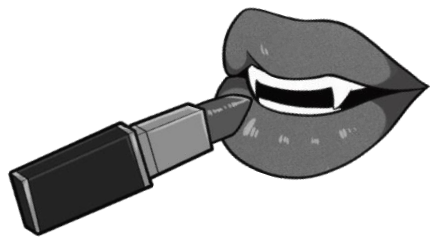




SYZYGY

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“The fisherman was ready to return home when he noticed something shining between the scales of the fish that had just given up struggling. He could hardly believe it when he saw that it was gold. Real gold.” The woman swung her hip, placing the hand towel over one shoulder before pouring him another shot of rum. “He and everyone he knew were familiar with the stories about the sea witch who protected her treasure so fiercely that anyone who dared to get close to her died, but no one believed it.”

“Why not?”

“Because no one had ever seen even a shadow of gold among the waters, dear. How could you believe that someone was protecting something that didn't exist?”

The sailor laughed out loud before downing his drink and winking at her to pour him some more.

“You're good at telling stories, sweetie.”

“It's not a story.”

“Okay, okay,” he sobbed for a moment. “It's a legend, a fable, whatever... It doesn't matter. Nothing will make me turn back.”

The woman looked up at him, her dark brown eyes shining in an amber tone so saturated that they soaked him up more than the contents of his glass.

Her hair, in the same tone, was loose around her back, and her heavy locks were made thick by the sea air and lacked cream, but they were still beautiful.

Flushed by the daily sun, her skin was a beautiful shade of almond, forming a monochromatic palette around her that complimented all her curves and way of speaking more than well.

For a bartender at the only bar still open at that time of night, she certainly belonged in the village.

"Good luck, then."

"I know I'm not the first to venture here after the winds bring the challenge, but I'll certainly be the last." He raised his glass. "And when I get rich, I'll make you mine."

It was her turn to laugh: a loud, feminine sound, almost magical.

He stared at her with admiration, his cloth pants suddenly bothering him.

"I am not a maiden to have to marry whoever I sleep with."

"Can I sleep in your bed tonight, then?"

Coming out from behind the counter, she dropped her weight on the wood and faced him. Her joviality gave way to a maturity that seemed like he had been thrown into the fire. He needed her even more than the gold he had come to seek.

"No sleeping."

"No sleeping." He repeated.

He kissed her passionately. While he fought against despair, he went up the stairs with her wrapped around his waist, his hands holding her ass, forcing her to feel his hardness that, minutes later, found itself slipping inside her. He lost himself in the smell, the taste, and the heat.

When he woke up, he noticed that the night was almost over — time to go.

Low tide awaited him; in the end, he would be the pirate who changed everything.

The smell of the sea air and the cold wind no longer bothered him. Knowing he was about to get his hands on big things filled him with adrenaline. His dry mouth from the hangover and anxiety made him lick his lips every now and then, and with each new meter he saw himself passing, his chest accelerated in anticipation.

His crew consisted of only four men, friends he made for life. Each one followed his post, getting the boat running while dealing with the excitement of the unknown.

The cave was close; he could see its hollow tip from afar. However, the sandbanks proved to be an obstacle to overcome. Due to its size, he might have to

get off the boat and swim over the sandbanks, but the sea was low so that he could walk easily.

The hull gave a slight jolt, and the wind seemed to change direction. Frowning, he saw that the path that, despite dawn, the sky and the sea had become an enormous shade of gray joined as if they were two halves of the same thing.

He strained his eyes, taking the binoculars, delighting in the reflection of something inside the cave. The few rays of sunlight that pierced the thick clouds illuminated the path to his consecration, and he could hardly wait to... Another jolt took his focus away, and his eyes finally turned to the sandbanks.

They were so close... Blinking, he seemed to see a human form a little ahead. He rubbed his eyes and looked through the lens again, seeing that, yes, it was a person.

And it wasn't just one. As his boat approached through the remaining stream of water, the bodies revealed themselves as the sun rose timidly just behind the cave. Faces of men, women, and children came to the surface, and he noticed that there wasn't a single grain of sand there; it was all dead people.

Fear chilled his blood for a moment, but he soon tried to convince himself that his mind was too adorned by the stories told in the bar last night.

That thought had barely begun to make sense when another jolt stopped his boat once and for all.

He heard a squeaking sound, like nails scraping on the deck, and when he turned back, he found no one. He called for his men, but none of them answered.

Was too afraid to move and try to find out anything. The wind blew even colder, as if the sea was furious because of him, even though he had done nothing to offend it.

He could hear his heart pounding inside his ears and tried in vain to ignore the trails of blood that lay in the corridor beside him. The cave was quiet, the motionless bodies taking over it, silent, calling him to try to get through them.

He had to get out of there but could only turn his body forward. What the binoculars on his face found, terrified him when he saw familiar faces on top of the pile.

Unsure it was illusion or magic, he swallowed hard when the sound of footsteps grew louder.

Heavy, skittish, not at all human.

He could feel the creature approaching, but he didn't dare to try to defend himself. His attention was focused on the dismembered head of his favorite men rolling towards the weak waterfall that marked the end of his path.

If he was going to die, he had to die with dignity. Suddenly, he grabbed the knife he was carrying inside his shirt and turned his back in a single, precise movement, ready to attack before whatever it was could do so.

The blade flashed as he held it, and just as he was about to bring his arm down with all his might, he stopped dead in his tracks, his breath escaping him in cowardice.

She was standing in front of him.

Naked, just as he had left her on the bed a few minutes ago.

Her tanned skin was stained with the thick red of his comrades' blood, and her eyes were dilated and gloomy — empty or just too full of something he couldn't name.

Opening his mouth, he tried vainly to find a phrase to verbalize his confusion, but she didn't even give him time.

Ripping his throat with her long nails, she watched as his vein burst, staining her face like paint on a canvas. He felt no pain, but he heard her loud and clear before realizing he had lost.

“I warned you.”

