the epics. But when I was of marrying age, I met many knights. Do you know what I found? I hadn't fallen in love with knights. The knights I all met were arrogant and pig-headed. They fought for glory and cared little for the right things, as long as it made for a magnificent story. And then I met a man who was a young prince. He would argue with his father for hours about the justice of the people: the need for war and the outcomes of actions. He wanted not for those within court but for generations down the line.”

“Sounds like a good man.”

“He is. King Terrom sits in the seat his father held today. My husband, you see, wasn't an idea. He had passion and needs...a desire to do good in the world.”

Dezeck looked up, startled. He had forgotten he was speaking with royalty. The queen laughed and shook her head. “Don't be so shocked. I was young enough to marry for love once. And so are you. Don't marry for money or beauty. Money and beauty fade with the ugliness of the soul. There are many others you could do well with.

“I don't know how I can move on without her. She's all I've wanted for so long.”

Queen Novos nodded and scratched her chin with a finger. Coming to a decision, she rose to her feet and took a few steps forward, entering the circle of the King's Serpent. The snake reared

and bared her green-tinged fangs, venom dripping to the ground. Queen Novos bowed, spreading her arms out wide and bending at the waist. The King's Serpent closed her mouth and bowed back, the snubbed nose touching the green earth. After a moment, both snake and queen straightened. The King's Serpent retreated into the dark curls of the roots of the tree as Queen Novos approached and plucked a peach from the Tree of Life.

The queen bowed again, acknowledging the serpent before turning her back to it. Once she was out of the gold chain border, the serpent slithered out again, coiling around the trunk of the tree. Pulling a paring knife from her belt, Queen Novos worked to cut out a thin slice of the fruit.

"Forgetfulness has some benefits," the queen said, pulling out the cut. "Only a morsel. Think of her while you chew it and that should remove her from your mind. Then it's easier to move on. A broken heart is a tenuous thing...this won't get rid of the ache, but it will make the longing take less time."

"That little piece?" Dezeck said watching the queen toss the rest of the peach towards the roots of the tree. The peach rolled a little but came to a stop next to the coils of the gargantuan snake. The King's Serpent wrapped one of her coils around the fruit with a hiss.

"It should be plenty. The mind wanders when you think. As long as the peach is in your mouth, you will forget whatever comes to mind: love, family...even yourself."

Dezeck thought of Jerria and slipped the thin piece of fruit into his mouth. Chewing, he focused on her lips, her nose, her smooth cheeks, the way her red hair fell down one shoulder. Or was it brown hair? Blonde? Remembering the queen's advice, Dezeck chewed and focused on Jerria. As he swallowed the last bit of the peach, she faded away into nothing.

"How do you feel?"

“About the same,” Dezeck shrugged. “A little scared that I can’t remember...uh...”

“It’s best if you don’t think back on her. Why don’t you head back over the wall? I can keep the guards distracted long enough for you to slip away unnoticed. And Dezeck? Please consider your options before diving headfirst into the most foolish action you can think of again. I happened to be out for a walk, but you might not be so lucky again.”

Dezeck blushed a little, but nodded, sticking his hands deep into his pockets. He turned to leave but looked to the King’s Serpent one more time. The large snake’s muscles relaxed again and wove through the roots of the Tree of Life.