

Crooked Good

By Fairuza Razak

“Hey, you there!” the shopkeeper yelled, pointing at me as I stuffed mangos into my shirt. “STOP!”

“Sorry, buddy, gotta eat to live and steal to eat, I’m afraid.” I tipped an imaginary hat at the angered man, breaking into a light backward run. Deftly stealing a loaf of bread and a whole chicken from one of the shelves, I sprinted across the village’s beach.

“Come back here, thief!” His voice faded as I placed more distance between myself and him.

With an arm securing the stolen goods underneath my ragged shirt, I slid through a gap between the dense mangrove trees on the shoreline. The occasional waves licking my feet as they slowed their steps across the sand, I heard a feeble squeak. Stashing the food under a wooden plank, I followed where the noise was coming from.

My heart felt as if it was being strangled in my chest, but my muscles urged me to sprint toward a murky area of the fishermen beach. Entangled in a nest of fishing equipment and deposited litter was a tiny sea turtle, moving its legs in a vain attempt to wade through the saltwater.

I landed beside the trashed spot, scraping my knees against the coarse sand. “*Shit!*” Softly, I untwined the plastic bag and net that was trapping the turtle. With the swift hands of a person who’d practiced thievery for years, the baby turtle was free.

When it squawked more, I gingerly cupped my hands around its rough reptilian body, clambered to my feet and to a cleaner part of the shore. “There you go, little turtle,” I mumbled, smiling fondly. I placed the turtle down on the edge of the coastline. Pride swelled in my chest I was shaking with happiness as I watched the little green body swim into the ocean.

I was quiet for a moment, staring at the horizon where the turtle had been swept by a sun-gilded wave. I was reminded of ten years ago when a Belgian scientist first came to this beach, carrying expensive-looking instruments in his bag. He’d asked me if I knew my way in the beach, and I’d said yes.

“Do mangroves grow here anymore?” he spoke in stuttering Indonesian, inspecting a shoreline where mangroves had used to grow on.

“No, sir,” I said.

The scientist laughed harshly. “You drink ground water? Is it salty?”

“They weren’t before, but now, yes.”

“Well, mangroves provide shelter to marine life, purify water, and protect land.”

“Really?” I suddenly didn’t want to steal from him. “Why do they take their wood for fire and leaves for their livestock?”

“Simply lack of education perhaps. They don’t bother restoring the mangroves.” He scowled, glaring at the instruments he held in his hand. “The ocean’s acidification’s risen.” He turned to me. “You live near here, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, I need you to help me record some things while I’m staying here.”

I gaped at him. “Me?” Who would trust a thief?

He gave me a pocket camera that may be worth lots.

Three months later of accompanying the scientist with his research, he instructed me, “Keep doing what you’ve been doing with me. I’ll be back next dry season.”

“A-Are you sure?”

“Your eagerness to learn about nature assures me. You’re a good man. By photographing the fish, we’ll be able to see how the calcium carbonate deficiency affects the growth of fish here.”

The next year the scientist returned, he appeared pleasantly stunned to see young mangroves budding from the ground, spreading five miles from the shoreline. “You planted mangroves?”

I beamed, handing him the camera he’d left me. “Yeah.”

Studying the photos on the camera, he grinned. “Thanks.” His grin faltered. “My suspicions are confirmed. The fish size and population’s growing smaller.”

I drooped at the news. “Will the mangroves help them grow better?”

“Yes, it will.” That helped me smile again. “Where did you find the mangrove seeds, by the way?”

“I stole it,” I said, grimacing sheepishly.

“Oh.” He didn’t seem pleased that I was stealing, but his eyes softened with understanding. “I’ll bring you more seeds next year, so you won’t have to steal.”

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The latest entertainment for tonight was a newspaper I'd snatched from a local store in the village. To put it lightly, I was enraged by some of its headlines.

I cursed loudly, jumping to my feet, clutching the crumpled newspaper as I took in the disgusting words of a so-called nature-loving journalist. I pulled at my hair in shock. "I can't believe this!"

"“A raise in salary for *decorative fish capturers*?! ‘High demand for seafood leads to rarity of large fish’?! ‘More oil shipment demanded over the country’?” Scorching fumes escaped his nostrils as he read the last one. “Oh God, endemic airlines delivering dolphins to traveling circuses?! Those government shitheads have lost their frigging mind!”

I heard a snap over the warm fire's crackling. I looked over my shoulder; I scowled to find another nasty child trying to steal my mangroves' wood. *Again.*

I snarled and grabbed a small knife. "Go away! Don't you know mangroves are important?!" I brandished the knife at him, frightening the boy enough to provoke him to drop his bundle of wood.

Gilded in firelight, the waves rushing between the mangroves exposed a school of silver fish. I smiled, because over time, through the reports from the scientist, I knew the fish living in my mangroves were slowly growing in size.

I remembered what the scientist said: "People protect what they love."

Now, feeling the fierce thudding in my chest, I knew it was true.

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The scientist's words "Share what you have, no matter the quantity," motivated me to become a teacher. No one would consider me.

Luckily, a businessman was building a library in the village. He, overlooking my unforgivable past, hired me to teach village children about nature.

"If a thief can change and protect nature," I told the kids, smiling proudly, "why can't you?"