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Maria

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Maria

Maiken Møller-Andersen

“Nice to meet you, my name is Maria.”

She had an accent that intrigued me.

I gently held *Maria's* pretty hands. They were so soft, free from any worries and fears. Her eyes reminded me of how the grass plains of my home used to be, and her hair was the fire that devoured all life.

“What are you doing out here? Where are your mother and father?” she softly questioned, allowing me to turn her hand a bit as I ran my fingers along her knuckles and palm. My smaller ones were significantly rougher, fingers calloused and worn. She brought out a knife, causing me to flinch, but cut through the rope around my waist. I had almost forgotten it was there, the worshippers of the two-headed basilisk barely throwing it over me before I fled. I had not realized how tight it was around me until now, the rope burning into my flesh like a hungry serpent. I worried the rope had been longer, that fragments of it had been left behind to tell my pursuers where I had gone, like a trail of crumbs.

“Are you hungry? I can feed you.”

Her voice was soft, coming out in whispers. I have to admit I was famished, my stomach feeling like it was caving in on itself. But I did not give much of a reaction, simply running my fingers over her knuckles, staining them in mud. Maria seemed to find my silence endearing in some way, softly chuckling and pulling me closer so she could pick me up. I quietly wrapped my arms around her neck and felt the scent of rivers and soap awaken my tired senses. I wanted to trust and accept such kindness, but I could hear His voice rumbling in the back of my head like thunder warning me—my god's foreboding warning. I

could see the two-headed basilisk in those flaming locks of hers, the worshippers of the deity hissing up against the sky in victory as my home and family melted into bone and ashes. But her warmth was like Mother's, cradling me as I wept over a scraped knee. Sticks cracked under her shoes as she wandered along the path, seemingly taken by her a million times. I watched as the clearing she had found me in disappeared behind the trees, the spiral carved into the dirt to summon Him abandoned behind the dying trees.

As her fingers combed through my messy dark hair, I huffed and water spilled down my face. The removal of the dirt on my body had revealed the blood, the water now a murky red. My shoulders were hunched forward, the tips of my fingers emerging from the depths of her bathtub enough to keep me in place. She had placed a rag in the water, and I kept pretending my hand was a large monster emerging from the depths, grabbing onto the bride foolish enough to go on a swim in her beautiful gown, only to be devoured by a giant beast.

As the rag bride's screams became nothing more than a gurgling choke, my mouth parted and I giggled. Maria leaned over, her wet hair spilling over my shoulder.

"Did you hide the rag from me, sunshine?" she playfully hummed, rubbing some more soap into my hair. I shut one eye to avoid the stinging pain that would have awaited me if I let my guard down.

"I do need it soon, though. Could I please have it?" Maria continued, holding one hand out until I begrudgingly obliged.

Between Maria's soft lulling, the screams of my family rang out. I could hear them as loudly as the wind rustling in the trees.

I found my arms wrapping around her neck in an almost nostalgic manner, my heart racing fast as her warmth devoured me. She tucked me into the wooden bed. It creaked louder than the crackling of the fireplace, reminiscent of that night. I found myself tensing up, only for Maria to pull me in close and hug me. I pondered if she would become like my mom, if her skin made out of ember stars would wrinkle like the

wool of our bedcover. I found myself turning around to face her, staring up at her bright features now darkened by the night. I focused on steadying my breath, my lungs wheezing with every exhale.

"Silly little sunshine, you need to shut your eyes to sleep." Her voice was the same warmth as usual, dragging her fingers along my forehead. "Mother used to sing me lullabies before the wolves took her. Do you wish for me to sing you to sleep?"

Wiggling her face close, Maria's lips touched the top of my head. For a moment, I thought she was going to eat me, but then I realized she was doing the same as Mother had once done.

Maria continued, "This song is about a witch that lurks in the forest"—her words vibrated against my head as she held me tighter—"cooking little children in her pot and stealing their faces."

I shut my eyes and held onto the front of her nightgown. It seemed old and much too big for her. Maria sang:

*Her cackle rings through the forest.
Warning children near and dear.
The grasshoppers loudly sing their chorus
She tells you to have no fear.*

*She walks feet bare
Bloodstained gown
Filling the air,
In smoke, you drown.*

Beware, my sweet child.

"Your hair is so long and pretty."

Maria combed through my hair, braiding it back and out of my face in firm gestures. For the weeks I had stayed here, this had become a tradition every night that I never grew to enjoy. I hated when she pulled too hard, making my eyes water a bit. I wanted to bite her whenever she tugged too hard but resisted out of worry she would do the same as

Mother. I slumped forward, looking down at my less-pretty hands. The moment she stopped tugging my hair, I turned around to grab some of her own.

"You wish to do mine?" Maria softly asked. I found myself nodding, clutching onto her hair.

We switched seats and I started mimicking her brushstrokes, combing through fire and screams. Twirling thick strands around my fingers, I pulled a bit until she spoke up, complaining. I could see my past in her hair and the longer I stared the more it made me want to stop. My eyes wandered over to the dagger on Maria's hip, then the window. I could feel the sunshine warming my side, causing me to turn my attention outside. Sunrays stabbed through the darkness in swirling circles of light. This forest felt different from home. Despite the sunlight it still had a sense of foreboding darkness that did not give me the desire to leave the safety of Maria's run-down home. Halfway through brushing, I got off the chair, hurrying over the old dusty plank boards.

"Sunshine, where are you going?"

I wanted to hide under the stairs again, to train for the future. For when I would hear that dreadful hissing and see the crouched movements that humans should not make. From here I had the perfect view. Currently, though, Maria was blocking my view, eyes slightly squinted. The steps I crawled through were broken long before I arrived, the planks clearly old. Still, upon my observations, Maria was much too weak to break it further and crawl in. She had tried when I first began hiding, ending up with a large painful splinter.

"You look like a small black cat under there," Maria scoffed, "eyes golden and black hair covering your body. You are a bit scary like that."

She got down on all fours in an attempt to get me out from between the steps.

My vocal cords broke; not even Maria's lullabies would stop me from screaming myself awake. I found myself pushing her away as my body wanted to shoot out of bed, gasping for air as I wheezed through the tears. Like always, she caught me by the waist and kept me from

crawling on the floor like a wild animal. I felt myself kicking in defiance, screaming more as I wanted her to let go of me. But she was awfully strong, crushing my small body against hers as she did her best to calm me down. I hated what I saw. How dare she impersonate Mother? I felt suffocated. How could she decide over me? I just wanted air but I was drowning in her scent more and more. I refused to stop screaming. I feared my nightmare awaited me, just past the front door, that they had found my crumb trails of rope. My body grew tired after a while, something I believe Maria knew as she refused to let me go until my screaming turned into heavy pants.

She seemed to have grown comfortable leaving me by myself, something I despised. I could feel my stomach churn, even as she abandoned me for the eighth time that week. It was quieter without Maria at home. Her constant fussing for me to stay clean and eat was infuriating, but something I had gotten used to. I would take it over the vacant footsteps I was currently hearing from outside the wooden house we resided in. I had expected them to find me eventually, but I suspected they had been quicker than my small legs could ever possibly be. Slithering over the branches and rocks that my path here had consisted of.

The wind sounded like hissing against the walls. The sky was blue as usual, although the clouds told me much more than one could think. One day the sky would be as gray as my home, they would kill again. Crawling underneath the staircase, curling up in the dirt and dust, I waited for the front door to open. My eyes fixated on the small gap between where the door ended and the floor started. With my ear pressed against the wall, I thought about what to do, should I stay hidden or avenge my parents? My body was much too small to do much damage and these were individuals that were far from any humans I had met. I could see the hallucinations of feet, eyes, and even heads peering from underneath the door, knowing fully I had been staring at the door for a while now.

This always happened in the past when Maria left, but this time I

believed it to be fully true. I believed the two-headed basilisk and its worshippers awaited me just beyond the series of wooden planks that Maria called a door, that my god could not save me anymore after all my foolish mistakes. He had given his last warning and I had not listened. It had rained the night before so their feet would most likely be muddy, leaving footprints on the porch as they staked out the wooden house. I clenched the scissors, my heart racing as I studied what my tired eyes had created in front of me. The silhouette of two bare legs, covered in mud as expected. The creak of the door opening.

I screamed and Maria jumped, almost dropping the basket in her hands and dropping the firewood with a loud thud.

I did not understand why I began crying upon realizing my fear was both valid but also ridiculous. I was tired of being scared, of waking up at night screaming until Maria smothered me back into bed. Quickly she stepped inside and shut the door, clearly worried for me as she almost immediately headed over to dry the tears appearing on my cheeks.

I crawled further underneath the stairs, screaming like a wild animal at the slightest touch. I found my little corner, the one that greeted me with the privilege of never seeing the door, sobbing against the dirty wall in the dark.

I liked watching the rabbit boiling in the stew, how its left foot poked out from the thick lumpy liquid. I was always hungry, it was an awful sensation I was cursed to constantly endure. I wondered if Maria felt the same, my form flickering in her eyes as she stood by the table.

“Do not burn yourself now, Sunshine.”

Her words rang out as a warning, similar to Mother’s. Large bags were forming under her eyes, just like mine. I simply smiled back. I could hear Maria move closer as my head turned back to the fireplace. Her steps were light, barely audible as she slipped across the old wooden floorboards.

“You are hungry, huh?” Her slender hand was placed upon my shoulder, softly squeezing it. “Me too...”

I liked how her voice rang in my ears, even when she was not

talking. Her strange accent entertained me, even when she left the house to pluck berries or check the traps she put up around the house. I sat there for a few minutes, Maria slowly kneeling behind me. I had known for a few days that something was scaring her, something was off. About three sundowns ago, she had come home late, carrying a rabbit by its hind legs, the usual cheerfulness in her voice stripped from her. Her face was flushed, her dagger missing. We had gutted the rabbit tonight with a nail; it was tedious and Maria had cut her fingers a few times. My time was running out, I was aware of this. It had taken till now for me to realize how little time I had left.

Rusted rabbits did not taste the same as rabbits flayed with a knife. Maria ripped every part of its meat off the bone, an odd preciseness in her tears.

Golden eyes reflected against the wet floorboards, wide and bloodshot. The crackling of the fire filled the room, being the loudest thing as the bed did not dare make a sound. Skin as fair as death itself ran softly across long black locks, some of it sticking to the blood-covered face, then down to my scraped knee.

Was this the witch, come to eat the children?

I felt a rush, my heart racing as I continued to push my hair out of my face, just like Maria had once done, her hand now mine. It was harder to clean myself up without assistance, especially the back as my arms were much too short to reach one of the stickier spots. I wanted to make Maria look pretty, to make myself look pretty.

As I ran the hairbrush through my black hair, making sure my white nightgown did not fall off my frail shoulders, I thought about her voice, how it had softly lulled my screams into slumber, how she had told me the story about a witch so heinous she would eat the faces of children. I knew her shoes would not fit me so I left them behind, next to the bed of what once was me. The crackling of the fire had died down, so I put some wood underneath the still-boiling pot. Most of her body was still in bed; the rest had made sure I would not be hungry for a while.

There was no use staying, waiting for the worshippers of the two headed

basilisk to find me.

As I opened the door to take my leave, my voice rasped into existence.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Maria...”

Maiken Møller-Andersen is an international student from Norway. Growing up on fairy tales and ghost stories, their writing is heavily inspired by those sleepless nights and curiosity of what might reside in the abandoned house just up the street of their childhood home.