

## COUP

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It began on a Saturday, the whisperings of malcontented servants. If I'd been smarter then, I would have recognized the signs of an impending coup. But I was proud. I commanded giants, after all. I pointed at the object of my desire, and they rushed to bring it to me. The slightest furrowing of my brow was enough to compel them. I cannot name the power that allowed me to bend these fearsome monsters to my will, only that I was born with it.

My ablutions had been completed, but the servant responsible for serving my evening meal had failed to return from the kitchens in a timely fashion. As I shifted on my throne, I wondered if my magic might be weakening. Did I need to utter the Cry of Wrath to re-establish my control over their simple minds?

"I was up all night with his royal highness, it's your turn," whispered the long-haired giant, clearly unaware that I could overhear.

"Fine, but it's back to you tomorrow," replied the short-haired one. Moments later, he appeared with a bowl and spoon. I decided to be lenient. Rather than send him to the dungeon, I expressed my displeasure by spitting the first few bites back in his face.

By the time dinner was over, I was certain the lunkhead understood how grateful he should be to serve me.

I heard other whisperings the following day, but the giants were careful to keep their voices low this time. I assumed they had learned their lesson and were conspiring to determine how they might avoid such mistakes in the future.

You can imagine my horror when the short-haired giant—who'd served me faithfully if not flawlessly for the past two years—rousted me from my bed before dawn, forced me to don rough pants and a tunic with a hood, and carried me out of the palace. I screamed, but for once the Cry of Wrath had no effect. My magic had deserted me.

Everything went dark as the hood fell over my face. Massive hands chained me to a seat far less comfortable than my throne. No doubt the hood was intended to prevent my loyal subjects from recognizing me and intervening in my abduction.

I would find a way to recover my magic, I swore. And when I did, heads would roll.

A strange, deep-throated hum filled my ears. Exhausted from my attempts to bespell the giants, I finally fell asleep.

I awoke as massive hands lifted me out of the seat. Curses, if only I had been alert a few moments earlier, I might have escaped while the giant unchained me. Now, I was pressed against his massive chest by meaty arms whose true strength I was only now discovering.

When he put me down, I was finally able to raise my hood and survey my new surroundings. A prison. My captor greeted a giant I'd never seen, another of the long-haired variety. He pointed at me as he spoke with my new jailor in whispers. Then he left without so much as a backward glance of regret for his unspeakable betrayal.

So obvious, in retrospect. I wondered what pretender they would place on my throne. What a coward my successor must be, preferring to instigate rebellion among the servants who once loved me rather than challenge me openly.

When I regained my magic, I would crush him. If I regained my magic. It had never deserted me before. I surmised that the giants must have found a way to bind it.

My jailor dragged me, kicking and screaming, to a room whose sad state of disrepair could not be disguised by the brightly-colored furniture and horrid wall decorations. But it was the other prisoners that frightened me the most. Dazed, crying, catatonic. The one in the corner sucking his own fist. Another curled into a ball on the floor, blubbering. One stared belligerently at me.

A second jailor read to the inmates from a book as she sat cross-legged on the water-stained floor. Or were those water stains? I refused to dwell on what else they might be, lest my spirit be broken.

I had heard of re-education camps, but being the benevolent dictator that I was, I had outlawed them in my kingdom. If I needed to brainwash my enemies to keep my throne, I'd reasoned, then I didn't deserve to rule.

It might be time to reconsider that logic.

The inmate with the stare rushed up and shoved me. I fell backward, arms flailing, but managed to grab the collar of his shapeless blue jumpsuit and take him down with me. He hit the floor with a loud smack. I rolled over and slapped his ruddy cheeks. He screamed like a baby.

Served him right.

The jailor who'd been reading put down her book and lumbered over, setting the other inmate on his feet. "You know the rules, Justin. No fighting. Do I need to send you to the naughty corner?"

The naughty corner. What terrible punishments were administered there? I wondered.

My attacker shook his head.

"What do we say when we've hurt someone else?" the giant prodded.

Justin sneered at me. "Sah-wee."

"You're just cranky 'cuz you're hungry. Go into the kitchen and tell Melissa I said you could have some grapes."

What devilry was this? This Justin had spoken a single word and suddenly our jailor rewarded him with a feast. Were there other magic words that would allow me to control my jailors and engineer my escape?

The giant turned to me expectantly. I graced her with my most beatific smile as I repeated the magic word.

"Aww, what a cutie. You can have some grapes too."

I had made an enemy, but I had gained so much more—these giants were fools, teaching their own prisoners the very magic that could be used to control them. And they rewarded us for learning it.

One word to rule them all.