

Brown Rice and Tears of Guilt

By C. Jade Wyton

Raven confronts her mother about the abuse she was put through as a child and finds herself willing to give her a second chance... provided her boundaries are respected, of course, and her mother doesn't take this chance for granted.

Contains mentions of child abuse, domestic violence, and death.

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Brown rice with a pathetic smattering of peas, carrot, and mushroom.

It was a simple meal; easy to make in bulk.

Over a thousand kilos of rice had been prepared for dinner tonight— *Another* night of that damned grain... boring but necessary with the sudden influx of desperate and hungry mouths to feed. The only thing stopping it from being unbearably plain was the dehydrated vegetables that Maggie had suggested Raven add to the supply stockpile.

Thank the gods she had listened, because this stupid rice almost made Raven miss the venison, bread, and potatoes she had been raised on.

But they had no resources to be creative, now. Not with over seven thousand children suddenly appearing in the city overnight.... And nearly three thousand adults, as well.

*Gods, so many of them Raven recognised.*

She shuddered; pushing the memories of the murdered orphans from her mind as she made it to her mother's bedroom door.

She didn't knock. She was in too foul a mood. She simply pushed open the door with her hip, holding both bowls of rice in her hands, and glared at her mother as the woman turned —slowly, unsteadily— from the strange, not-quite-right clone of herself whose hair she had been brushing. Charity, Raven recalled the name the clone had been given. A fragile, weak-hearted and sickly newborn mind in an adult's body that was to be seen as her now *youngest* sister. Which, despite her resemblance to their mother, Raven didn't actually mind all that much. Charity was a sweet thing who, despite the tremble in her hands and the medication needed to keep her heart from failing, wanted nothing more than to play and be loved just as the other children were.

Raven's eyes softened as Charity attempted to turn to her and instead lost her balance and fell into their mother's chest; she was rightened, and as she was the others in the room —Fungus, Genny, and Blossom— perked up at Raven's presence. Genny leapt from the bed to run around Raven's feet, making those strange little sounds she made when she was excited. And Blossom gave a little wave as Fungus nuzzled her side.

Though, Raven didn't acknowledge either, as she met her mother's eye.

'Raven?' Genevieve asked. 'What—'

'Dinner,' Raven interrupted, bluntly, and held up one of the two bowls she held.

Genevieve stared a moment, looking at her daughter in an odd, almost vacant manner. 'You don't usually bring me—'

'I wanted to talk,' Raven cut her off again, just as flat as before, and held up the second bowl. 'If you will have me.'

'Of course,' Genevieve breathed, her tired gaze distracted as Fungus hefted up Charity over a shoulder. 'Oh— Fungus, please be careful with her!'

Fungus gave a happy grunt, which was echoed by Charity's giggles, and leapt from the bed. Blossom was quick to follow; struggling down off the tall mattress but landing on her feet as Genny arrived in time to righten her.

'We'll be back after dinner, Mother,' Blossom promised. 'We'll see if Wonda will bring Moonbeam in!'

Genevieve's shoulders fell in quiet defeat, and she sighed. 'Okay,' she reluctantly agreed. 'Just, please, remind Fungus not to swing her around. She's not as strong as the others....'

'She'll be fine,' Raven said, firmly, moving aside so her family could pass her into the hall. 'Fungus knows her better than you do.'

It came out harsher than she intended; she could tell by the hurt look on her mother's face. But she didn't acknowledge it or apologise as she shut the door behind Blossom and strode over to the bed. She held out the rice for Genevieve to take and, once it was accepted, sat down beside her to pick at her own food.

They ate in silence for a minute, not speaking as Raven had intended, before Genevieve sighed and looked up at the woman.

'You look nice,' she said, softly. 'Are you growing your hair out?'

'Yeah,' was the curt reply.

'Ah...' Genevieve looked down, clearly too tired to think how to respond to such a harsh tone.

Another quiet passed before Raven's stomach turned and she put her bowl down on the bedside table.

'Raven?'

'Samara's happy you're back,' Raven said, that harsh tone edging in her voice. Genevieve sighed, poking at her food as she guessed: 'And you're not?'

'I'm...' Raven trailed off, grumbling. 'It's complicated.'

'*I haven't forgotten what you told me,*' Genevieve muttered, her voice so quiet she may as well have whispered. '*You wanted to kill me.*'

'Yes,' Raven answered. 'I wanted to kill you. And myself. And anyone who put my sisters at risk.... But that was before I realised that we.... You and me. We're people.'

Several seconds of quiet followed the statement, before Genevieve gave another hopeless-sounding sigh. 'I don't feel much like a person, right now.'

'Yeah, well, suck it up. If I have to face myself, then so do you!' Raven huffed, retrieving her food and downing it as quickly as she could. She put the now-empty bowl down perhaps a little too hard before snorting. 'I still don't forgive Cirrus for making me a person.'

A crestfallen look found its way to Genevieve. 'You were *always* a person, Raven—'

'No I wasn't. You never even named me.'

Silence.

Genevieve finished her own food, and Raven took her bowl to place beside the other.

‘I should have.’

‘But you *didn’t*.’

More silence.

Then, Raven gave a furious snort. ‘Samara told me all about you. Apparently, you weren’t always so shit at being a mother.’

Genevieve’s brow furrowed and, slowly, she closed her eyes, bracing herself for what Raven had to say.

‘She said you never hit her,’ Raven grumbled. ‘Not even once. What the *fuck* is with that?!’

‘I never should have laid a hand on you.’

‘No, you fucking *shouldn’t* have!’ Raven growled, crossing her arms and scoffing. ‘I don’t care that you promised yourself you’d stop, or whatever the fuck you said. I was almost fully grown by then! And do you know how shit it is to hear that? To hear you *never* beat your children until me?! And then Wonda shows up, and you *stop* again?! Do you know how it feels to know that I, alone, was your punching bag?!’

Genevieve said nothing; though her face was filled with guilty pain.

‘I’m *trying* to understand,’ Raven’s voice quivered with anger and hurt. ‘I get it. The Scavenger fucked you up. You were in mind-numbing pain. It was only when Fungus found you that you got any relief.... I acknowledge that. I’m trying to give you that grace— But do you know how much it fucking *hurts* to be me?! In this body you forced me into?! In this *life* I never wanted to live?!’

She rose to her feet, now, to pace, and refused to meet her mother’s eye.

‘You walked three days, barefoot, barely resting, to try and save Samara from the plague,’ she continued, a feline growl rising in her throat. ‘You searched the continent twice over for Maggie when she was lost. You built an entire *kingdom* to shield Wonda from harm. You gave up your *life* for Blossom! You faced your biggest fears so she could live unharmed! And Charity— You speak so softly to Charity! Like she’s made of damn glass!’

Raven kicked her mother’s clothing chest, knocking it several feet from the foot of the bed. She saw her mother flinch as she did, but was too angry to stop herself from raising her voice.

‘AND WHAT DID YOU DO FOR ME?!’ she shouted. ‘You *broke* my *arm* for standing up to Mori! You sent me to *kill children* for your fucking fear of the Scavenger! You trained me like an *animal*! Made me sleep *outside* to keep me strong! You showed me death! And pain! And horrors! You made me call back corpses for labour! You made me give up *everything* I loved about myself! And for what?! To survive a world that never wished me harm?! A world that has done nothing but meet me with compassion since I stepped into it?!’

She kicked the bed, this time, and Genevieve gave a cry; throwing her hands down to grip the edge so she didn’t fall.

‘I COULD HAVE BEEN LOVED!’ Raven shouted. ‘MY PIECES WERE LOVED! Every single part of me! Every single one of those little girls that came back from the dead —that were torn apart to house my soul— they do *nothing* but speak of their families! Sisters! Brothers! Mothers! Cousins! How much they miss

them! How much they were cared for! How they'll be welcomed home, even after all this time! My pieces were *wanted*! My pieces were *loved*! And you *stole* that from them! From *me*!

'*I'm sorry!*' it was both a whisper and a sob. '*I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry....*'

Raven's beak clamped shut, the muscles around her eyes tensing and twitching in her anger as she bit back another shout.

*What would Cirrus think to hear you yell? To see you bring your mother to tears? Why hurt her like this, what's even the point of it?*

The thought made her that much angrier as it brushed through her mind; though she heeded its warning tone and, with a heavy *thwumpf*, flopped face-down onto her mother's bed.

She lay in silence as her mother cried; unsure what to say or do.

It was just as Genevieve finally calmed that Raven raised her head. She didn't know what she wanted to say, what was *right* to say, as she watched her mother wipe her eyes on her skirt. But she knew she had to say something. So she opened her beak and spoke without thinking, letting whatever wanted to come out, come out.

'You were a terrible mother.'

'I know,' Genevieve conceded, sniffing. 'I know.... I'm sorry.'

'Cirrus is my father, now. He welcomed me into his life as his daughter, and I have never felt more at home than I do sharing his name.'

She wasn't sure why she said it. Nor why it came out so blunt and firm. But as Genevieve's face fell into her hands, a devastated energy trembling out of her, Raven felt a pang of guilt. A small sympathy for the pathetic woman who had raised her prickled up her arms.

And so as Genevieve's body shook, so did Raven's voice: 'I'm not... *completely*... forsaking you...' she said, as softly as she could force herself to speak as she sat up and shifted to sit beside her mother again. 'You can still be my mother. But you're my mother on *my* terms.'

'Your... your terms?' Genevieve asked, her voice a confused whimper.

'My terms,' Raven repeated, flatly. 'They're rather simple, I think. Your hands stay the fuck to yourself, for one. And for two; I will *never* follow your orders again. You listen to *me*, now. Three—' the bridge of her beak crinkled in disgust. '—You clean up your shit and cut the crap with trying to be any sort of leader, *ever* again. I've been following your piss-trail backwards and, frankly, the good you did for the people here is *nothing* compared to the harm you inflicted on the rest of the world. You're *lucky* that the people whose lives you've destroyed are willing to forgive you. It's a stupidly huge act of compassion that I'm not actually sure you *deserve*. But it's not my place to change people's minds, so be *grateful* for your *third* chance at life. And make sure to thank Cirrus, Eulogy, Plume, and Wonda for it. Because they had to drag themselves through actual *hell* because of you! So don't you *dare* fuck this up! You understand?'

Genevieve nodded, desperately, and curled up tight; her tail wrapping around herself and she shivered.

'You can still be my mother,' Raven said, firmly. 'I'm willing to give you another chance, now that we're both *people*, to do it right.'

'*Th... thank you,*' it was more of a squeak than an actual sentence. 'I... I

promise I won't take it for granted.'

'You better not,' Raven muttered.

That was when a knock rapped against Genevieve's door, causing the gnome to flinch as her daughter scoffed at the familiar voice that called softly to ask if he may enter.

*Of course it was Kordulf....*

Genevieve looked to Raven, as checking if she had her daughter's permission to answer him.... Though, instead of saying anything, Raven silently retrieved the dirty bowls from the bedside table and left; pushing past the old satyr as she left the door open for him.

It felt just that *little* bit less horrible to walk out knowing someone was there to comfort her.... Even if it *was* Kordulf.

—END—

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