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## THE HANGED MAN



The Hanged Man dangled precariously from his right ankle rather than his neck, which would have been more prudent, not to mention effective. His clothing from another time suggested someone of noble, or at least better-than-average birth. It was difficult to tell if the expression on his face was a grimace of pain or a sneer of indignation or perhaps just a hefty dose of stomach upset. The tree he was affixed to appeared vibrant and well and had all the classic fittings of age and wisdom. Indeed, even the neatly tied noose seemed to be in good spirits, if such a thing can be said of a rope.

The Hanged Man does not necessarily mean death,” said the card-reading witch sitting opposite me. The lilt

of her words was unusual, suggesting a different generation rather than a different heritage. Slowly, she unfurled a single, spindly finger from her tightly closed fist and scratched it over the card's worn surface with the sort of confidence that came from extreme familiarity. "The Hanged Man is the card of the paradox. A great change is coming. Immense joy will be had, but not until an equal sacrifice is made."

I sighed inwardly, for as with everything else in this bloody room, that made absolutely no sense whatsoever. "But what can I sacrifice that is the equivalent of death?"

"You are not listening," cackled the witch. Her voice sounded like feet over broken glass. "I said death might not be the intent of this card. But since you asked, death is equal to death, and so is life."

I sighed and took a moment to wonder why I'd bothered to come here—to waste these precious few remaining hours with this shriveled piece of jerky rather than with a fine red of either the liquid or the female kind. Either would have been fine. "But to give my life or my death is to defeat the purpose," I said, which was the truth. The two were one and the same. If I were to offer either, none of this would matter for I'd be dead.

The witch had the audacity to shrug, as if my life meant that little to her. "While it may be true that your mortality

is one thing you can give, it is not all that you have.”

With mighty, hard won effort, I resisted the urge to slap my heavily bejewelled hand across the witch’s cryptic mouth. “That is not true,” I growled, my frustration trumping my good breeding. I needed answers, not this hog swill.

“The Hanged Man desires a sacrifice from within, child,” she said, tapping her hairless temple in case I was unsure of the term *within*. “The sacrifice will not be easy; simplicity is not the point. What do you have that you hold dear but serves little purpose? That should be the first to go.” Her eyes were rheumy with age, which gave them a strange vagueness, but still, she managed to look at me as if I were the stupidest animal on the planet.

I turned each of my rings round and round my fingers in turn, wondering what in the name of the Devil I had that I didn’t need. I shifted my position on the uncomfortable chair, my seat bones starting to ache. The chair’s soft wood jeered in a way that sounded like either laughter or ass music.

The tiny, ill-lit room was every bit as shoddy as the woman who owned it. It stank of mold and unwashed bodies—or dead ones. The embers in the small fireplace did little to illuminate anything, which was something I was not entirely ungrateful for. Full light would have meant I’d have to look at the details of the witch’s

craggy face. That likely would have turned my stomach.

“I don’t understand the question,” I said eventually. “I’ve already given up so much. I simply can’t do with any less.” Besides, I had come here to gain information, not to give something away.

“Vanity, haughtiness, pride, pompousness... Who knows. You must look at yourself from the viewpoint of another.” She glared at me, only the look was not angry. Her eyes glinted with either laughter or age, I really couldn’t tell which. “Let us look at another card. Perhaps that will give us further insight.”