



S.W.A.

Save the World Academy
Part II:
The CROCODILE'S SMILE

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THE CROCODILE

Her name was Boadicea, a caramel coloured girl with a shock of naturally frizzy red and golden hair.

A long white and pink dress she had received from mother recently for her thirteenth birthday hid her short plump body, ending off oddly with un-matching bright red shoes and pink socks.

Some days the hair would be wrapped in a pair of pig-tails, yet mainly she wore it loose, the wild strands enjoying the freedom she granted around chubby innocent cheeks and brownish-yellow eyes. On a leash behind her was Baudelaire, her albino crocodile.

The day was overcast with a thick warm fog making the hour impossible to guess.

Sweat dripped from her brother, Titus, whose blue dungarees were as badly stained as his white and sun-damaged skin. The seventeen-year-old was returning from the swampy shore.

‘Got another one of dem, Bo,’ he held a fishing spear tipped with fresh blood proudly, ‘he by the pits with Granna. She wanna give him to Sirius.’

Granna always wanted to give things to Sirius down in his hole. It made Boadicea jealous of the old monster. Yet that was her nature, always spoil and always jealous.

Bo recalled how covetous she became when Granna spoke of giving presents to her older sister, Claudia. *She don’t deserve it. Why can’t I inherit these things?*

It didn’t matter anymore though. Claudia was long gone, dead almost six months. No sister to skip and sing along the wells with anymore. Bo missed her for that alone.

The girl tugged at Baudelaire and he followed with a hiss, the head tilting opposite with each webbed front foot that stepped.

Baudelaire had to wear a muzzle since he attacked her brother, Clemly, a few months ago.

‘Nile Croc is too wild, Bo,’ her mother, Granna, once said, ‘you picked one dat don’t wanna be tamed. Albinos don’t live as long and is unpredictable. Don’t grow as big neither.’

Whether there was truth to that Bo did not know, only that she favoured the albino croc more than all the others they kept in their menagerie of reptiles. He was small for his age and too plump for his bones.

Baudelaire wasn't a complete albino, more a very dirty white and yellow, still retaining many of his Nile Crocodile dark-striped features. His teeth ran in sizes large, medium and small, sharp, deadly and random along his upper and lower jaw. His snout did not look as flat as the other crocs, Bo admired. *He's different like me.*

Claudia had chosen a legavaan, a thick white throated monitor lizard that sat on her shoulder lazily when she lived. Watching it swim in the swampy lakes made Bo anxious and bored, the serrated tail whipping in the water. Charles was its name. When Claudia died it did not take long for her pet to follow her, unable to catch prey in the wilds with years of being fed meaty scraps by Claudia's dark hands.

Baudelaire wasn't like that. Every now and again he fought in the crocodile pits for his food, a trait unheard of for albino crocs, Granna told her. Though smaller in size he made up for it in speed, something Bo noticed as he would cunningly steal the dead whole chickens from starving reptiles bigger than him, eating alone on the banks, ever watching from thick yellow and black eyes.

He growled behind her as he waddled over the weathered wooden porch, his hefty arms working methodically.

'I know, I know, Baude.'

The white croc hated the muzzle. When no one else was around she removed it. Baudelaire never bit her. Where most would see malice in the reptilian eyes, Bo saw kindness and love. The beast slept faithfully beside her even when she hugged or poked him playfully. Like a cat he was often bringing her gifts of dead possums or chickens.

The walkways to the pits were an old grey wooden deck with occasional logs serving as posts. Once in a while lanterns would be hung on them for predictably foggy days to guide while walking as one misstep would land you in the water where all kinds of creatures lived.

Bo paid the slithering swamp around her no mind. She had grown up surrounded by snakes and reptiles. They were her friends.

The haze of a lantern up ahead was reassuring, though Bo believed she could navigate the wooden decks with her eyes closed. The mist was thick as grey green smoke and when she turned to her pet she noticed his long tail was almost hidden in the foggy veil that surrounded them.

Boards creaked with each step, the sounds of toads and water rippling about her until she came to the stony step that gave way to a grey dry shore.

The mangled trees held vines and leaves like tattered clothing, worms and tree snakes weaving about the purple branches.

A praying mantis sat on one tall black mushroom in the fat blades of grass that poked out intermittently. Bo thought it odd until a gecko attacked and ate the insect. *The reptiles and lizards rule here.*

Five stone wells appeared from the mist. *The pits*, she knew. How they came to be by her home she did not know or care. A certainty was they led to the deep caves in the ground. They led to Sirius.

Granna stood with her back hunched by the fourth pit, picking at small white mushrooms that grew between the slate and limestone rocks. *The white are edible, the others poisonous*, Bo was taught.

Bo's mother always appeared a frail old woman at first glance, but when she spoke her skinny black arms would dance about animatedly and the wrinkled face would stretch in different ways. Teeth were missing from her slack jaw and a knobby chin bore a wart and some thick greying black hairs. One eye sat lower and larger than the other, the bags sagging so low that the pink beneath her eyeballs showed.

Her skin was crisscrossed with lines like the skin on knuckles and her wiry silver hair was hidden beneath a dark crimson bonnet. The dress was a dusty and furry old thing that itched Bo if she went too near it.

No one knew Granna's age, but some claimed she had mothered half the folk that lived about the pits and that was well over two hundred.

'Dem boys catch one snooping, Bo,' Granna cackled, her accent much thicker than all the others, 'dat be da first in a moon's turn.' Granna collected her black basket full of fungus and walked on with Bo following. 'Maybe give dis one to Sirius, eh?'

Granna always went on about giving tokens to Sirius down in the well.

'Great honour to give tings to him down dere,' she would often say, 'he rewards dem sacrifices. You fling a baby in dere and good tings will come your way. A baby worth ten good tings. If you sacrifice yoself, dat worth a million.'

Boadicea didn't believe though. *He didn't give me a million good things, not that I couldn't get myself.*

Her brothers, Scrag and Marlt, were tugging at a boy's blonde locks, bullying him when the old lady and little girl approached. Scrag and Marlt were always dirty with uneven teeth and unruly hair, often wearing the same clothes for weeks without washing.

The boy they tormented was dressed terribly, Bo observed, wearing a strange black suit with a thin gold line across the chest, some areas padded like armour. He appeared overly clean and his hair long and shapely.

'Talk! What are ya doin' down here?' Marlt kicked the blonde boy. There was no answer.

‘You know he can’t talk, idjit!’ Scrag scuffed him on the back of the head, ‘we used a poison spear on him.’ Scrag handed Granna an odd dark trinket.

‘A watch,’ she stared deeply with one eye.

The round face of the device was vacant until Granna held the back of it against the boy’s neck. The display came alive in a brilliant blue.

Granna launched it into the nearest pit, spitting, ‘cursed it is. All kinds of witchcraft dese children do. Da watch talk to ya, don’t it?’

The blonde boy did not answer, but looked through drugged and beaten brown eyes.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘we give dis one to Sirius. Marlt, drag him to da well. Scraggy, bring Gran Pappy, he wanna see dis.’

Scrag did as he was bid, his baggy trousers slapping away into the grey fog, the faint sound of mud squelching on his shoeless feet as he ran until he reached the boards of the walkways.

Baudelaire growled, unsettling Granna slightly.

The well wasn’t much farther along, tracing beside the rippling water banks that were fresh with dark reeds and slime.

Where the pits had been modest, the well was a massive opening large enough for an elephant to fit through. The stones surrounding the well lay unsettled from where men and beasts alike had kicked and fought not to be thrown in.

Peering over the side, Boadicea could not see the bottom, but knew the fall to be so high and dangerous that some would die instantly when their necks snapped on the rocky wet floor.

That is what happened to Claudia. That day she sang and skipped around the well.

‘Sirus,’ Granna yelled down the depths and the name echoed about the rocky shaft, ‘we bring a sacrifice for ya. In ya honour!’

Granna inspected the boy’s eyes, pinching his cheeks with her cold crone hands.

‘He tainted,’ Bo squeaked, ‘Sirus won’t like him.’

‘Da poison only works on man, Bo,’ Granna told her, letting the head drop. ‘A beast da size of Sirus won’t even feel a tingle when he swallows.’

The truth of it was none of them knew the size of Sirus. The monster had lived in his cave for well over fifty years, long before she was born.

Every four years the biggest croc in the pens would be sacrificed to the pit in vain hopes to replace the old beast.

Last year it was Remy, a five metre long, aggressive saltwater crocodile that was capable of eating goats whole. Once he was lowered in, there was no mistaking the roar of Sirus or his snapping. It sounded

like a prehistoric creature and Bo imagined that one day Sirius would burst through the ground the size of a house and devour them all.

The mist was warm as she twirled her dress from side to side, aware that she looked much younger than her thirteen years.

The well reminded her always of that silly song Claudia used to sing.

Smile, smile like a crocodile

Why so vain? Why so vile?

Grab its neck, hold for a while.

And smile, smile like a crocodile

Then the song would go on from the second verse and on and on. Claudia would replace the “*And*” with “*So*” or “*Then,*” and sometimes the “*Why so*” with “*Don’t be.*” Either way the song stuck in Bo’s head, irritating her in day and night dreams. The slightest hum or mention and it would not leave her mind.

It has been six months since I pushed her in. Bo missed playing with her, but preferred that she was the only one now, the one to be more spoilt.

Scrag wheeled Gran Pappy carefully down the boards, the rusty wheelchair squeaking creepily, not comically. A faded red and blue tartan blanket covered Pappy’s weak legs and drool frothed from his cracked white lips.

The caramel girl gave her grandfather a hug. Though he was as lifeless as a doll she found him endearing, never hesitating to sit close to his chair with Baudelaire and tell him of her day.

Pappy’s mouth was always contorted, open at a long awkward angle that dribbled his spittle all over his faded yellow puffy shirt. Granna always had the other girls dress him in his scarlet jacket and trousers, though they were moth eaten and smelt with age.

For as long as she could remember he had been this way, confined to his wheelchair unable to move or talk, but his eyes would flicker with expression. Like a crocodile stare it could tell you so much of his thoughts.

Gran Pappy was the only one who knew her secret about Claudia and some part of her believed he approved. That is why she liked him, she decided, wiping the saliva from his wrinkled lips with his own satin handkerchief that rested in his top pocket.

Granna stroked her hair at the same time, pleased with her display of affection.

‘Give da boy to Sirius,’ she ordered. The blonde, brown-eyed boy disappeared quickly over the stones, not touching the sides. The smack at the end of his fall was soft.

The boys cried out to Sirius, but no familiar growl responded. The beast was either full or sleeping. It could take him hours to come and get his offering and by then the poison from the arrow would have worn off.

Boadicea smiled pleasantly at the hope that the boy would wake from his paralysed state and scream for help in vain, an indigent victim to the beast. It would make a nice change from her day-to-day life.

Many minutes passed before Granna asked Scrag and Boadicea to take Gran Pappy back to the house, clearly upset that her precious Sirius had not made a sound appearance. Scrag only struggled lightly to lift the chair back on the boards, surprisingly strong for his stick-thin frame.

The house looked like a purple and grey painting in the smoky mist, the black and orange lanterns swinging lightly off the edge of the jagged tile roof. The chimney and loft windows had sharp peaks making their home appear like a sad haunted face. The window panes were misshapen from age and warping, the grey-blue wood bulging and appearing scarred. Next to the door hung homemade dream catchers and dolls made of twine and chicken bones.

Boadicea opened the door for her brother, but Baudelaire walked through first with his legs stretching and his yellow spotted belly hovering off the ground.

Scrag kept a safe distance, turning Pappy in his chair and leaving him in the entrance facing the stone hearth in the next room. Scrag left quicker than he entered, back to the swamps to scout and hunt.

No fire was going, it was often too warm for flames. The chimney's blackened rocks appeared odd amongst the dark purple wooden walls. Skulls of crocodiles and stuffed animals decorated corners while antique furniture sat heavy with oddly coloured pillows and cover sheets.

Boadicea knelt by her Gran Pappy, ripping off her pet's muzzle and watching his pupils twitch with her light touch.

'Sometimes Granna looks at Baudelaire like she gonna put him in with ol' Sirius.'

Baudelaire hissed from understanding, his teeth exposed fully in a long smile. Bo stroked his tongue and yellow serrated teeth, picking out a little piece of leftover raw chicken meat that was stuck between his side teeth.

Now Pappy's eyes danced with light expression, yellow and black.

Above the hearth was an old portrait of him when he was young and in his prime, wearing his scarlet suit with the frilly white shirt looking truly like the lord he was. One foot was placed on top of a massive

black crocodile, snakes about his neck like jewellery and his favourite white throated monitor lizard, Zander, was close by his side.

So handsome Gran Pappy was back in those days with his black hair and dark skin, she thought and kissed his black mottled hand lightly.

This was long before the man named Sparks crippled him.

To the folk of the swamps he was Gran Pappy, but beyond the pits he went by another name.

They called him *Lamour the Lizard Lord*.