

Eren Tales

THE ELEVENTH TALE

Fortune

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'That house – that place – it holds danger. Pay me for the warning, child.'

You shouldn't stay in that house.'

The woman was old and she smelled of liquorice. Elhadi scrunched up his nose.

'What?'

She stepped forward, the dust of the street swirling round her skirt. She reached out for him, bony hand, sharp nails, and he backed away a little.

'Read your fortune?' she said. 'Tell your fate. Pennies, I ask. Nothing. You must.'

Rita laughed nervously. She was standing behind him, and she prodded his back. 'Go on, Hadi. Dare you.'

'Shut up,' said Elhadi.

'Double dare you!'

'That's not how that works,' he said. 'I never dared you. I didn't.'

The woman shook herself, her jewellery rattling, her earrings swinging and catching the light.

'That house – that place – it holds danger. It holds oblivion. Pay me for the warning, child.'

Her eyes were pale, watery in the afternoon light. Her skirt was red and purple, thick and old, and she moved quickly on her feet, reaching out again. Elhadi leapt backwards and tried to laugh, but his eyes didn't leave hers.

'Get away,' he said. 'Fortunes aren't real. Come on, Rita.'

'Don't tell her my name, she'll curse me!'

The woman sighed, spat on the ground, rubbed it into the dust with her heel.

'You're moving!' she shouted, cupping her hands to her mouth as they hurried down the street. 'Moving to a place of dust and ink and echoes. I know this. I see it! Fair warning, little ones. The new house is a bad place. That's all you're getting for your rudeness. Hmph!'

Her words were swallowed by the noise of the sellers, the hawkers, the tourists and their cameras. Rita blew a raspberry and poked Elhadi's ribs.

'Madwomen!' she said. 'Old hags. Witches! Ooh, she'll hunt you, Hadi, for turning your back.'

He tried to laugh. 'Me? What about you! You can't blow raspberries at a witch. Anyway, she wasn't a witch. She was just trying to beg. Everyone knows that.'

They passed the banana seller, the watchmaker, the tat shop that drew in the foreigners. Rita watched him, a smile on her lips.

‘Not scared, are you? Want to go back, get that fortune? I’ll pay. Ooh, maybe you’ll get boils! Or she’ll tell you that you’re going to die at sea!’

‘And I can pay for your fortune, and she’ll tell you she’s you from the future, no husband or family or money or job!’

She poked him again. ‘If she’s me, she’d have said. I wouldn’t let myself end up like that.’

‘You shouldn’t say things like that,’ said Elhadi. It was all a joke, though. Everyone knew that. Still, how had she *known*?

‘I have to go home for dinner,’ said Rita. She pointed down a side street. The air smelled of rice and spices and sugar. ‘You going to Rafael’s later?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Rafael’s. You going?’

Elhadi’s mind was too full, buzzing like a nest. She hadn’t known. She couldn’t.

‘Hey,’ said Rita.

‘What?’

He looked back, but the woman was gone. Rita tapped her foot on the ground. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Rafael’s? Sure. Yeah. I’ll go.’

For a moment Rita looked like she might say something, then she sighed and punched his shoulder. ‘You weirdo,’ she said. ‘See you later.’

‘Yeah. Sure. In a bit.’

He watched her walk off, running her hands along the fences and rails. She turned the corner and was gone.

Elhadi began to run.

Why hadn’t he told her? It was too hard – he kept putting it off. He’d known for weeks. *Months*. And now it was too late. He had to tell her – if she found out from someone else, she’d kill him, she’d be hurt – but every time he wanted to tell her, the words stuck in his throat, and he just couldn’t do it.

Rita, I’m moving. We’re moving away. Dad has a new job. We can’t hang out anymore.

And now the woman said that he shouldn't – but witches weren't *real*. Fortunes didn't exist. He knew that. He knew it. The old beggar's words echoed in his head, pounding as loud as his feet in the dust.

You shouldn't stay in that house.

His chest hurt. He was running too hard, but something made him keep going – something mad and angry and hot. He raced up the driveway, slamming into the front door. It rocked open and he fell forward, slamming his palm on the floor.

'Elhadi!'

His father was frozen in surprise, a suitcase in his hand, another already packed and standing in the hallway.

'Where have you been? What are you doing? Your mother needs help. Everything has to be packed! We're moving tomorrow, Elhadi. There's no time for games, boy.'

Elhadi stood up, his hand throbbing. 'Dad, 'he panted, 'the new house – I heard – I mean, she said –'

'You'll get to see it tomorrow, I promise. Come on, help your mother. Is everything OK? What's the matter?'

The woman's words filled his ears. Rita's laugh. The trunks were already packed.

'N-nothing,' he said. 'Nothing, I'm being silly. Where's Mum? I'll help, I promise.'

He stared at the suitcase in the hallway, his heart racing, but he swallowed.

He was being silly. That was all. The new house would be fine. He just had to tell Rita. He reached for the case and picked it up. It was lighter than it looked.

'Fortunes aren't real,' said Elhadi. The house around him was silent.