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## **The Honey Cake**

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*People living deeply have no fear of death.*  
Anaïs Nin

Contrary to the popular images, I do not play chess with those whose souls I am about to retrieve, or allow myself to be delayed or distracted as I carry out my task. I am Death, and am all business.

I can, however, be summoned, but it takes a very powerful mage to accomplish this. It was one such summoning, by the great mage of Caliph Al-Mu‘tadid, that led to the events I shall relate.

At first, I resisted the summoning, but the mage persisted until, to get rid of his demands, I materialized in Al-Mu‘tadid’s chamber, and learned the Caliph’s unusual story.

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Al-Mu‘tadid had many beautiful wives and concubines he had gathered from all over his empire. He kept them under guard in a harem, protected from the eyes of the populace. But it came to pass that the mother of one of these ladies fell ill and the daughter pleaded with the Caliph to let her travel to the village where her mother resided. The Caliph was partial to this girl

and, making an exception to his confinement rule, allowed her to go visit her mother and render such succor as she could.

During the travel, the girl became acquainted with one of the guards escorting her caravan, who was the Caliph's nephew. The trip was long and the occasions in which the two traded pleasantries evolved into increasingly passionate romantic encounters. By the time they arrived at the village where the girl's mother lay, the girl and the boy had become lovers.

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The girl's mother died shortly after the caravan's arrival, but the lovers decided to conceal her passing from the Caliph so they could extend their dalliance as long as possible. They swore to each other that they would remain together the rest of their days, no matter what happened.

The Caliph grew suspicious of the long absence of his wife and sent out spies to investigate. When the Caliph learned of the treachery of two people who had been close to his heart, his anger knew no limits. He sent an army to capture his unfaithful wife and his treasonous nephew and had them brought before him in chains. At the palace, they were placed in separate, contiguous cells, in which they lingered pending the Caliph's decision on their fate. As they awaited, each would repeat loudly to the other the vow to remain united until the end.

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Weeks passed. The Caliph became incensed at their defiance and had his wife brought to him from the dungeon for questioning.

His anger abated somewhat at the sight of his beautiful bride, now exhibiting signs of the rigors of imprisonment. Al-Mu'tadid felt a pang of love for the woman who lay prostrate before him.

“Renounce to your guilty attraction to my nephew and I’ll release you to spend the rest of your days in a retreat to lead a life of reflection and devotion to Allah,” he offered.

The girl responded with a question: “What will happen to him?”

“I’ll have him beheaded.”

“In that case, I won’t renounce our love. I’ll perish with him, for we have promised never to part from each other.”

“I can force you to go to a retreat,” threatened the Caliph.

“Do that and I’ll kill myself. Either set us both free, or slay us both.”

“It shall be as you wish,” replied the Caliph.

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Al-Mu‘tadid started losing sleep from trying to think of ways of making his revenge against the guilty pair most exemplary. He discarded the idea of beheading them, for their demise would come swiftly and be almost painless. At the end, he ordered that a sepulcher be erected on the side of a hill that he could watch from the balcony of his bedroom. The lovers would be confined there, to choke slowly beside each other, each sensing helplessly in the darkness the struggle of the other to find one final puff of breath, until their lives were stifled in anguish.

The Caliph then thought of a further refinement on his idea. Was there a way to make one of the guilty pair die by asphyxiation in the presence of the other, but allow the survivor to linger on, suffering the torment of their separation? It was then that he asked his mage to summon me.

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I was quick to express to the Caliph my annoyance at being summoned: “What is so important that requires me to appear before you? By your leave, I must attend to many pressing

matters. Right now, plague is running rampant all over your kingdom; scores are dying each day. I must see to them.”

I started to fade away, but Al-Mu‘tadid’s outcry stopped me. “Wait! I want to discuss with you the deaths of my nephew and one of my wives, who have dishonored me and have been sentenced to die slowly, by suffocation.”

I reappeared. “What do you want me to do about that?”

“Is there a way that one of them might survive for a period, so that the survivor may experience the agony of being separated from the other?”

I had never been asked such a question. After some pondering, I replied: “There is an ancient enchantment, developed by the High Priests of Egypt, for the creation of a special kind of honey cake that can postpone the ending of life if it is fed to a living person. I can not detach the soul from the body of a person who has eaten one of those delicacies until the cake has been fully digested and all traces of it have left the body of the person. That can take many weeks, for as long as even a particle of the cake remains in the body, it will repel me.”

“Where can I get such a cake?”

“Every pharaoh’s tomb has an antechamber where items of food and drink were stored for the dead ruler to get nourishment while he traveled in the afterlife. The cakes keep forever, and can be found in one of those tombs.”

There was a long pause while the Caliph consulted with his mage. At the end, he had another question.

“If one of the prisoners eats such a honey cake, can he or she stay alive while the other dies?”

“Yes, for however long it takes for the cake to disappear from the consumer’s body. Are you going to have somebody bring one of those cakes to the sepulcher and offer it to them?”

“Yes. It has to be you to offer the cake and get one of them to eat it.”

“Why me?”

“Because they will believe whatever you tell them. Who ever heard of Death being dishonest?”

“But why would I do such a thing?”

“Because if you do this for me, my mage will lift the spell that holds the holy city of Luz against your power. Right now, those who reside there enjoy exceedingly long lives, and linger among the living way past when, by the natural order of things, they should have surrendered their souls to you. I’m sure you find that situation a bit frustrating.”

“Why don’t you send your nephew or your wife to Luz while the other dies?”

“Because Luz is a holy city, where only those who are pure of heart may live. They are sinners, so neither may enter Luz.”

“I can do this much,” I replied. “I can bring a cake to the sepulcher, tell them of its properties, and say that one of them has the opportunity to survive for some time. But I shall not recommend anything.”

“What if they shared the cake?”

“For the magic of the cake to work, it must be eaten in its entirety by a single person. Sharing it would render it ineffective.”

There was another long consultation between the Caliph and his mage, at the end of which the Caliph proffered a variation of his deal: “What if you offered to set free whoever ate the cake? Could you do that?”

“Yes, I could propose transporting the person who ate the cake to some place outside the prison. Perhaps that would lead one of them to agree.”

“Well, why don’t you give it a try? You can have access to Luz if just one of them eats the cake and lives while you take the other.”

“The deal you propose is unsavory, but would be beneficial to me. I shall do it.”

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It took the Caliph’s agents weeks to break into a royal tomb in Egypt, seize a few honey cakes, and bring them to their master. I was summoned and the Caliph handed me one of the cakes. “We’ll bury them alive in the sepulcher at sunset tomorrow. Go see them.”

I scowled but took a honey cake, whose touch burned like acid.

The following evening, I entered the walls of the sepulcher and confronted the guilty pair, who were sobbing and embracing each other, saying their farewells to the world.

They were fearful when I materialized in front of them. It was very dark in the room and they could not see my features, but my spear emits a faint phosphorescence that showed the outline of my skeletal form. “Who are you?” challenged the boy.

“Death. I am here to carry your souls away.”

“We’re ready” declared the girl with false courage.

“But before I take you, I would like to present you with an alternative.”

They remained silent, awaiting my next words.

“I have with me a magic honey cake. If one of you eats it, he or she will avoid dying in this tomb.”

“How can that be so?” asked the boy. “I’m sure they will come in a couple of days from now to confirm we are dead. Anyone who is still alive will be slain.”

“If you eat this honey cake, I will transport you to a hidden kingdom in the Pamir Mountains, where the power of the Caliph does not reach.”

“Can’t we both go there?”

“No. I can save only the person who eats the cake.”

“What if we share it?”

“That will not work. One of you must eat the entire cake for its magic to be effective.”

“We’re not interested,” replied the boy. “We have pledged to be with each other forever. Anything that separates us won’t do.”

“Well, the decision is yours. I will leave the cake here. Think about it. I shall return in a few hours.”

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Later, I returned to the sepulcher from a battlefield, having nearly tired myself collecting the souls of fighters from both armies. War leaves me weary; I prefer taking the spirits of the living one by one, so I can savor the lingering fear, the purposeless despair, the remorse and self-recriminations of my victims.

As I approached the sealed chamber where the profane lovers had been confined, I expected one of three scenarios to have played itself out: either the boy had seized the honey cake and consumed it; or the girl had somehow taken it away from him; or, perhaps more likely, they had shared it, despite my warnings.

The sight that welcomed me as I entered the chamber surprised me. The couple was reclining against the rough stone walls of the sepulcher. They held each other in a tight embrace, and appeared unconscious or in a trance. On the floor, where I had left it, was the magic honey cake, untouched.

I approached them silently and, when I was in front of them, noticed their labored breaths, as they gasped to get fresh air in their lungs. I am insensitive to temperature, so I could only guess that the chamber was stifflingly hot and running out of breathable air. Soon they would asphyxiate.

I struck the ground three times with the barbed iron spear I use to seize souls off the bodies of the deceased. The sound of iron pounding on stone was dull but effective. The boy opened his eyes with great difficulty; a few moments later, the girl also became conscious.

“Why wake us up? You’ll soon have us,” asked the boy reproachfully.

It was my turn to remonstrate. “Of that, I am sure. But I must satisfy my curiosity first. Why did one of you not eat the honey cake and be transported to the Pamir Mountains?”

“We each tried very hard to convince the other to eat the cake. Neither of us would do it,” explained the girl.

“We’d never do anything that would separate us!” added the boy. The girl, raising her head a little, nodded.

“My charge was to take one of you today, not both. This is a great disappointment.” I could not but notice that I was sounding petulant, contrary to my sober manner.

“Sorry to have disrupted your plans,” was his sardonic reply. “But you’ll have to wait a few minutes and take us both.”

“Death waits for nobody,” I responded. “Right now, there are a thousand other places I have to be.”

“Then, why don’t you kill us and be done with it?”

“I harvest the souls of people. I do not slay them.”

“That’s your problem. Now, go and let us die in peace.”



I would have directed my rage at the youth, but violence is not in my charter. But I was furious: my distasteful deal with the Caliph had unraveled, and I had already wasted a lot of time in this sordid affair. Plus, I felt something akin to pity for the couple.

I struck the front wall of the sepulcher with my spear, and blasted a huge hole to the outside. Through the opening, I could see the panic-stricken soldiers the Caliph had posted to guard the tomb disperse in all directions.

Fresh air bathed the sepulcher and revived the prisoners. “Go away,” I instructed the lovers. “Get as far from here as you can. I shall meet you again soon.”

The boy helped the girl to her feet and led her out the hole. As they left, he had the nerve to cast a cautionary directive at me: “Make sure you come for both of us at the same time!”

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