

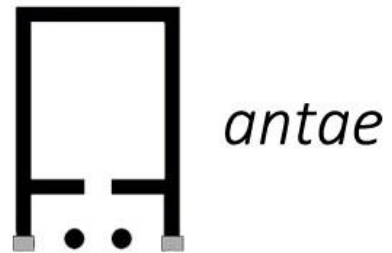
A Gut Feeling

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A Gut Feeling

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Ian McNamara took one look around the bar and sighed heavily. His glass of the finest whiskey that the bar tender has on offer—Johnny Walker, by the taste of it—was festering in his cup as he stared at the grooves in the table, trying to find some sort of pattern in the wooden swirls.

The bar wench walked by with a tray, her nose wrinkling as she passed by a table of men shrouded in cigar smoke. They yelled at her, something in Maltese that he could only imagine the sentiment behind. A hand waved her towards them but she ignored them, walking towards the bar and setting the tray on the table.

He downed the whiskey, pursing his lips at its sour taste, and got up, smoothing out his standard regulation uniform that was a bit too loose to fit comfortably, and a bit too stark a reminder of his position.

“Maria, a word?” he said as he walked up to her, gesturing towards the outside. She scoffed slightly before she even looked at him, taking off her apron and throwing it behind the bar, running a hand through her hair.

“Ian, this had better be worth my time.”

He laughed at her slight mispronunciation of his mother tongue and gestured towards the door again. Clicking her tongue, Maria watched as he stepped outside and lit himself a cigarette—the last of the packets he had brought with him from Belfast—and leaned against the doorframe, waiting for him to start speaking with the air of impatience that she never voiced, but definitely exuded.

“I need a spell. Or a potion. Whatever you call them.”

“We have different names for what we do, Ian. It all depends on what you really want it for.”

“Like what?” he asked, after a brief pause punctuated by his smoky exhales.

“Draughts for more brains, serums so nobody can see you, potions for longer life, more days. What do you want?”

“That potion for a longer life doesn’t sound too bad, to be honest.”

“I wouldn’t drink it. It doesn’t stop anybody from killing you, just gives you two, maybe three years more.”

It was his turn to scoff at that remark and he spat onto the pavement, the cigarette almost done now. He had no idea why he still smoked—the hacking cough was only getting worse and he hated the taste.

“Well, I don’t know if what I’m asking for is a bit much, really...”

“*U, obżoqha!*” she growled under her breath. He’d been here long enough to know what that meant, so he obliged. Spitting onto the floor again, he crossed his arms.

“I need a potion for bravery. Or a serum. Or a draught. Whatever you witches call it.”

Her eyes widened at the request, her jaw going slightly slack. A breeze passed through the street, rustling the skirts and neatly pressed pants of those walking by, blowing her blonde hair slightly askew as the air rose. He watched her eyes take a quick sideways glance one way, then the other, and watched her turn around, gesturing at him to follow her.

She led him into the opening just next to the bar, right into the street famous in this ancient, reportedly-haunted capital city as the home to many a harlot and man of dubious intent; a place of debauchery. She was weaving through the streets with a guarded confidence, while he was trying to air off the importance that he knew he should hold here. Really, though, who was he even fooling? He wasn’t the first British soldier to walk through these streets, and everybody probably thought he was here to pick a fight, a girl, or a drink to destroy his liver with.

Before he could register where she had disappeared to, Maria appeared at his side, pulling him into a doorway, already opened, smelling ranker than that time he had stumbled upon a sack of rotten potatoes back when he was still a boy on the farm.

She was muttering to herself in Maltese as she entered further into the dank darkness of the house. She turned at a point to whisper to him that, strictly speaking, she wasn’t allowed male visitors, so he had to be quiet. He nodded but she didn’t see him; she had already turned her head to stare along at the corridor they were advancing into. She turned left, right into a staircase he hadn’t noticed in the darkness, and started climbing quickly. He stepped behind her, every footfall creating a little cloud of dust as he ascended.

“Doesn’t your landlady clean up?!” he whispered, forgetting his promise. She turned around and shushed him. By now they were at the top of the stairs, she was unlocking a room on their right, and he was being pushed into it.

Much cleaner and brighter than the rest of the house, her small room had a kitchenette, a bed, and a window looking out into the street they had just traipsed through. Lighting the room were a string of candles all around the place (that had lit themselves the minute Maria stepped over the threshold) and a single light bulb, hanging lazily from the mouldy ceiling.

“Really, Maria, you deserve better living arrangements than this.”

“I live where I can pay.”

He shrugged, not really wanting to argue with a witch, and pointed at the sofa. “May I sit?”

“Yes, you may.”

While he settled down, she moved around the small space, light-fingered touches bringing the apartment to life. He swore that she was making her room brighter just by moving around it, her skirt swishing about her; she touched a radio and switched it on, placed her hand on the kitchen table which immediately cleared itself of dust and clutter, and finally held up a candle that had refused to take flame and made it shine the brightest out of all of them. She turned to him, eyes shining in the flickering flames.

“Bravery?”

He nodded, about to speak, but was cut short by a loud, barking laugh that she let out, turning to look around her cupboards and kitchen counters.

“You people, you all think you’re so smart. You think that if you pay us enough we can give you anything you want, any sort of potion you want. It’s... it’s... you think we can just make anyone feel a feeling they don’t already have?”

“Aren’t your people the ones who invented love potions?” he asked, his finger poised to point the accusation her way, but before he could, she had stabbed the knife into a chopping board, turning to look at him through her black, tangled mess of hair.

“And you never hear about a happy marriage that comes from a love potion, let me tell you.”

She turned back to her knife, and started to mutter under her breath again. Before he could tell her to speak up, he felt a chill pass over the apartment, and realised that she wasn’t complaining, but casting. Around her, a blue glow started to pulse, red lights flying around her hands and head and disappearing the minute they extended even a meter away from the blue aura that was slowly growing. From the counter, the cupboards, the kitchen sink, items were slowly flying to her and lying themselves waste to her knife as she chopped and threw them into a jar. With a flick of her wrist, the stove lit itself; with another, a pot full of water floated onto the flame and sat obediently. She turned to Ian, her eyes half closed and her words still tumbling out with her breaths, low and menacing, a language he didn’t (and wouldn’t ever) dare understand.

She stood in front of him, holding the jar under his chin, and in between breaths she looked into his widened eyes and said ‘breathe’.

He sucked in a large breath of air and exhaled from his mouth. He saw his breath, a blue mist, hit the jar, and slowly turn green as it mingled with his breath. And slowly, her glow too turned green, the red lights disappearing as she moved back to the pot and placed the jar inside it. She exhaled a few words one last time and moved away, looking back at him with tired, brightly-lit eyes.

“Now, we wait.”

“For?”

“The potion to be ready, take in the spell fully.”

“And that takes how long?”

“A few minutes.”

“Oh, that sounds alright.”

She shrugged, sitting on the other end of the sofa and angling her face away from him. The light from the window fell on her back, giving a light sparkle to the hair she had probably tried so hard to look after that morning. Her hands twiddled unconsciously in her lap as she stared at the floor, and he reached a hand out to her, trying to convey a sense of gentleness he wasn't used to expressing anymore.

“Why do you never look at me for longer than a few seconds?”

She looked at his outstretched hand and took it in her own two small ones, running her thumbs over the gently marred lines on his palm.

“Your hands are very soft, but they're a lot like a farmer's hands.”

“No surprise there.”

“Your life lines are so bright.”

“I didn't know you were a part-time psychic,” he laughed, and she cracked a smile, looking up at his eyes.

“Your people can be so rude to us sometimes.”

“You're rude to us back.”

“We are the locals, we're allowed to be rude to the outsiders.”

He jerked his hand away, feeling some sort of chill creeping up his spine. Deciding to believe in the magic in the air causing it, he jerked his head towards the boiling potion.

“Ready?”

“Yes, it should be.” She flicked her fingers at the stove and the fire switched off. The jar slid out of the water and flew into her waiting hand. The colour had changed to a soft pink. Ian frowned.

“That colour doesn't look very... brave.”

“You men and your colours. Pink is the colour of women, who are much stronger than men, for sure.”

He raised his eyebrows, electing to say nothing again. She sniffed the potion and her shoulder twitched as she made a face that seemed to say “Eh, good enough.” Handing him the jar, she poked it under his bottom lip.

“Drink.”

He obeyed, almost dropping the jar and spitting out whatever was in the potion before he even got half way. But he was a soldier, and damn it, he would drink it and prove himself a man. When he was done, he hastily shoved the jar back into her lap as he got up and ran to the sink to splash his mouth with water.

“Why did that taste like fish?!”

“It’s the only thing I had in my kitchen,” she sighed, crossing her legs in her seat and nodding. “Did it work? Do you feel braver?”

“No, just stupid for trusting a mediocre witch who doesn’t even have the right ingredients to make something.”

She looked away from him, running a hand through her hair and covering her face with it.

“Fine.”

“Look, I’ll pay you for it still, but I’m almost certain that that did nothing for me.”

“How are you so sure?”

“Because, Maria, the last time you gave me a potion, the effect was instantaneous.”

“A potion for virility works instantly. Bravery is something you feel in your stomach, not a feeling in your skin and blood.”

He dug into his pocket, found a few coins and dumped them on the kitchen counter, wiping at his lips with the back of his hand.

“There has to be a better witch in this city somewhere. Someone you report back to, like a Commander or an Officer or something like that for you witchy folk.”

“Well...”

She didn’t seem to want to answer at first, but he had just made up his mind to walk out back into the street when she looked up and played with the frayed edges of her sleeve.

“There is a woman who fixes clothes, makes them as well.”

“A seamstress?”

“Yes, that’s the word. She lives here, in Valletta. Find her, Rita, and she will help you find your bravery again.”

"I never had any to lose in the first place." With one last fleeting glance, he was gone.

The streets were just as crowded as when he had walked through them not fifteen minutes ago. Alone now, he saw the looks people gave him: the looks of apprehension the locals shot at him and the looks of solidarity from the others in uniform. He felt himself, the outsider stuck in a place he didn't call home, in clothing he could never fill, with a responsibility he felt too weak to bear. He exited into the main road, the hub of the city, and saw the whole place opening up to him as it always did every time he walked through there. Valletta held a certain power over him that he could never place, but the city had grown on him, and the thought of leaving with his companions in a week brought the seamstress back to mind in full focus.

He sighed and turned around in his spot, trying to think where a seamstress could possibly keep shop in this city. Realising that he didn't have enough time to waste anymore, he reached into the lapels of his jacket and found the button that Maria had charmed weeks ago, telling him to use it when he really needed it.

Rubbing it between his index finger and thumb, thinking 'Rita the seamstress' over and over again, the button started to grow hot and vibrate slightly between his fingers. It burned pain through his thumb, and he dropped it, staring at the mark on his skin that was slowly forming into a triangle, pulsing strangely as he started to walk in the first direction he could think of, towards the city gates. It seared pain through his thumb as he passed the Cathedral's street and he felt his foot take a step back and angle towards that road. The pain coming from the triangle was slowly subsiding as he moved in the direction it pulsed least in, and soon the pain had left completely as he stood in front of a weathered green door, paint peeling and door knocker much duller than the others in the street. He grabbed at the thing—a large, heavy Poseidon holding his trident, standing in a clam—and knocked once, twice, but no more.

Almost instantaneously, the door was opened by a woman whom Ian thought resembled a walnut. She was tan, with white hair that sprang all over her head and settled around her shoulders like a cloud. Her wrinkles were clearly those caused by too much exposure to the sun, but her hands looked as well-tended to as the crops he'd tried to raise when he was younger. She smiled at him, and he smiled back, pointing at a small snag in his uniform that he'd only noticed that morning.

"I need something fixed."

Inside, she fingered the sleeve while he looked around her living room, standing completely still. The mirrors were all shimmering, as if they led to some other inaccessible world; the walls seemed to hum with an energy he couldn't pinpoint; the house smelled of lavender. Without speaking a word, Rita put a finger to his temple and pressed lightly, making soft noises to herself and nodding.

"You want to be brave?"

“Yes.”

“I can help. It is a strong emotion, not very easy to make, but I can.”

“You can?”

“*Iva*.”

“I went to Maria, the bar maid. She said-”

“Maria, ha!” she scoffed. He looked down at his sleeve, noticing it had already been mended, though he didn’t remember her having a needle or thread anywhere near his skin. “She’s still a little girl. She has no idea of what magic really is. You need good magic. Powerful magic. She does not have that.”

“She’s given me spells before.”

“Yes, simple spells, spells any witch can do...”

She had grabbed a medallion of some sort and breathed on it. He swore he could hear the crashing of the waves emanate from the walls as she started to speak in the same tongue Maria used before, only this old woman had a finesse to her that Maria would only acquire after decades of spell casting. This old woman commanded the words on her tongue as if they were made to please her, not her to serve them. She didn’t run out of breath, merely kept speaking at the same volume, same pace, as she closed her eyes and rocked slightly in place. He smelt the sea, felt the floor rock beneath him as she held the medallion up, and then suddenly it stopped, and he was lying on the floor, the medallion burning on his chest as he lay, spread-eagled, and feeling thirsty.

“What was that?”

“Magic of power, Ian McNamara.”

She mispronounced his last name but he didn’t really mind. He was on his feet within seconds and she was brushing down his shirt from the dust he had gathered. She smiled at him, putting a hand to his hair, and he realised how much shorter she was than him.

“You remind me of my grandson. Very nice young boy. Died in the war. Had hair like yours—black.”

He smiled warmly at her and she patted his cheek before pointing at the medallion.

“That works like the button you used to find me. Rub and it will make you brave.”

“For how long?”

“As long as you need.”

Two minutes later, Ian was walking through the streets of Valletta again, his hand clutched firmly around the medallion. He started to slowly make his way back to the main road, and he found himself gripping the letter he had hidden in his pocket that morning. His father had fallen unexpectedly ill and wanted to see his son again one last time before he passed. He looked everywhere as he walked, taking in the sounds, smells, and colours of the city he had grown to love more than his beautiful Belfast. The medallion had cooled down, and he shoved it into his pocket next to the letter.

He sniffed, realising he had arrived at the sight of the fallen opera house. He looked at it, feeling like he should have long abandoned the uniform and everything it brought with it. He should have burned it and run off with a local girl, found a field he could tend crops in and lived the rest of his life as a British ex-patriate. He would have faked his own death, sent letters to his family telling them of their young son's untimely demise. And yet something kept holding him back.

Reaching his hand back to his pocket, he fished out the medallion and looked at it, taking a deep breath before rubbing his thumb over the surface over and over again. He wasn't even sure what he needed bravery for anymore.