



# *The Day That Absence Came*

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Fable

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A thousand years before the world was overrun with tendrils of electricity fighting new wars without guns, emptiness there was not. No famine, no drought. There were floods, indeed there were. The waters of emerald blue swallowed the ground, suffocated crops like babes in their beds. Heatwaves, where the sun scorched a relentless line into the ground until it cracked. Even so, there were no droughts. Crops still sprouted, still nurtured the villages, which were cupped delicately in river valleys. The grass was permanently lush, a deep green with vibrant flowers. Those flowers never withered. No one starved, no one thirsted. Hunger was a concept apart from this world. Presence was everywhere, filling everything. An all-encompassing presence. And nowhere else was this presence more felt than the Palace of Nervosa. The gilded roof was coveted by jewels which were mined all year round from the tunnels beneath the kingdom. Great wide eyes of windows peered out into the streets, a benevolent God of golden glass. And the King was as grand as his home suggested: a man who never seemed frail or cowardly or grey. His broad shoulders and dark skin cast shadows over his people, reminding them never to stray out of line. Like his castle, he was looked upon with respect, with admiration by all. Though none respected nor admired him as much as his daughter, Anorexia. Anorexia was a plain girl, with wide hips and mud-brown hair which ran a yarn down her back, though she was much a part of the kingdom as the dirt road which stretched the length of the Palace grounds. She played with the children, both born of nobility and the poor. She danced in the river, collecting water for her family. She read poems, wrote stories, even learned to swing a sword on the battlefield. Her hands became calloused, yet she still held her beauty. Her mother had died at birth, barren for most of her life until the storm had crashed through the curtains and brought her a daughter. Anorexia missed her mother, of course she did, but it was her father

Merciless, who occupied her every waking thought. This, all she had done – playing instruments with strings which cut her fingers, using a blood-sanded blade – all of it was for him. She danced through life, a guilty smile on her face, moving only to his tune. Never to her own. When he strode past her, beneath the shimmering roof, she would spin around, unsheathe her sword. Asked him if she could demonstrate a new technique she had learnt. A new song she had written. A new recipe, a story, even a single word she had found interesting in a book. She sat upon Councils, though she spoke not once, only stared at her father with such longing, the pearl-laden statutes in the hall deigned to weep. Her eyes begged for him, for his hand on her shoulder. For a kind word, a grateful utterance. She yearned for him to look at her, rather than as if she were a ghost or another fixture in the castle. When she rode the village with him, coveted in diamond hair pins and dressed head to toe in a crimson gown, he stared at the road ahead. And she felt herself rising, a corporeal ghost. Able to touch yet quite out of reach. Indeed, there were lovers. Suitors, her father would have liked to think. They cooed over her beauty, gasped as if rehearsed at her feats in all areas of life. Then, as soon as they stopped long enough to finally see her, they turned away.

“I wish there was less of you,” said one Prince. For him, she was too much to love or marry. That night, she lay in bed, in satin sheets where the smell of lavender never wavered and wept. Wept until her eyes were raw. Until her throat ballooned outwards so she could hardly breathe. A cool breeze, one of many, drifted in through the open window. Climbing out of bed, she staggered towards it. She had everything, though none of it was what she wanted. And she knew, though the walls of the castle was sandstone, her father could hear her cries. Leaning out into the cool night air, she realised how much this kingdom possessed. Food, water. Weather for all occasions, resources. Jewels. A harvest every other week, where the streets were clogged with wheat or tomatoes. All food grew in this kingdom. The water never stopped, never dried up. A damn had been built next to the baker’s cottage, so there was always fresh bread. As if on cue, the aroma of lightly floured dough wafted up to her window. Anorexia squared her shoulders, a glint in her eye. If her father, if those suitors failed to notice her presence, then perhaps they would notice her lacking. They wanted less of her, did they? Well, she decided. They would receive less of her. Then perhaps, they might deign to love her. Of course, the kingdom adored her, but it was not their smiles which she noticed when passing through the streets. Only the eye-less glance of her father. The hollow stare he cast upon her whenever she danced through the winding halls. Not that he ever truly looked at her. Even if he did, he did not linger. And so, she began. On the morning of the fete, she barely touched her food, clamped her hands behind her back when strolling past the stalls of baked bread

and jewelled sweets. Her father did not notice. The kingdom shrugged its glossy shoulders and moved on. A day passed. In laborious hunger, her stomach grew claws, gnashing teeth. Every night, when the moon hung like an eager courtier in the sky, she would curl up on her cold stone floor, clutching at her bodice. Hunger. It became a living thing inside her, its voice tearing through her resolve. The days grew longer, the sun shone brighter; yet Anorexia depleted. Life drained from her as easily as bathwater. Days turned to weeks, a month. Each second was agony, agony, agony. Until suddenly, it was too easy. Easy to pick at her plate of fresh vegetables and pretend to eat. Easy to convince her servants to tighten the ribbons on her corset. The hardest part was the mirror. A full-length lake of glass on her wall. Each time she caught her reflection, she wanted to weep. A skeletal husk drowning in silks three sizes too large. Eyes so sunken they almost disappeared into the skin of her cheeks. Bones hollow, peeking through. Sickly. She was a shadow, easing gracelessly from tower to tower, street to street. And her father said not a word. The servants whispered in the halls, about their vanishing lady. She pretended not to hear them. Pretended that every night she was not hunched over the wash basin, spilling the contents of her near-empty stomach. When she fainted in the golden fields, her father spoke not. Months passed without her name passing his lips. Still, she persisted. Why did he not see her? See the lack of her? She only wanted him to look, to truly look into her eyes. Just once. One night, when a storm found itself flung upon the kingdom, Anorexia walked to her balcony. The spears of rain fell so heavily, it was as if her bones were breaking. She was so physically weak that servants had to lift her out of bed each morning. Even then, their gossip continued. While her father's tongue spoke not of her, yet everything else. Around her, lightning flashed in a symphony of white. Grey hues. The smell of smoke. Clouds dancing and inter-locking and falling around her. She held her head. Clenched her shaking, bony fists and wished that the storm could see her. That the storm would vanish. That the storm would understand how felt. And a moment later, the lightning dispersed. Replaced by... nothing. The sky cleared in seconds and Anorexia knew. She knew everything. If not for the light emulating from her pores, she would not have realised. For Anorexia was not a Princess and the King was not her father. You see, Anorexia, the slip of a girl with the skeleton's body, was a God. A young babe brought to a dead Queen on the night of a raging storm. When she realised that the man she had let inhabit her world, whose attention had become her life's endeavour, was nothing, she let loose a howl which would rip skin from bone. As the King had ripped hers. Glaring up the kingdom which had everything, she realised her gift. The gift of...nothing. The power thrumming in her veins was a void. Servants who had heard her shriek came racing to her chambers, their breaths caught in the eyes of nothingness. And

finally, he appeared. The King, bracing himself with the hilt of his sword. Anorexia let loose a laugh, a soft, bitter chuckle. She stepped off the balcony and rose into the sky. Her bones jutted out of her shoulders like flagpoles. So, this was all her life came to. Meaningless accomplishments which had never won her heart's desire. Her father's love. Her father, who was in fact, no father of hers. Even if they were truly blood relations, she would not show him mercy. He had never showed her any, after all. Her hands poised, thrumming with a new-found nothingness she could not yet explain, Anorexia of Nervosa intoned, "As my body receded, you did nothing. As my mind screamed silently, you did nothing. This land has too long been plagued with fruitful harvest and endless supplies. From the void, I give you nothingness. I will make you all recede!" She threw her arms towards the King, who for the first time, stared her in the eye. She smiled grimly. It was too little, too late. Her nothingness began to fall upon the kingdom, a veil of empty. The crops did not wither or die – they just faded. Until only air lay in their place. The bread crumbled until no essence of food could exist. The wells dried up, as did the lakes, the once flowing rivers. Dry husks of river-beds appeared in their place. Plants evaporated as if tipping from one world to the next. Gone. In an instant. Famine became commonplace and the droughts were never sated. To this day, Anorexia still wanders the darkened streets, following you, matching your pace. When you risk glancing behind you, you see nothing. Only absence.

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