

Asphalt streets. Concrete walls. Chain link fences. Metal towers faced with glass.

It had been a long time since I visited. The old castle was long gone. In its place stood this town, full of modern conveniences and the high technology of a world that had moved on since my heyday.

I was not entirely sure whether I approved.

It is in my nature to weave a web of half-truths and partial statements. I piece together bits of truth into a whole. It is what I am.

Likewise, I always fulfill my word. It is what I am. The notion of doing otherwise is inconceivable. My word is my bond, and I could not break it.

But neither of these is the whole of my nature.

My song had been a simple one, back in the day. Treat Hinzelmännchen with respect, and you shall be rewarded with kindness and convenience. Your house shall prosper, your crops shall flourish and your herds be fruitful. Anger Hinzelmännchen and reprisal shall come swift and sure, merciless and pitiless. Drive Hinzelmännchen from your home, and his place shall be taken by misfortune and evil luck.

A pity that they hadn't listened. A pity that others hadn't learned from their example.

Walking through the streets, I was not bothered. The humans did not even notice I was there. It was simply done, not even a thing of magic and mystery. It was merely a matter of walking in the places no one was looking, moving with a confidence such that they did not question. A quiet sort of invisibility that could be seen but was not remarked upon, a sight soon forgotten.

A maiden once asked to see my true face, and I showed her, though she did not understand the truth of what she saw. She still saw enough and more than enough to convince the master of Hudemühlen Castle to drive me forth with iron and fire and the prayers of his church. Iron held less terror for me than for many of the fae, and fire held none at all, nor did the holy words of any god. But I went all the same. It is not the way of kobolds to linger where we are not wanted.

I reached the part of the park they called Animal World, and with a brush of my hand I persuaded the fence to open long enough to let me through. I stepped into the enclosure and no one noticed or commented, though the sight of a child entering the home of tigers should have been an alarming one.

One of the white tigers that lived in this enclosure made as if to bite me, incensed at my invasion of its territory. Then it drew back in confusion, perplexed by my odd scent, which did not match that of the child it had expected.

I smiled and stroked the beast, its fur smooth and sleek under my fingers. We were similar, in a way. We had certain attributes in common.

In a way, I almost regretted what I was about to do to it.

I looked out at the street again and saw a child watching me, her eyes wide and fascinated. Children were often less easy to fool with simple tricks of attitude and demeanor than their elders, but that wasn't why she saw me and remembered.

I grinned at her and waved. It took only a little magic to push her into walking in my direction, her interest and excitement overcoming caution and hesitation. A little more was enough to cloud the vision of those around her, to keep their attention elsewhere for the few critical moments.

The child reached the fence and found a hole in it, just large enough for her to squeeze through. She hesitated, looking at the tigers, but I waved her on with one hand and caressed the tiger's neck with the other, and she continued on.

She reached the tiger and reached out to pet it. She ran her hand over its fur once, twice, her expression delighted beyond words.

I relaxed my hold on the adults at the same time as I tweaked the mind of the tiger. The girl's father looked over just in time to see the cat bite his daughter's neck, sinking its teeth deep into her flesh.

He screamed and ran towards us, but found no hole in the fence to let him through. He looked up, thinking to climb over it, but the razor wire discouraged.

Ah, what an exquisite torture this was. A veritable feast for every sense. A thousand thousand details of body language, shock and horror written in every line of every person watching. The child's own expression was betrayed, upset, though the pain hadn't yet registered. Even the tiger seemed horrified at what it had done; it was a peaceful beast, and would not have hurt a hair on her head without my intervention.

The moment seemed to last a thousand years, the first drops of blood sparkling as they caught the light, the red nectar a lovely crimson against the girl's white dress and white skin.

Then the eternity shattered, and time began again. The tiger dropped the child, mewling in piteous confusion at its own actions. The father screamed helplessly, gripping the fence tightly; other sightseers were screaming as well, some fleeing, others trying to help and unable to do so. Park officials came running, as horrified as anyone else. The details of word choice, volume and inflection, the way they moved, the white knuckles of the father's grasp, all added to the delicate bouquet of the scene. The child herself could not scream, her throat being too badly damaged for that. This was intentional, another small artistic touch; the quiet whimpers, the gurgling sound as she tried to breathe, the soft patter of blood on the grass, it was all a lovely counterpoint to the screaming and chaos outside the enclosure. Noisy, chaotic life contrasted beautifully with quiet, peaceful death.

Scáthach told me to come and assist her with a battle she was planning. Mention was made, at that meeting, of my actions. Of the things I had done to the residents of the castle, after they drove me away. Of the fact that I was, as a kobold, not supposed to return to a home from which I had been cast out.

She did not precisely threaten me with exposure for my actions. That would have been unbearably rude, and the Maiden of Midnight was not foolish enough to be overtly rude. But mention was made, very deliberate mention.

My fellows knew of only a small portion of what I had done to that maid and her friends, afterward. That had still been enough to earn five hundred years of exile. If the Court were to learn of the rest, of all the things I did, and how close I had walked to the crumbling edge of my word and my bond, then they would kill me.

I had done things during my exile as well, things such as this. They had condemned me to boredom, idleness, and inactivity. If the Court found out that I had amused myself in my exile, they would not be so kind and merciful as to kill me.

The Lady of the Isle of Shadows did not truly know the punishments that waited for me if that happened. Who can hope to know, without having experienced them? And Scáthach, it was impossible to deny, was more inclined to the infliction than the experience of agonies.

But she had some idea of what would happen. That made exposure a very credible threat, and she well knew it.

I stood and watched as park officials came in to see to the child. The tigers let them pass without question or interference, but they were still too late to save the child. She bled her life out on my feet, with the rich smells of blood and sun-warm grass tickling her nose.

I watched her breathe her last, then turned my attention to the crowd watching. The tension, the fear and anger and horror, was still running high, delicious and heady. I nudged it a little here and there, making sure that people were looking where I wanted them to, stoking emotions higher and wilder. A mild effort on my part was enough to ruin any hope of reconciliation. My influence would wane when I left or they did, and emotions would calm with distance and time, but words once said could not be unsaid.

Scáthach thought to blackmail me and force me to do her will, but she made three simple mistakes.

The first was that I didn't fear the Court's reprisal. On the contrary, I wanted them to come hunting me. What fun, what excitement, what a thrill that chase would be!

As expected, none of the humans noticed that I was standing in the tiger enclosure beside the child. None of them saw me as I decided that my work here was complete and left. There were humans with cameras watching now, many of them, but it was not difficult to ensure that I was not in their photographs. They looked right, and I stood to the left; they looked left and I slipped to the right. It was a trick I had practiced for a thousand years.

Once out of the crowd, I turned my steps towards the old foundations. My clothing was bloody, but that was why I had always favored red velvet; it would not show the blood until it was dried, and I did not intend to stay here that long.

The castle was long gone, but the echoes of its presence could be seen by those who knew how to look. I stood nearby and looked at it for a time, reflecting on the things I had done there, and the things I had caused to be done. When I left, I started a fire in a small house in passing, dark flames dancing from my fingertips to its walls. Within an hour the building would be consumed entirely.

Her second mistake was in thinking that I would forgive her presumption. That was not in my nature, any more than the breaking of oaths. I did not forgive, not anything, not ever. I paid all my debts, soon or late. She should have known that. These people had cast me out and driven me away more than four hundred years ago, and still I punished them for it. They had driven Hinzelmann from their home, and misfortune and evil luck took his place. I can go by many names when it pleases me.