

The Genesis Of Rubai

A short story by Michael Horne

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The Genesis of Rubai

From The Histories of Aeval

With the grace and stealth of a floating bubble Queen Mab XXXIII lowered herself to the hot sand, her retinue of Fairies landing around her. The sand was of a beach that crept from the water and spread as far as the eye could see for 180 degrees.

"Nowhere else is there a sea this colour," spoke the Queen, encompassing the sherry coloured waters with a sweep of her arm. "I will have my new palace by its side."

A young green skinned puck, who had not bothered landing as he did not think they would be here long, tittered at the thought. "But nothing can live here, oh Queen," he giggled, "the sands are drier than the cheeks of the moon."

The Queen smiled. "I shall do here today that which even the Trolls, with all their size, would not think of."

This sparked much chatter amongst the other members of the Fairy court; a mixture of the sceptical and the sycophantic. The former whispered fearfully and the latter spoken just loud enough, it was hoped, for the Queen to overhear.

The monarch drew their attention to the burning horizon.

Slowly approaching was, what seemed to be, a parade, in the midst of which there was dragged a carnival float bearing the full-sized sculpture of a red dragon.

As the parade came close, gasps travelled the Queen's retinue and wings shivered with excitement. For movement that had previously been interpreted as the quivering of the air turned out, in fact, to be the strugglings of a very real and very live dragon.

Striding proudly at the front of this procession was Queen Mab XXXIII's champion: The Carmine Crow. His figure was unmistakable even from a distance, enveloped as he was from head to foot in red. No explanation for his arrival was needed for the Queen's entourage. They all knew that the Queen's favourite had done the impossible: caught a ruby scaled dragon. Now they knew why he had spent the past six months with his best men and women deep in the rainforests.

So great was the discrepancy between the size of the creature and those who had caught it, that a Fairy could walk between any two of its teeth, arms stretched wide.

The Carmine Crow knelt before his Queen and took her petal soft fingers in his hands.

The Queen's skin was white like cuttlebone and no pounding from the sun could ever bronze it. Against the red grape colour of The Carmine Crow's hand the iridescence of her own skin was particularly notable, making her hands seem made not of flesh at all but of pearl. It was the quality of her skin that had earned her the first of many epithets: the Daughter-of-Pearl. In fact, this unique aspect was what found her selected Queen before she had learnt to speak.

For the Fairy civilisation at this time was a beautocracy. Every monarch was selected at childhood from the general population, having to meet only one requirement: that they be, undisputedly, the most beautiful child alive.

The selection process is far less problematic than you might think. For when confronted by absolute beauty even the most jealous beholder is rendered honest by awe. Also, every Fairy has a preterhuman sense of good taste and their society is not dogged by the distortions of fashion and conformity that so inhibit the human race.

The Carmine Crow announced to his Queen, "though this can only come a small way in repaying you for the privileges you have granted me, I have brought you this gift as an expression of my love and devotion to you."

Snow-Haired Mab kissed her champion on the lips. A dozen pairs of eyes looked away in pain, so their owners did not know how long the kiss lasted. But even the shortest kiss is too long for those who love the Queen, and every man who met her loved her, and some women too. This universal love guaranteed loyalty to the Monarch and was one of the strengths of a beautocracy.

Those who diverted their eyes towards the sea saw now on its waters dark green shapes, like giant leaves, coming towards the shore. They were the sails of a Fairy fleet. These sails caught, not the winds, but the energies of the sun. Each ship was the size of a small human yacht but carried many hundreds of Fairies.

The fleet came to shore a little way down from the dragon and within moments the beach was crowded with thousands of

Fairies unloading materials, livestock and machinery from the ships.

With the speed and single minded efficiency of an ant colony a makeshift town began to take form. This town would house the thousands of labourers, engineers and artisans who would create the new palace.

As for the Queen and her court, a pavilion was built for them which afforded a good view of the creation process. A lavish meal was provided, over which there was much discussion and speculation as to what exactly was taking place. Snow-Haired Mab refused to tell the beautocrats anything and each of them was delighted and humbled by this, knowing that they were the privileged witnesses to a remarkable and, of course, beautiful moment in history.

Some silently guessed what was taking place, having seen the type of equipment and livestock unloaded from the ships, but they would not voice their notions, knowing they would only be ridiculed as incorrigible fantasists.

When the meal was over and the world's most beautiful Fairies were made dozy by their fullness, The Iridescent One took advantage of their vulnerability to announce that, this same evening, she would kill the ruby dragon.

*

All the worker Fairies had lain down their tools and were gathered a safe distance from the dragon. They watched as, like a comet, their Queen flew from the pavilion and towards the head

of the dragon, drawing in her wake white tails of streaming silk and hair. The creature's massive eye swivelled in its socket as it traced the approaching star and came to discern the Fairy Queen's form.

Mab the Precious hung in the air before the dragon's sparkling gemstone face and at the top of her voice she shouted, "I am Mab, Queen of all Fairies, and I have brought you here to discuss a matter of great importance."

The dragon could just discern the tiny Queen's shouts, while the observers on the sand were beyond range to hear. Moving faster than the Dragon could see the White Queen unlocked the great muzzle that bound the dragon's jaw. If she felt any fear before this ancient creature she did not show it.

The dragon spoke with a deep voice that rumbled like pouring lava. The Fairy Queen felt the voice through the vibrating air more than she heard it: "if all you wished to do was talk it would have been simpler if you'd visited me in the jungle."

"I need you to see for yourself the empty canvass that you will help fill. I am the most beautiful Fairy alive today and said to surpass all Mabs that came before me. Only the first Titania, the fourth and ninth Glorianas, could stop hearts more than I.

"It was enough for them to have shadows of their beauty preserved in art, so those of us separated by time could be touched by it. But what of the beauty that existed behind their eyes? Nothing of that now remains. I wish to create a work of art that means, not only will my outward beauty be remembered for millennia, but also my imagination, and the science and industry of my people.

"You, dragon, can die naturally in twenty or thirty thousand years and then be forgotten, or you can die now, to create a monument that will inspire and marvel until the dusk of time."

The dragon responded. "I remember a time when your people numbered only scores and had not yet learnt how to gather twigs. When my eyes first opened, but for us dragons, the only speaking creatures on this world were six giants, who could have held me between thumb and forefinger, and whose arguing split the land into six continents when before there had been only one.

"My grandparents lived to see a race of spiders create a civilisation more marvellous than your own, and yet who left it all behind when they rode in plastic ships to meet strangers on a world in the stars. A world so far away that they can, not even now, be halfway there.

"You, Fairy, wish to use me to create something timeless, but only change is eternal. These sands were once mountains, that sea will eventually be desert and one day that sun will sink for the last time.

"You can not impose permanence. I, oldest of all creatures and least afraid of death, understand this the most."

"Thank you for making my argument for me," answered the Queen. "I could not have put it so eloquently. For it is the transience of the universe that I seek to celebrate."

And Queen Mab XXXIII explained to the dragon the details of her project. In the time it took for the sun to set, the dragon deliberated and made her decision. To the great agitation

of the crowd the Daughter-of-Pearl released all the restraints holding the dragon's body.

In the twilight the dragon took four strides to the sea, sending tremors along the beach. She dipped her fabulous head to the water and drank.

Never acknowledging the presence of those gathered, she walked inland, just a short way, before stopping on a patch of limestone that emerged from the sand like the pate of a giant skull, dusted off by archaeologists. She turned her body to face where the sun had set and stretched her gargantuan wings. Sand showered the onlookers, but they blinked through it to see the ruby dragon rear back upon her hind legs, wings out wide and head held high in a gesture of triumph, before she slumped to the ground dead.

All creatures die who drink from the Red Sea, as the dragon was well aware.

As each sparkle of her skin was extinguished by the strengthening night a new star burned in the sky.

*

On the first day the excavation of the dragon body began. The problem was to remove all the innards of the dragon (muscle, organs and fat) while keeping the skeleton and the crystalline hide intact.

Vast amounts of bacteria and fungi were inserted into the dragon's corpse via its natural orifices to speedily decompose the

flesh into fertile matter. Also inserted were a great number of flies' eggs that quickly hatched into thousands of hungry maggots. When the flies eventually emerged they were caught in spider-silk nets and killed, for the Fairies did not want precious organic matter flying off into the desert.

The broken down dragon flesh was shifted out of the skin with beetles led by insect handlers. In the mean time other Fairies worked on building a processing station that would pump water from the sea and free it of its poisons to make a reservoir of drinkable water. Until this was completed the Fairies and their livestock relied on imported water, for the skies here were intolerant of clouds.

It took thirty-three days for the dragon's body to be entirely cleaned of its flesh. The recycled matter was spread out inland and the Fairy horticulturists wasted no time in sowing carefully chosen seeds.

The bulk of the Fairy workforce now moved in on the dragon skin, erecting around it great scaffolding, cranes and the other devices of construction that were necessary for the engineering feat ahead.

A team of architects spent four days exploring the insides of the dragon, making measurements, tests and devising a precise plan. Holes were bored through strategic parts of the skeleton, ready for the insertion of support rods and cables.

Over the following weeks and months the ruby hide was raised back into the position it had possessed the moment before the dragon collapsed and died. To give the impression that the dragon was solid, the skin's shape was maintained with a frame,

reminiscent of the farthingales that supported the wide dresses of Elizabethan ladies on Earth.

Central to the suspension of this heavy gemstone hide was the skeleton. Hundreds of metal cables performed the function of muscle tendons in making the skeleton stand again.

Every step of this erection, of which there were thousands, was fraught with a myriad considerations. A single oversight could see the entire structure crash to the ground, possibly killing any Fairies working inside.

The dragon was eventually raised to stand on its hind legs. The thick end of its tail touched the ground, acting as an essential third ground support. The remaining length of the tail was made to snake into the air, in that manner most pleasing to the eye.

The entire structure was held in place with long beams that went through the bases of the feet and tail and bore deep into the rock beneath. This was only a safety measure, though, as the dragon's pose was perfectly balanced and it would have taken great force to topple it.

With the dragon set in her final position work was begun on adding the floors, ceilings and walls to the inner cavities that would become the 2,187 rooms of the Ruby Palace.

Every object that went into the palace was laboured over by master artists and craftsmen. Objects, that to us would be merely commonplace and functional, were to Fairies each an unhewn sculptor's block awaiting metamorphosis by the hammer and chisel of imagination. An equal wealth of creativity went

into the landscaping of the gardens, which were intended to feed the eyes and stomachs of the palace's future inhabitants.

At last the day came on which it might be said that the palace and grounds were complete. The Daughter-of-Pearl, who had been absent through much of the construction, attending matters of the state, arrived to gaze at the reality that had previously existed only in her mind.

There was held a spectacular carnival in which all the workers and artists swapped their hammers and paintbrushes for musical instruments, banners, ribbons, paper sculptures and all the paraphernalia that such an occasion calls for. While the colour and marvellous sights on display would have matched anything produced through all the ages of humankind, the best our species has to offer in parades was not only doubled by the Fairies but cubed. For their parade not only spilled along a horizontal plain, but also vertically through the air. A great sphere of revelry wrapped around the dragon. Like a multicoloured mist it obscured the palace and grounds from view and the whole space throbbed with all kinds of music.

There is a popular conundrum amongst Troll theologians: if a group of Fairies have a party in the desert but nobody is there to see it, do they have fun?

In an attempt to find an answer, these trolls will contort their minds over the behaviour of waveforms and matters of quantum emotion. But the answer is simple. Being short lived creatures, Fairies elevate fun above all else. Everything they do is carried out in a manner that makes it as fun and exciting as possible. Thusly, the most simple things are made complex and complex issues are reduced to simple matters of fun.

Therefore, if you can not see a Fairy, the odds dictate that they are enjoying themselves immensely.

On an occasion like this, which is a celebration of beauty, art and life itself, it would be useless for us to try and empathise with those Fairies flying in that super-dense mix of music and colour. Their exquisite exhilarations we could not comprehend.

*

Queen Mab XXXIII sat on her throne of amber, the back of which was carved into a stylized sun. She was in the audience chamber, whose one huge window looked out to sea and was in the place of the dragon's right eye socket.

Seven years had passed since the Ruby Palace became the seat of the Fairy empire. Seven years it had stood as monument, parliament and home. The gardens had spread slowly across the sand: an oasis rich with life in a place where nature had deemed there should be none. In the grounds lived its keepers and some of the palace workers. Their homes were the beginnings of a settlement that would eventually grow to be autonomous from the palace, but would be called Rubai in honour of it.

By the Queen's side sat The Carmine Crow, and gathered about were various ministers. They were listening to the battle report of green-skinned Locust Breeze: one of the empire's best captains, but who had only been a puck when he witnessed the Palace being made. He told of his leading a host of Delerati against a force of Imps and retaking a peninsula admired for its coral reef. He described the formations they took

and the moves they made as though describing a ballet and not a battle.

But as he relayed his tale it became evident to those present, and especially The Carmine Crow, that the Queen was breathing hard and holding her waist as if in pain. As this was her thirteenth year, it was clear to everyone that she was about to die. For Fairies show no signs of ageing, but at the end of their lifespan they suffer a sudden and rapid collapse of the internal organs.

The Carmine Crow took the White Queen in his arms and carried her to her bedchamber. Her children were called for and she was given the juice of a pitcher plant to relieve the pain.

Her son and daughter arrived. They had both recently reached maturity. The son was wine red, the daughter pale white but without the iridescence of her mother. The pink of roses bloomed in her cheekbones and her hair was as red as her brother's.

So the Queen died in the presence of those she loved the most.

The Carmine Crow knew that his time would be soon also, but wished it would be now so consumed he was with grief.

*

Queen Mab XXXIII was cremated. Her ashes were added to powder of paints. Infant Fairies, the children of those who worked and lived in the palace, used the pigments to create

their own painting. They pushed the paint around with their tiny hands, filling the space with their will. A quickening of form took place where their new minds shaped a tiny fragment of the universe, for all the world to see.

The painting was hung in the hall of mirrors, which consisted of ninety-nine portraits of the White Queen, each by a different beholder. It would hang there, in pride of place, for as long as the Ruby Palace stood.

Which, as the Daughter-of-Pearl had predicted and the ruby dragon believed, was until the dusk of time.

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