

NEW  
TALES  
FROM  
OLD YARN

AN  
ANTHOLOGY

*New Tales From  
Old Yarn*

*An Anthology*

*Fairy tales and myths, rewritten and re-imagined  
by writers on tumblr*

*New Tales From Old Yarn*

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# *Introduction*

An Anthology by writers on tumblr

*A beautiful experiment. As everything in life, it took much longer than we anticipated.*

Some people may not know it but there is an active and inspiring writer community on tumblr. We love writing, we share stories and we help each other to become better writers. One of our fellow "writelrs", Lorna Davidson, brought up the idea of combining our abilities and doing what we love – write. It took a long time and the project had to change hands but here we are now. A collection of fairytales and myths, re-imagined by some of the talented writer on tumblr.

We hope you'll like what you'll find in here.

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# *A Fable Of Truth*

*Mari-Anne Copeland*

*Since I was a child, I have always loved fantasy and fairy stories the best, especially animal stories and tales of transformation. This poem is based on one of my favourite stories growing up, Beauty and the Beast. Of the many versions I have encountered of the story, it never ceases to be intriguing, and can be examined through the lense of so many genres.*

*It is with this thought that I wanted to explore the nature of genre and of different perspectives, and with it I've tried to pay homage to my favourite childhood Stories With A Moral by making one of my own.*

*I have not written a poem since 2006, but I always enjoy a*

*challenge.*

~ ~ ~

Thirty years ago, when the townsfolk first told  
Of the girl who married the prince,  
They altered the ending and embellished the start  
And they have in all the years since.

These days there are few who were witness that day  
To confirm or deny any fact,  
And so stories were told in the markets and inns  
To more than make up for the lack.

Some said that the match was politically wise,  
That the two of them married by force,  
Others claim that her family sold her for gold  
But she fell for his charms in due course.

The favourite theory that folk like to tell

Is the one of love at first sight,  
How her kiss saved him as he died in her arms  
And they married the very same night.

However the circumstance of it may change,  
One thing that all gossipers know:  
That no one has seen hide nor hair of them since,  
Locked away the last decade or so.

Thus the story became a bedtime tale,  
And that tale fell out of style,  
And the people moved on as they are wont to do  
Only telling it once in awhile.

Then one stormy evening at the bustling inn,  
The door blew open with a groan.  
There stood a woman, all dirty and ragged  
And soaked through right to the bone.

“What’s wrong?” asked the innkeeper as she came in,

“How on earth did you travel here?”

“From the woods,” she replied, “I escaped from that beast!”

They could see she was trembling with fear.

“Be calm, it’s alright,” one man tried to sooth,

“Just tell us what has occurred.”

So she took a deep breath as the patrons all stilled

And recounted it in her own words:

“At first it was wonderful, like a childhood dream

We lived happily within that grand place.

He said that he loved me and offered me gifts

And treated me with a fair grace.”

The townsfolk all murmured as she choked out her tale,

For they realised who she must be,

The long missing girl who had married the prince –

No figure of mythology!

“But then,” she continued, “many summers ago

He went for a walk in the woods,  
He returned with his sword stained with blood, and a  
book  
From which I knew would come no good.

He'd lock himself up in his tower most days  
And hardly would join me to dine!  
All he consumed were the words in that book  
And a copious quantity of wine.

I begged, I implored him to put down the tome  
For I feared it would alter his spirit.  
But he shouted and raged 'til I cowered with fright  
And he forbade me even go near it.

But I could not just watch as this malicious text  
Tore my kind and gentle prince apart,  
So I snuck it away from him one fateful night,  
And I saw it was a book of Black Arts.

He caught me red-handed, and violently roared

So mightily that it caused a storm!  
The magic he'd read had taken too strong a hold  
And before my eyes, he began to transform!

His nails became talons, he grew ten foot tall,  
And he sprouted thick fur and a tail.  
I ran for my life but he was too fast for me  
And since then I have lived in the gaol.

For years I held hope that my love might return  
But the things that the beast has done,  
I know truly my husband could never commit  
And I am certain now that he is gone.

So last night I grieved for the loss of my prince  
And made my escape at last.  
I wandered the forest and came to this town,  
Desperate to forget all that's passed."

The patrons were silent as the woman broke down,

Stirred deeply by the heart-breaking tale.  
This woman so ragged and tortured for years,  
Now alone and afraid and so frail.

“We’ll kill him!” somebody cried to applause,  
“We’ll punish that creature of malice!”  
So they gathered all the men, and their wives waved  
them off  
And they marched through the rain to the palace.

They pounded the gates ‘til they burst at the hinge  
And they hunted the monstrous beast.  
When they found him and dragged him from his hiding  
place,  
He was not what they expected in the least.

His face was disfigured and mouth full of teeth  
His body bore a dreadful stink,  
But instead of a roar, he begged for his life:  
“Have mercy, men, she’s not what you think!

The woman's a sorceress, a killer and a thief,  
It was she who turned me like this!  
My wife caught the witch trying to steal from our halls  
And she killed her with a poisoned kiss.

When I saw what she did, I stabbed at her heart  
But it had no effect on her!  
She vowed her revenge and promised my death  
And then cursed all my body with fur!"

The townsmen heard his account with unease  
And dismissed it as a monstrous lie,  
For his face was so cunning and the woman's so sweet  
That they knew that he deserved to die.

So they killed him right there and burned the whole  
place

And returned to the town with his head.

They marched through the streets singing out as they  
went:

"The terrible beast is now dead!"

But when they had scoured the town for the woman  
That they had killed the beast for,  
There was no trace of her to be found  
And their homes had all been robbed poor!

When the men asked the wives what had happened that  
night,  
The poor women only shared confused frowns.  
For not a single one among them could even recall  
That any woman had come to the town.

And to this day they could never be sure  
If they had done the right deed.  
It was best to pretend and adapt what they must,  
“Happy ever after” they all agreed.

But guilt then on served as a nagging reminder  
To search a little harder for proof,  
“There’s always three sides to a story,” they’d warn,  
“There’s yours, mine and the truth.”



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# *Any Other Name*

R White

*Any Other Name - based on the version written by French author Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont - is a retelling of classic fairy tale Beauty and the Beast. As punishment for attempting to steal one of a hideous Beast's prized roses, a merchant must send his daughter, Belle, to live in the Beast's castle. But when Belle arrives at the castle, she discovers that the flower was in fact a human girl named Rose: the Beast's daughter, and realises that her time in the castle may not be at all what she had expected.*

It is a beautiful day to be kidnapped, but Belle isn't sure 'kidnapped' is quite the right word for it when she's got to make the walk herself.

Belle's father walks beside her in silence, staring down at the dry twigs crunching under his boots, and what little daylight can filter through the gaps in the trees illuminates the devastation in his expression. She's never seen him like this, not even when their family came close to losing everything - he'd always put on a brave face for his favourite daughter, and now his openness only serves to show how much this is destroying him.

Belle looks away before tears can form, trying to find beauty in the cold pines surrounding them as they make their way through the woods, but lingering memories of childhood fears taint every gnarled branch and shadow. When she was a little girl, her older brothers would tell her stories about woods like these, where you could go mad with hunger and fear, or be eaten by hideous creatures of the night. It had terrified her, but her father was always there to reassure her that there were no monsters - not in the dark, not in the woods.

Now, neither Belle nor her father are so sure.

By the time they've walked far enough to finally be able to see their destination, Belle feels as though a lifetime has already passed, silent minutes blurring into years, punctuated only by birdsong from somewhere too high up

to see. Even then, all they can see of the castle are the tops of turrets, the brick stark against the sky; as they draw closer, the dark trunks thin out, and Belle can finally see the high stone wall separating the castle from the outside world. In the centre of the wall is an ornate iron gate, the only window to what lies behind - through the bars, the castle itself can be seen in all its glory, aged and elegant and, admittedly, beautiful. More beautiful still is the vast garden surrounding it, and this, more than anything, is what catches Belle's attention - it's just the right sort of overgrown: not so wild that it looks unkempt, but not pristine enough to be purely for display. Flowers of all colours spill and climb and stretch over whatever space they can find, while brick paths proudly walked keep whatever order they can manage, an effortlessly perfect balance. It looks lived in; it looks *alive*.

Belle approaches the gate calmly, and her presence of mind allows her to notice the hesitance in her father's movements - he's been a couple of paces behind her for their whole journey, but his reluctance to come closer is even more obvious now that she is standing still. It seems to take all of his strength to come and stand by her, and when he does, he can't bring himself to look at the garden, and stares instead at the grass at his feet. Belle isn't sure she can blame him.

It doesn't feel like yesterday that her father returned home with nothing but sorrow and the scent of flowers. He'd blamed his depression on debt, the repossession of his cargo, and the excuse had seemed to satisfy her sisters, but

their concerns centered more around the lack of gifts he'd brought with him. Belle could have believed it too, had he been able to look her in the eyes when he told her. He had looked at her as if she was dying in front of him, and she had known that something far worse must have happened.

Belle had had no problem being told of the hospitality of an unseen host, who had allowed the poor lost merchant food and shelter while lost in the woods. She *hadn't* been prepared to hear that the price of her father taking advantage of such generosity was for him to send a daughter to stay in the castle indefinitely, or meet his own end. How exactly he'd caused offense, she didn't know - all he'd said was something about a rose.

He had said rather considerably more about a beast.

Belle, thinking rationally, still finds it hard to believe that 'beasts' exist, but Belle has always thought that her father is as rational as she is, and the fear in his eyes as he looks out over the garden is hard to ignore. Just standing here at the gate is making him nervous, and the next seconds pass in a silence even more strained than before until finally-

"You don't have to-"

"*No.*" Her father stares at her. It came out faster, more violently than Belle had intended it to. "It's safer this way," she explains, and it's only half a lie.

Her father doesn't look any less concerned. "But not for you."

“I’ll be alright. I promise.” The slight wobble in her voice on *promise* makes his face crumple, and without hesitation, he leans in to pull her into a hug. Belle returns it without question, burying her face in his shoulder.

“I’m going to miss you so much.”

“*I’ll be alright,*” Belle says again, and then, quieter, “I’ll miss you too.” She pulls away after the first sniff, since the last thing she wants to do is cry in front of him. She gives him the best smile she can manage, but it comes out watery and weak. “I’ll be okay from here,” she tells him, and her father realises, as she’d hoped he would, that this is her way of telling him to go. He hesitates, but doesn’t protest, and turns wordlessly back to the woods - Belle is glad that he didn’t say anything, but the guilt in his eyes makes her chest ache as she watches him go. She tells herself that it’s better this way: she doesn’t want his last memory of her to be behind bars.

Once her father’s form has disappeared into the trees, Belle turns back to the gate - it’s heavy and stiff with disuse, but it’s not too difficult to move, and she ventures into the motionless garden - now that she’s in it, it feels a lot more sinister than peaceful. It seems unnatural for something so alive to be so still, even threatening, almost like it’s lying in wait; for what, she doesn’t want to think about.

As she nears the castle, Belle feels the prickling of foreign eyes watching her, and her head jerks towards one of the windows just in time to see a figure dart out of view. She pauses for a moment before continuing towards the

main entrance, moving considerably slower. The feeling of being watched has left her, but as she comes to stand before the dark, imposing main doors, a sickening dread has taken its place: dread for what will become of her, and for what she'll see on the other side of the door. In this state, she's far more willing to believe any story.

Summoning what remains of her nerve, Belle raises a shaking hand, and knocks on the towering door as many times as she dares. She doesn't know how long it takes before the door swings open, and it does so far faster than a door of its size and probable weight should be able to, at least by a human hand. She is not left wondering - when she sees what has opened the door, she understands, and immediately regrets her decision.

The creature standing before Belle does so in a human way, though that is the only human thing about it, save for the expensive-looking clothes it wears, which it has quite clearly outgrown, if one can outgrow a body *shape* rather than size. Its hands have all the digits of a human's, but they end in long, clawed nails, and are covered in the same thick brown fur as the rest of it - its lack of shoes makes it clear that its feet are the same, long and padded like the hind paws of a lion. Its head, a hideous combination of animals, is covered in the same fur, but not so much that Belle can't see the large, protruding teeth, or the eyes staring back at her. There is no better word for it, she must admit, than 'Beast'. Her father was right.

The Beast opens its mouth, and that alone is enough to

make Belle flinch back from it, though she's surprised she can even move at all. Fear has her rooted to the stone steps, and though she can hardly bear to look at it, she can't quite look away.

“Are you the daughter?” It has the voice of a man, but distorted, and every word comes out as a growl - Belle is too focused on this to register what it's asking her, and she continues to stare at it in silence. “Are you the daughter?” it repeats, its tone more irritated now, and the new edge makes her jump, snapping her attention back to the question at hand, but leaving her thoughts no less frantic.

“I-I,” she stammers, but her voice catches in her throat. Too slow.

“Well?”

Tears start to well in her eyes, but as her vision starts to blur, she catches sight of a dart of movement from behind the Beast - it turns to face the source of the oncoming footsteps, and Belle takes the opportunity to quickly wipe her tears away.

Standing on the grand staircase behind the Beast is a young woman, lovely and livid with a pink gown and dark hair and a wrath Belle can feel from outside. Even elevated by several steps, Belle can tell that this woman is taller than she is, and given the sturdiness of her build, stronger, too, though her open hostility towards the Beast already proves that. Her pale face is contorted into a glare, but her beauty is still painfully obvious, her sharp features aimed like a

dagger at the creature standing in front of Belle.

“What is wrong with you?” The woman descends the rest of the stairs, keeping her look of revulsion fixed on the Beast as she approaches, but when she turns to look at Belle for the first time, her temper seems to ease - at least, until she turns back to it, and her anger returns at full force. “You made her *cry*?”

Belle is amazed to see fear on the Beast’s face, fear at the sight of this seething young woman who only reaches his chin at her full height. “Of course n-”

The woman ignores him completely, turning instead to face Belle, her expression far gentler again, and she offers out her hand. “I’m so sorry - please, come with me, I’ll find you a room.”

Belle’s chest still feels tight, leaving her unable to take anything but tiny breaths, but she gives a shaky nod, and takes the other woman’s hand. She lets herself be pulled away up the grand staircase, but she’s still too dazed to take in her surroundings - the castle blurs past her, and it occurs to her that she should be more concerned with the situation at hand than the fact that she’s already crying, but she doesn’t care. Thoughts of laughter and taunting try to cloud her mind, but she does her best to ignore them, grounding herself with the feeling of the woman’s cold hand in hers.

By the time they reach a spacious bedroom, Belle has her breathing back under control, and has the presence of mind to recognise her surroundings, as well as the look of

concern on the woman's face.

"I'm fine," Belle insists, before she can say anything, but she doesn't look convinced, which doesn't really come as a surprise. "Thank you, by the way," she adds. "For saving me downstairs."

The other girl lets out a long, slow breath, trying to calm herself down, but her hands are still clenched tightly into fists when she sits down on the edge of the bed, and motions for Belle to join her. "Honestly, you weren't in any danger, but I didn't want him being... *him* at you."

Belle sits down next to her, sinking into the sheets. "Did he make you come here, too?"

The girl laughs, flashing Belle a grin as sharp as the rest of her. "No, I'm his daughter. Rose, by the way. I suppose you're Belle?"

*Rose.* Now her father's ramblings about stealing a rose made more sense - the price wasn't a daughter for a flower. It was a daughter for a daughter. Even so, it's hard to guess from looking at her that she could be related to something as inhuman as the Beast - at least, unless he hasn't always been this way.

"How do you know my name?"

"I met your father, when he came here - he talked about you an awful lot. He tried to make me leave with him, and when my father found out, he was furious. It's not like I would have gone in the first place, but it didn't matter to

him.” Rose sighs. “Although, I *would* have liked to have the option.”

Belle squashes down a spark of pride that her father would’ve mentioned her over her sisters. “Why wouldn’t you, though? Leave, I mean?”

“Well, he’s my family,” Rose replies, as if it proves a point. Belle just looks at her. Assuming Belle’s disbelief comes from her father’s appearance, she adds, “He wasn’t always like that. He was cursed by my mother, when she left - she was... a witch, I suppose. Honestly, you can spend five minutes with him and see why she did it. It was supposed to teach him a lesson, but I can’t see it working. He’s so *impossible*.”

Before today, Belle did not believe in curses. After today, Belle thinks she’ll believe anything. “Can anything change him back?”

“Yes. True love.” Rose keeps a completely straight face when she says it, but the second her eyes meet with Belle’s, both women burst into laughter. “No, really.”

“God, the poor man.”

“He’ll save a fortune on fur coats, though.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say,” Belle says, but she giggles all the same. It feels like an age since she last laughed, and it occurs to her that the same could be true for Rose - they share matching smiles, weightless and silly and everything they haven’t been able to be, and for the first

time in God only knows how long, Belle feels like everything could be okay.

“You know, if you want, I can give you a tour of the castle,” Rose offers. “You’ll need to know your way around. And on the way back, I can pick up some of my dresses for you.”

Belle smiles at her. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

The words are barely out of her mouth, and yet Rose has already leapt to her feet, her expression even brighter than before. “Right, then, let’s go. We’ve got a lot of castle to see.”

With understandable enthusiasm for a woman living alone with a monster, Rose pulls Belle through the winding stone corridors by the arm with an energy Belle can barely match, and yet there is nobody else Belle would rather have showing her around. Despite the circumstances she lives in, her love for the place shows clearly in the way she describes everything, proud and protective. The details only someone who’s lived here their whole life would know come out so casually in her descriptions, revealing the secrets of the castle to such a degree that, to someone so new to the place, it feels indecent to listen to, but Belle couldn’t tear her attention away from Rose even if she wanted to. She is vaguely aware of the fact that she isn’t taking in nearly enough of what Rose is saying, but she can’t bring herself to care.

Eventually, the tour extends to the garden, and, looking at it with a new sense of reassurance, Belle can now fully

appreciate the beauty of it - even the garden walls, with the tops of the pines peeking over them, are just another elegant feature of the castle's design, no more intimidating than the arches and pillars of the castle itself, no longer reminiscent of a prison.

She lets her fingers brush lightly over the heads of flowers as she walks. "Lots of roses, I see."

Rose smiles, picking one from a bush, twirling the stem in her hand. "My father planted them for my mother, before they got married."

"And they named you after them?"

"Very perceptive."

"Very symbolic."

She snorts. "Oh, coming from *Beauty* over there." Rose slides her a sideways glance. "Not that it's entirely inaccurate."

Belle laughs. Rose does not.

"*Rose!*" The cry comes from the castle; the Beast, standing in an archway, looks out to them. Belle thinks for a moment that, since he'd shouted so loud, he might be frustrated, but then she looks at him a little harder - perhaps it's the distance confusing her vision, but the Beast looks nervous, as if he'd rather shout to them than come any closer. She doesn't understand why someone like him would fear anything, least of all them. He points over to Belle, beckoning her over, and she shoots Rose a worried look.

“It’ll be fine,” Rose says, under her breath. Belle raises her eyebrows. “It *will*. He probably just wants to talk to you.”

“Don't say 'probably'!”

“Just go!”

Reluctantly, Belle makes her way along the garden paths towards the Beast; as she draws closer, all doubt recedes - he definitely looks apprehensive of her, but why? All she’s done so far is cry in front of him.

Belle comes awkwardly to stand in front of the Beast, and for a moment, he just looks at her, unsure of what to say.

“Are you alright?” Belle asks.

He looks surprised. “What?”

“You look like something’s troubling you. Are you alright?” *If I’m bothering you that much, I’m only here because you made me*, she thinks, but doesn’t dare say. Besides, it would be cruel.

For a moment, the Beast just looks at her, confused, perhaps as to why a creature like him would be asked such a question, perhaps as to why she would be brave enough to speak out. But then he forces out, “I came to apologize.”

Belle can’t help but raise an eyebrow. “For keeping me here?”

“For startling you earlier.” He stalls for a moment,

fighting expression from his face. He looks out over the garden, which Belle might interpret as disinterest if she hadn't seen him so nervous a moment ago. The fact that he refuses to look at her is very telling. "What is your name?"

"It's Belle."

He gives a brisk nod. "Well, I'm- I'm sorry, Belle." He lingers for a moment, uncertain, before turning back through the archway, stalking away back towards the castle.

The footsteps scraping their way up the path announce Rose's presence before she speaks; she comes to stand beside her, nudging Belle's shoulder with hers. "Are you alright?"

"Yes. That was just... strange, is all."

"I told you he wouldn't be any trouble," Rose says, and smiles, in an ominous sort of way. Belle has a feeling she knows who the Beast was really afraid of upsetting. Rose links their arms together again, starting back towards the castle. "Come on - let's go get those dresses. You don't need to worry about him."

As the days pass, Belle quickly finds that Rose was right - the Beast keeps to himself to the extent that Belle barely sees him. But while the Beast remains a stranger to her, she and Rose grow ever closer - Belle had been terrified that she would be miserable in the castle, but she finds herself becoming closer than she'd ever thought possible with the lonely, lovely girl. Belle barely notices the days spreading into weeks as she spends every possible moment of them

with Rose, sharing the stories and secrets they'd never been able to tell, and the castle sees more laughter than it has done in years. Belle wonders, most days, how she could have gotten so lucky in a situation that had once seemed so grim.

The gardens, from the first day, have remained Belle's favourite part of the castle - she wanders through them every morning, before Rose wakes up to join her. Usually, her walks are peaceful, uneventful, but, on a morning in her fourth week at the castle, she sees something odd on her way: the Beast, standing at the gate, with a young woman on the other side.

Curious, Belle draws closer to them, but a few paces further and the cold weight of dread drops itself upon her as she recognises the girl at the gate to be her sister, Livia. Belle's first instinct is to go back inside, and ask the Beast what she had wanted at a later, safer time, but Livia has already seen her, and Belle realises that she has no choice but to talk to her.

"Belle!" Her sister's face breaks into a teary smile as she sees her approaching. The concern in her face, to Belle's surprise, seems genuine enough. "Oh, we've been so worried-

"Livia, what are you doing here?" Belle can only hope she doesn't sound as nervous as she feels. She casts an uneasy look towards the seemingly indifferent Beast. "What's going on?"

“It’s our sister. Portia,” she adds for Belle’s benefit, though she doesn’t see why it matters - they’ve gelled into one entity into her head, a four-headed beast of their own right. “She’s fallen terribly ill - we don’t know if she’ll...” Livia pauses for a moment to compose herself. “We want Belle to come home. Just so P can see her again.”

The Beast doesn’t so much as look at Belle when he asks, “And she would only be staying for a few days?”

“Of course. It might be all the time we have.”

The Beast considers this, then turns to Belle for the first time since she arrived. “And would you go?”

“Yes,” Belle replies, too quickly - in the face of her sister’s possible demise, she can’t very well say no, but she regrets it the second the word leaves her mouth. Still, if Livia really has been worried about her, perhaps she has nothing to be afraid of, returning home. Considerably quieter nonetheless, Belle adds, “She’s my sister.”

Livia beams up at the Beast, reaching out to hold Belle’s hands through the bars with a grip that makes Belle’s fingers hurt. “Oh, thank you! Can we expect her tomorrow?”

The Beast nods, a dismissive gesture - there will be no more said on the matter, and Livia must go. Belle wasn’t sure whether or not she got what she expected: the Beast never raised his voice, but then again, she’s never seen him do so in all the time she’s spent here. On the other hand, hearing him make Belle’s plans for her as if she were a child has been a particularly irritating habit of his. Picking up on

his meaning as well, Livia gives them both a last winning smile before turning her back on them, and heading off back into the forest.

Unwilling to watch her sister's retreat for any longer than she has to, Belle starts to walk away, already thinking of how long she has left in the castle before she has to go. She didn't realise how much she was going to miss it.

"Belle." The Beast's voice breaks her out of her thoughts, unexpected enough to startle her, but there's no menace in his tone. "Would you walk with me?"

She isn't quite sure why he would want to, but she nods, and he comes to walk beside her. They stay quiet for a little while, but just as Belle begins to wonder whether he's doing it out of obligation, or simply prefers less involving company, the Beast speaks.

"Why was it that you came here?"

Belle wants to tell him that she had no choice, but, when she thinks about it, it's not entirely true. She could have refused, she could have let her brothers go to the castle to fight for her, and yet, she'd chosen to go. "What do you mean?"

"You have sisters. Any one of them could have come here, so why you?" He pauses for a second, a hint of understanding crossing his face. "Was it your father's choice?"

"No, it was mine," she says, with rather more of an edge

to her voice than she'd intended. It's becoming increasingly hard to stay patient with the Beast's idea that she can't make decisions by herself. "I wanted to get away."

"Even on someone else's terms?"

"It worked."

He considers this for a moment, and Belle is glad he didn't pry any further. Finally, he asks, "Are you happy here?" The question catches Belle off-guard - she hadn't been expecting any sort of emotional consideration from the Beast, but though he seems oblivious to her capability of independent thought, he's never been *intentionally* insensitive towards her. She nods, and he seems satisfied. "Since you came here, my daughter is happier than I've ever seen her. I'm grateful for that."

Belle smiles. It's the first time she's heard him display any sort of affection for Rose, or any real emotion at all. She likes him better this way. "I'm glad I could help her. It's awful, being alone." Realising her mistake, she quickly backtracks. "Except for you, of course, I didn't mean-"

The Beast shakes his head, holding up a hand in reassurance. "Rose and I don't speak often, and I don't blame her for that. I hardly count as pleasant company."

"I don't think that's entirely true." The Beast gives her a strange look. How long must have been since someone last spoke well of him? "You're just... not so good with people." She pauses. "You care about Rose, don't you?"

“Of *course* I do,” he says, the hurt in his voice obvious.

“When was the last time you told her that?”

“Belle!”

Belle turns to see Rose standing a short way away by the main doors, looking expectantly out to her. The Beast, still silenced by Belle’s last comment, merely stares at Belle’s apologetic smile and her little wave of goodbye as she goes to join Rose in the doorway.

It suddenly hits her that she’s going to have to tell Rose that she’s leaving. It will only be for a few days, of course, but to a girl who’s been alone for so long, how long will three more lonely days feel? Looking at Rose’s smile, she feels her heart sink.

“What just happened?” Rose notices her expression, and frowns. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m fine.” She doesn’t look convinced. Belle sighs. “It was my sister at the gate.”

Rose quickly hides the flash of apprehension on her face, but not fast enough to stop Belle’s chest tightening when she sees it. “What did she want?”

“One of my sisters is sick - they want me to come home to see her. Just for a few days,” Belle adds, hurriedly.

“What did Papa say?” *Papa*. Rose doesn’t seem to notice, but it’s the first time Belle has heard her call him anything affectionate - has their relationship always been like this?

“He told her I’d be there tomorrow.” Rose takes a sharp inhale, and Belle quickly adds, “He asked.”

Rose considers this for a moment, and to Belle’s surprise, a sly smile spreads across her face.

“What’s that *look*?”

“Can you meet me outside my bedroom at six?”

“Why?”

“It’s a surprise.” Belle is about to ask further, but Rose is already on her way up the stairs, leaving the other woman staring after her, bewildered. She stops only to lean over the banisters, her smile wild and bright and beautiful, and shout down, “Just trust me!”

Rose’s whereabouts remain a mystery for the rest of the day, in fact - though Belle busies herself with packing a bag for her days away, the afternoon passes with no sign of her. Curious, Belle arrives at her door at six to see what she has planned. She knocks on the door, and hears Rose’s call of “Come in!” from inside a second later - pushing open the door, she finds Rose standing in front of her, with a large cake in her arms, covered in piped flowers.

“Surprise! It’s the smallest going away party in the world.” Belle can’t help but laugh. Rose gives her a nervous smile. “Alright, so I just wanted an excuse to make you a cake, but I’m going to miss you.”

“It’s only going to be three days.” It’s an empty reassurance - three days is too long for both of them, and

Belle knows it. “Thank you, though. It's beautiful.” It seems to make Rose feel better, but the reminder of their time apart still looms over them both. Seeking a distraction, Belle drifts over to a piano tucked into the corner of Rose's room; dusting off the long stool in front of it, she sits. “I never noticed you had a piano in your room.”

Rose looks up from cutting the cake. “It was my mother's. I never learned to play it, though.”

Belle raises a hand to her chest in mock disdain. “What sort of *lady* doesn't learn to play the piano?”

“Maybe you should teach me, if it's so unbearable.”

“Maybe I will.” Belle pats the space next to her. “Come, sit.”

Rose raises an eyebrow, but does as Belle says. She presses a few experimental keys, and frowns. “It's a bit out of tune.”

“Then it'll hide your mistakes for you.” Rose snorts. “What do you want to learn to play?”

“What's your favourite song?”

Belle smiles. “Follow my lead.” She begins to play an old, slow song, one of the first she'd learned - a lullaby, dear enough to her for it to still sound good despite Rose's mistakes. After her fifth unsuccessful try, she huffs, sitting back from the keys.

“Clearly, you're the graceful one.”

“Maybe it would be easier if you put your fingers over mine.” Rose gives Belle a look, and she blushes. “So you can follow along.”

Rose is still grinning as she complies, and places her hands over Belle's: this time, when Belle plays, there's no need to stop - moving together, there are no mistakes. Belle puts it down to her doing all the real moving, but when she takes her hands away, Rose retraces her steps beautifully. Belle lays her head on her shoulder, sneaking glances at her as she concentrates on the music, her hair falling over her face in dark waves.

“I wish we could have someone else play it for us,” Rose says, softly. “Then we could dance.” She looks down at Belle where she rests on her shoulder - the music comes to a standstill as Rose stops playing, instead lifting a hand to tuck a stray hair behind Belle's ear, as gently as she can.

Belle sighs, despite herself, and half hopes Rose hadn't noticed, but surely it wouldn't make a difference; she'll just go back to playing, and Belle can go back to sighing in secret with nobody to stop her or tell her that the way she feels is too silly, too much of a risk. But Rose does not keep playing. With the hand still resting at Belle's temple, Rose tilts Belle's chin up to face her - a moment that feels like an age passes, hesitant, holding their breath until the anticipation fizzing in their blood gets the better of them both and Rose leans in to kiss her. Belle doesn't know how long it lasts, she only knows it's not long enough, but despite the elation of it, when Rose pulls back she can feel unwanted tears prickling

her eyes.

“Belle?” Rose’s face fills with concern as she notices, moving her hand to rest on Belle’s arm, her touch grounding. “What’s wrong? Should I not have-?” Belle shakes her head; Rose visibly relaxes, if only a little. “Then what?”

“I just-” she pauses, hating how childish the words sound. “-I don’t want to go home.”

“Why not? It’s only a few days,” Rose says, as if she hadn’t had to hear the same reassurances only minutes ago. “Hey, come on, you can tell me.”

Belle looks at the genuine worry on Rose’s face, and in that moment, she feels like she could tell her anything. She takes a deep, slow breath, and Rose doesn’t rush her. “My father used to go away a lot, and whenever he did, my sisters would always be awful to me. They’d make me act like their servant, and make fun of me, and then whenever I started crying, they’d tell me I was too sensitive.” She gives a teary laugh. “See? I’m fine, honestly, I’m just always overreacting.”

“No, you’re not!” Belle blinks, shocked by the emotion in Rose’s voice, the outrage in her tone. She seems to recognise her mistake, and her voice softens. “Really, you’re not. Belle, that’s awful. Why didn’t your father ever stop them?”

“They never did it in front of him. And if I went crying to him, I’d only be proving them right.”

Rose lets out a long sigh and wraps her arms around her, pulling her in for a hug that leaves her with her head on Rose's shoulder again. "There's nothing wrong with being sensitive. You weren't even *being* sensitive. You were going through a lot; I'd be worried if you *didn't* cry."

"I *know* that. Logically, I know that, but when it happens..." She sniffs again, and leans in closer. "I'm really scared to go back, Rose."

For a minute, there is only silence, and Belle rests on Rose's shoulder, comforting herself with the other woman's warmth before Rose stirs, eyes lighting up with a new idea. "What if I went with you?"

"What?"

"I could go with you!" Rose beams, and Belle can't help but smile back. She could get through those few days, if only Rose was there too.

"W-What if your father doesn't let you?"

"Then I'll sneak out." Belle gives her a scandalized look, but Rose doesn't seem to care. "I don't want you facing your family alone while I'm just sitting here doing nothing. Here, look-" Rose jumps up from the seat to go and rummage in a drawer, eventually producing a large ring, and two handled mirrors. She comes to sit back down with Belle, and spreads the three items out gently across their laps. "My father gave me these to give to you. They're some of my mother's old things - they're enchanted." She picks up the ring, holding it up for Belle to see. "If you twist the stone, it'll bring you

straight back to the castle; I'm sure it would take two of us if we held onto each other." She indicates the mirrors. "And these were meant to be for us, but we could leave one behind so father knows we're alright."

"What do they do?"

"If you look through one, you can see whoever has the other one." Belle looks at the mirrors in wonder - it feels like a plan with them there, but there is still the issue of the Beast. As if predicting Belle's next worry, Rose adds, "It's easier if I just sneak out without bringing it up. Say goodbye before he has a chance to see you out, and I'll meet you in the gardens, okay?"

When the time comes, Belle does her best to follow Rose's instructions, but to her relief she doesn't even see the Beast on her way. When she reaches the gardens, she finds Rose waiting for her by a pillar with the ring and one of the mirrors in hand- they'd agreed that Belle would pack extra for her in her own bag, rather than have Rose looking suspicious with a bag of her own.

"He didn't notice you leave?" Belle asks, her voice quiet despite their solitude.

"No - I think we're alright."

The two waste no time: with the mirror stowed away and the ring slipped onto Belle's finger, the two set off into the forest. It doesn't take long to break free of the cover of the trees - the sudden brightness of the sunlight hurts, but Rose's eyes wander over every detail, while Belle's stay

downcast, doing her best to ignore their surroundings to the extent that she almost leads Rose straight past the house she used to call home.

“This is the one.” It’s the first thing she’s said since they left the castle. Each step up the path is a journey in itself; at its head, with Rose beside her. Belle knocks on the front door as many times as she dares. It’s answered almost immediately by Belle’s eldest sister, Mara, an uncharacteristically bright smile plastered onto her face.

“Belle!” Mara’s smile loses a little of its brightness as she registers Rose’s presence. “Who’s this?”

“This is Rose. She’s the Beast’s daughter.” Mara raises her eyebrows, and Belle does her best not to think about how it must sound. “She’s my-” Memories of the previous night flash through her mind. *Friend? Girlfriend? Everything?* “- friend. I’m sorry, I know it’s unexpected...”

Her sister waves away her apologies, already turning back into the house. Rose gives Belle a look caught halfway between triumph and confusion, and Belle can only shoot her an apologetic one back.

She’s only been away for a few weeks, but, stepping back into the hallways of a house she could never truly call home, it feels like she never left. A sudden rush of gratitude for Rose’s presence washes over her - she reaches behind her, finding Rose’s hand with hers, and feels a gentle squeeze of reassurance in response. Strengthened, and remembering with a jolt the real reason for their trip, Belle

asks, "Is Portia in her room?"

Mara doesn't turn around. "Yes. Oh, but you mustn't go to see her yet. She's sleeping. You wouldn't want to stop her healing, would you?" Belle doesn't respond, silenced by the sharpness in her sister's voice - too sharp, no worry in her tone to match the words, but Belle supposes it could be the stress of Portia's illness - and she remains silent as she makes her way to her room with Rose in tow.

Her bedroom hasn't been touched since she left - everything is exactly where she left it, only now, under a thin layer of dust unshifted by her family. Belle lays her bag down on the end of her bed with a sigh as Rose looks around. She doesn't know how to feel about being back in her old bedroom: there's nothing warm in the familiarity of the house, save for memories of her father, but now, he is nowhere to be found - away again to work, Livia had told her.

Belle looks up to catch Rose looking at her inquisitively. "Are you alright?"

She gives her a little nod. "It's just... being back here. Especially with my father away again-" she sighs, cutting herself off before she can say any more, unwilling to get emotional again. Not here.

"Well, if you can't see your sister yet, there's no point in staying here," Rose says, and smiles. Belle raises her eyebrows. "I want to explore - I can't even remember the last time I was out of the castle. I'd love to see where you

grew up.”

Just looking at Rose’s smile gives Belle a sense of hope, the first hope she’s had in this house for a long time - another reminder of just how lucky she is that Rose is with her - and without a second thought, she agrees. They go without a word to her sisters, and as she shows Rose around her hometown, she finds Rose’s wonder contagious: like the castle, she finds a way to make everything Belle has taken for granted or overlooked into something beautiful. Belle had realised, before they’d even kissed, that she was falling in love with Rose, but now she feels like she could fall in love with anything if Rose told her she could.

They stay out longer than they should, forgetting all about the time until they see the sun lowering in the sky, remembering themselves as the town is bathed in gold, and they return to the house lighter than when they had left. Belle can’t even bring herself to worry over whether her sisters will be angry at them - thankfully, they meet no opposition when they enter the house: to save Belle from having to face them, Rose offers to explain for both of them, and disappears into the house as Belle heads upstairs.

Only a few minutes later, Rose joins Belle in her room, but the look of suspicion on her face makes Belle worry. “Did you say your sister’s name was Portia? The one who’s ill?” she asks.

Belle frowns. “I did, why?”

From the way Rose’s brow furrows, Belle knows it

wasn't the right thing to say. "I just saw Livia talking to someone she called Portia, and she looked perfectly healthy. Not very pleased, but healthy. You don't know any other Portias, do you?"

"No, P's the only one in town." Rose's eyebrows raise, and Belle realises what must be going through her head, too. "You don't think she's faking, do you?"

"I just think it's awfully suspicious that they would ask you over to see a dying sister, and then not let you see her." Belle can see a new realisation dawn on her face as she adds, "And with your father away, too?"

"You think... you think they were going to trick me into staying here?"

Seeing the fear set into Belle's face, Rose quickly backtracks. "Hey, it's alright. They probably just thought you were in danger at the castle - if you explain, surely they'll be fine with letting you go back."

"They won't," Belle says, her voice as faint and shaky as she feels. "They don't care about me. They just want me back to be their servant again. Rose, I can't stay here-"

"You're not going to." The determination in Rose's voice is comforting, but not enough to dull down the dread pooling in her gut. "We're going back to the castle."

"But you've only just gotten out-"

"So? I don't care where I am, as long as I'm with you and you're safe, and-"

She doesn't get to finish - without a second's hesitation, Belle stands up on her tiptoes to cup Rose's face in her hands and kiss her as hard as she dares. A startled noise is all that separates their collision and Rose returning the kiss with all of the breathlessness and enthusiasm they had held back the night before, and suddenly, Belle's whole world is Rose's hand tangling in her hair and Rose's lips and Rose, Rose, Rose.

“Oh my *god!*”

Belle springs back from the kiss as the door slams open, and she can only hope for a moment that Rose won't take offense before the fear curls into every corner of her at the sight of Livia standing in the doorway, her shrill cry still ringing in Belle's ears. “Livia-”

“I knew there was something wrong with you. You're just as bad as your father.” Livia gasps theatrically. “Are you a monster too?”

Belle can see the fury in Rose's eyes; she wishes she could be brave enough to stand up to her sisters, but she can't, she can't *move*. “How dare you call me a monster after how you've treated Belle, you filthy *liar-*”

A disgusted noise sounds from beside Belle's bag - when Belle turns, her heart in a vice, she sees that Mara had entered without her realising, and has found the enchanted mirror. “A monster *and* a witch. Look, this mirror's cursed!”

“Don't touch that! That was my mother's!” Rose snatches the mirror out of her hand with such ferocity that the other

girl stumbles back without protest. She drops her gaze to the glass, and her face drains of colour - when she speaks, the horror in her voice turns Belle's blood to ice. "Papa?"

In a second, Belle is at her side, holding Rose's shaking hand in hers to save her from dropping the mirror, but what she sees through it makes her wish she could smash it from frame and mind. Within it, lying in the garden with eyes shut in a grimace of pain, is the Beast, holding the mirror at arm's length, just far enough from himself to reveal blood darkening the grass around him. Thinking frantically, Belle remembers what Rose had said about the magic ring - twist the stone, and it'll take you straight back to the castle.

"Hold on to me." Rose gives her a frantic look, but when Belle raises the hand wearing the ring, she understands, and flings her arms back around Belle, clinging for all she's worth. Heart thumping, Belle turns the stone.

"Belle!" Her sister's cries don't matter to her - they dissolve along with the rest of the house as her surroundings warp and change, replacing the walls of her old prison with the open air of her new home and leaving the two girls standing at the castle's main doors.

Spotting her father's limp form in the gardens, Rose runs to him, with Belle close behind. Rose reaches him first, falling to her knees beside him: he lies on his side, turned away from her, but when she rolls him onto his back, the wound in his chest is painfully visible from the dark bloodstain seeping into his clothes.

“Papa!” Rose tries to gently shake her father back to consciousness, but he barely stirs. “Wake up! Come on, please wake up...”

Noticing metal glinting in the Beast’s huge closed fist, Belle loosens his grip, pulling free a bloodstained knife as nausea rises in her throat. “Rose...”

Rose makes a sound caught between a wail and a sob that makes Belle's own chest hurt. “Why would he have done this?” Rose looks up with a sudden gasp, and Belle follows her gaze to the mirror still clutched in his other paw. “Oh god, Belle, this is my fault. He must have thought we were running away.” Guilt stabs at Belle’s heart as Rose raises a bloodstained hand to her mouth, tears streaking her cheeks. “I didn’t know... I didn’t think he cared that much.”

“Of course he did, he loved- he *loves* you-” Belle's eyes widen as a sudden idea hits her. “True love. That was what you said could save him, wasn’t it?”

Rose just looks at her, confused. “You don’t think we-”

“N-no, no, I mean... nobody ever said it had to be romantic, did it?” She can see Rose considering what she's telling her, but she doesn't seem to quite understand yet. “We thought your mother was just being cruel, but she would’ve been leaving you alone, she would’ve wanted to know whether he’d-”

“Love me,” Rose finishes, finally understanding. Her face crumpling, she lays her head down on his chest and

breaks, her whole body shaking with the force of her sobs. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t understand, please, Papa, I love you, I’m so sorry...”

Tears pooling in Belle’s eyes, she reaches out to lay a hand on Rose’s shoulder, but recoils with a gasp as she sees a soft glow emanate from the Beast’s body - Rose seems oblivious, but when it grows brighter, she sits up with a choked gasp, shuffling back from the light. It only grows brighter, until the Beast’s entire body disappears behind the glow of the magic - it stays that way for a few moments, and Rose shoots Belle a teary, bewildered look, until finally, the glow begins to fade. But when the Beast’s silhouette becomes visible again, Belle can immediately see that he has changed, and her heart leaps with a new hope that is only confirmed when the glow fades completely, and the two girls see, not a beast, but a man whose younger self Belle has seen in portraits in the castle. His eyes open, and Rose gives a shuddering gasp as he turns his head to look at her, realisation dawning on his face as he sees his hand, his *human* hand, lying on the grass beside him.

“Papa?”

“Rose,” he says, softly, his face breaking into a smile, the same stunned, shaky smile that appears on his daughter’s face. Moving as one, she throws herself at him, and he sits up to receive her; they collide with a force that must hurt Rose’s father’s chest after its only recently healed wound, but they cling to each other without caring, burying their faces in each other’s shoulders. “Oh, god, Rose.”

Even just looking at them, at the way tears stream freely down the former Beast's cheeks, Belle can feel her own eyes filling, and for the first time she can remember, she doesn't care. When Rose's father opens his eyes again, seeing Belle for the first time, he gives her a watery smile, outstretching an arm to her - at first, Belle hesitates, not wanting to interrupt, but the gratitude in his eyes and the relief still flooding through her at his recovery persuade her otherwise. He pulls her into their embrace without a second thought, and when Rose's hand finds hers in the tangle of limbs, Belle finds herself surrounded with more love than she ever thought she'd feel in her life.

As the sun sets over the castle gardens and all of its beloved roses, it is a beautiful day to be home, and it is the perfect word for it, even if Belle had to make it herself.

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# *Beautiful Anomalies*

*Audrey Rose B.*

*Beautiful anomalies is a retelling of the story of the Pied Piper, set in a more modern world. When children vanish from the little town of Hamelin, Detective Sitara Galrind goes after the man (if he can be called that) responsible for the disappearance. To find the missing children, she'll need to be smarter than he is, and be careful that he doesn't whisk her away to another world too. But Sitara has a secret of her own, and the Piper is a master at playing games.*

A square neon lamp hung from the ceiling, and white light flickered on the iron-grey walls of the interrogation room. Sitara's reflection was stark and bleak in the one-way mirror. The grim lighting tamed the tawny beige of her skin and magnified the purple lines under her eyes, giving her face a sickly glow.

She had slept less than twelve hours over the last three days.

The girl in the mirror looked gaunt, frightening, alien, even in her bland gray pantsuit and tight ponytail. She wondered what her colleagues beyond the glass pane saw when they looked at her. Did they see an exhausted and determined co-worker in desperate need of more caffeine, or an angular and lethal creature, possessed by something raw and wild, hard to contain?

Discomfort forced Sitara's gaze away from her own face. Besides, the real danger in the room was elsewhere.

Her attention snapped back to the man, if he could be called that, who sat in front of her.

He lounged in his seat like a monarch on a throne, legs stretched out and crossed. His fingers drummed on the edge of the table. Nobody had bothered to cuff him, and it was a miracle that they'd caught him in the first place. Sitara didn't doubt that the entire unit buzzed with excitement and apprehension over his presence within their walls.

Sitara studied his fingerless gloves, mesmerized by the steady, rapid cadence of his fingers on the table. His gloves

were made of granite-grey wool, which seemed like an odd choice. From him, she would have expected leather, silk, or some magical fabric hewn from moonlight and nightmares, not something as plain as wool.

Did the winter nights set his teeth on edge? Did he feel the cold, did he shiver in the wind?

Sitara slid into the opposite chair and examined him.

He wore a plain sweater, dark green like a forest in the night, over a white shirt. A black tie hung loose and careless around his neck. His hair, shades of copper and auburn, was slicked back, with a handful of strands spilling across his forehead. As for his eyes, Sitara refused to linger on them for too long. She knew better than to marvel at the amber flecks in his brown gaze, like golden stardust dancing deep in the abyss.

When he smiled, it was gentle and harmless. A swift curve of his lips, and he turned into a polite young man, a bashful college student, an innocent deer. A mask, a trick.

Sitara's mouth tightened. "Where are they?"

His laughter chimed like the song of a distant river, buried in memories she didn't know she had. "Straight to the point, I see." His voice reminded her of a feather, a teasing caress meant to draw goosebumps.

"I don't like to waste time."

"So I see. You found me in four days. Others would have needed weeks."

“And I’ll find the children just as quick. This, here, is an opportunity for you to cooperate. Reduce your penance. We’re doing you a favor. So you might as well help us before we find them on our own.”

He laughed again. “Oh, I highly doubt you’ll manage that. They’re well-hidden.”

“So they’re alive.”

His smile widened. “Corpses can be hidden, too.”

Earlier, Captain Jace had taken Sitara aside and warned her that she wasn’t ready for this.

“He’s a monster, Galrind,” she’d told her. “A human-looking one, maybe, but a monster nonetheless. His kind usually is.”

Sitara had insisted. She’d read his file enough times to know it by heart. He may have been an enigma built on countless conflicting tales and wrapped up in mist, but that enigma belonged to her.

The Pied Piper was hers.

*She* had found him. She had smoked him out. She could wring answers out of him, and nothing would kill the resolve burning deep within her.

“Even your kind doesn’t kill children lightly.”

His brow quirked. “My kind? And that would be? Besides, you forget. Humans kill, too. Humans are capable of horrors that rival what ‘my kind’ can do.” He mimed

quotation marks, a slick and effortless gesture that seemed too human for him. “We don’t have a monopoly on atrocities.”

“Where are the children, Sorrel?”

She could have sworn the golden specks in his gaze had kindled.

“Ah,” he said. “*Sorrel*. Is that the name you have on file?”

“It’s your first name, isn’t it? The one your mother gave you.”

“It’s possible. I do prefer my other moniker, though.”

“Too bad. Sorrel is what I’m calling you.”

“And what should I call you?”

She pursed her lips. “Detective Galrind.”

“I’m not sure that works for me. If you insist on using my first name, which nobody does, it seems only fair that I call you by yours.”

“Forget it.”

*Never give one of them your full name*, she remembered. Names were powerful things. Everyone on the squad knew this. It was one of the first lessons drilled into your head during training.

He sighed a little and swatted at an invisible fly before crossing his arms over his chest.

“I fail to see how I’m in the wrong here.” He eased back

in his seat. The childish part of her considered shoving him so the chair would topple over. “I performed a service. I didn’t get my payment. Take it up with the Hamelin people. It’s not my fault if I was promised money I didn’t get.”

Sitara kept her calm. “There are lawyers for that kind of problem. Most people don’t resort to kidnapping.”

“Eh. The system doesn’t work too well for people like me. But you’d know, wouldn’t you?”

His smile was intruding as a puff of smoke. Her lungs tightened, and she struggled to keep her secrets from creeping up on her face.

He tilted his head at her, fingertips still dancing on the table. There was, she thought, a sort of twisted elegance to him, a magnetism that made her wonder if his flute was needed for people to follow him at all.

“Tell me your name,” he said.

She shot back, “Tell me where the children are.”

He grinned. “Your name’s not worth that much.”

“Then what’s worth it? What do you want?”

“About a million things you can’t give me. Or won’t.”

“You’ve been offered money, if I recall. Or is your memory faulty?”

“Interest rate goes up, darling, and I don’t like being swindled. That puts a price on top of a heavy fare. I got those winged rodents out of their city, and I doubt they

could afford my fare in the first place. In fact, there's probably not enough money in their town or yours to convince me."

"And how about immunity? We could offer you that. If you cooperate."

"Ha! Immunity. Good one. One, I don't trust their kind to hold up that bargain. Two, you assume they could keep me locked up if I didn't want to be here. That's not the case."

The barest hint of a smug smile touched her lips. "We caught you this time, didn't we? Even if you escape, we could do it again."

His laugh was the response to a challenge she hadn't meant to issue. "Maybe I let you catch me. Maybe I'm just where I want to be. Sitting across from the loveliest detective in the squad."

"Flirting will get you nowhere."

"Flirting got me plenty of places, actually. But sometimes, I just do it for fun."

*Play along, a bone-rattling instinct screamed within her. Lure him in. You're more dangerous than he realizes. You are shadow and blood and ice-blue fire, and he won't know what hit him, and he'll yield and plead and you'll win it all.*

Sitara considered her options. She knew the specifics and rules of her job well. Her education had been thorough. Still, in practice, she'd found that one particular lesson often eclipsed the others.

Fae-folk were unpredictable, volatile and ruthless. They had a tendency to change the rules and twist any situation to their advantage. A lot of the time, learned methods needed to be thrown out of the window.

Improvisation was a skill that Sitara Galrind mastered.

As tempting as it was to step into the web and tear it down from the inside, she ignored the impulse for now. “If you truly let us catch you, as you say, then that means you have a reason for being here.”

He shrugged like an uncooperative teenage boy called out by an expectant teacher. “Even things like us get bored.”

“Things like us?”

“Yes. Like us. Beautiful anomalies.” His pupils had widened, turning his eyes almost black, like coal that blazed gold instead of red. Sitara’s heart gave an uneasy thump. “But since you found me with surprising ease, I figured I’d throw you a bone.”

“How generous.”

“Tell you what. We’ll play a game. An answer for an answer. *Yes* or *no* questions. You answer honestly, so will I. How about that, Detective?”

*Don’t play games with a Fae.*

She pictured Captain Jace stiffening behind the one-way mirror, muttering to herself, *don’t you dare, Galrind. Don’t you fall for that trick...*

“Deal.”

She half expected Jace’s voice to thunder through the speakers and summon her back to the other side of the mirror. It didn’t.

Good. She’d already decided that she wouldn’t leave, not unless people came to drag her out of the room. She had the Pied Piper on a hook. The game would be of his making, but that didn’t mean she could not play to win.

She knew what his first question would be before he spoke it.

“Is your first name Sitara?”

“Yes.” It was no surprise, that he’d know. Perhaps he’d known before they’d even met.

He smiled. “Spells, that’s a pretty name. One of the Fae queens, if the old titles still apply, was called Sierra. It sounds like a note from a violin, I always thought. Yours is a bit harsher. It has a hint of bite, like you. How much do you know about the queens?”

“I’m not answering any extra questions.”

He nodded. “That’s fair. Your turn, Sitara.”

He drew out her name like honey on his tongue.

He was so easy to hate.

Her pulse sped up with each second. “Are the children alive?”

“Yes.”

Her chest loosened in pure relief. “Are they..”

“My turn.”

She held her tongue. He studied her face for a long time, stretching out the seconds, his eyes surveying each detail of her expression- her set jaw, her withering glare, her tight mouth... He let his gaze linger on the last feature and licked his lips. Slow, suggestive. Deliberate.

Sitara rolled her eyes.

“Have you ever killed?” he asked her.

“Yes.”

Three times.

First, there were the stories that people knew, two final and unforgettable shots that haunted some of her sleepless hours.

But long before, there had been an accident, a nightmare of blue tendrils that swiveled and swirled and refused to relent.

*You're a dead man*, a teenage girl had said, and soon, the dead man had thudded on the floor.

She didn't let the covert memory throw her off track. “Have the children been harmed?”

His lip twitched. “No.”

“You promised honesty.”

“I am honest. The children have not been harmed. Should you get them back, they’ll be good as new. Perhaps even better.”

Her heart skipped at the last part. It was a clue. It meant something.

If only he could be quiet for a second so her brain could work, then click, but he gave her no chance to reflect on the sentence.

“Have you ever seen Mornreeve?”

Her mind was still chasing after his previous words. She hoped that Captain Jace would pick up the thread.

“Sitara.”

“Sorry. Please, repeat the question.”

He complied.

Maddening visions of ivory-white buildings and onyx-black rooftops, glazed in dazzling moonlight, swarmed her mind. Like the stories about the Pied Piper, the many tales that spoke of Mornreeve scattered into a thousand directions. The descriptions agreed on its colors and its architecture, but when it came to its character, no accounts coincided. To some, Mornreeve was a nightmare that even daylight could not appease. To others, it was an endless pipe dream that rendered life on the human side tasteless and vapid, a memory that ached like a phantom limb.

The only certainty was that Mornreeve changed

whoever visited it. Once you saw the Fae City that sat on the frontier of the two worlds, you were never the same again.

Sitara had once met a woman who'd lived there for a while, for fifteen days or a century, she'd said. She'd returned to the human world with the wildness of hungry animals in her gaze.

Of Mornreeve, she'd told Sitara this, "It is like an architect forced someone to stand on a ledge before a dizzying abyss of starlight, then pried that person open to take that vertigo and build a city from it."

That was how Sitara liked to picture it.

She shook her head. "No. Is that where the children are? In Mornreeve?"

The Pied Piper grinned like a child who'd found a ladybug on his windowsill. "Clever girl. Yes."

Sitara felt her stomach clench. Mornreeve was an odd, maddening territory that answered to neither Fae nor human laws. Her unit had no jurisdiction there. Mornreeve was untouchable, impregnable, and Fae-human relations were so strained that it would take a long time for them to get the children back.

"Have you ever wanted to see it?" he asked. "Visit it?"

He'd made honesty a requirement. "Yes."

She was thankful for the one-way mirror. She didn't want to know what her colleagues thought of her answer.

“Now, tell me the truth. Is there something other than money that would convince you to let them go?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what it is.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I’m not done playing yet.”

“I am.”

“But it was just getting interesting.” He folded his hands and leaned forward. Embers glinted in his eyes, flakes carved from the sharpest gold. “I have so many more questions.”

“I have plenty for you as well.”

“You want an answer, you need to give me one.”

“No. I ask the questions here.”

A muscle feathered in his jaw. “Don’t make yourself into a swindler, Sitara. We made a deal. Let’s not ruin a perfectly nice time. But if you want to forget about the *Yes* and *No* answers, fine, except it’s still my turn. Now, you answer my question, I’ll answer yours.”

She threw him a withering glare. His mouth formed a perfect curve, a striking smile that quickened her heartbeat.

“Tell me,” he said. “What do you feel, now, Sitara? Sitting here, in front of me. What do you think? Feel?”

She adjusted her shirt collar in a mindless gesture. The fabric was cool against her moist fingertips. “That’s two

different questions. Thinking and feeling are not the same.”

“Let’s start with what you think, then.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What I think? You want to know what I think?”

“That’s what I asked for.”

“Fine. I look at you, and I think to myself, ‘What kind of man is heartless and greedy enough to take his revenge by kidnapping children?’”

He flashed her a grin that was all teeth and menace. “Ah, but you forget. I’m not a man.”

As Sitara studied his spine-chilling smile, she realized the inescapable truth.

Questions and games would lead her nowhere with him. He would drag out each round until the outcome played in his favor.

If she wanted to retrieve the children, she would need to break him.

She thought she knew how.

Sitara Galrind was a focused, sharp-minded woman who picked a lane and crossed its length until she’d reached her goals. People deemed her a resolute and fierce future sergeant whose willpower induced respect, but she was also

a creature of habit. She wolfed down two cups of coffee a day in her trademark flowery mug. She ordered the same Thai lunch on Wednesdays. She listened to the same flute concerto every rainy weekend. She dropped her keys at the bottom of her purse and always wasted at least fifteen seconds trying to get them out. She scowled at people who cursed in her vicinity, and her jaw dropped in pure dismay every time she caught herself swearing.

They thought her predictable with good reason, but they lacked a crucial piece of information.

People knew that Sitara Galrind possessed enough drive to climb the highest mountains.

They didn't know she could throw herself into the violent waters of a wild stream and change its current.

She left her chair. The Piper's relentless gaze followed her every move.

She circled the table, her step slow and deliberate, a predator circling her prey.

She strolled towards the space behind his chair and leaned forward to whisper in his ear, "You will tell me how to get them back."

The table rattled when the Pied Piper gripped its edges.

Wisps of dark blue magic, like ink in water, crawled out of Sitara's mouth and rushed along his jawline. He threw his head back to avoid them. The magic flew by and writhed over the table before fizzling and vanishing like smoke.

Captain Jace's voice boomed on the microphone, a sharp warning. "Galrind!"

Sitara turned and glared at the one-way mirror. "You will not be heard," she commanded.

The glass cracked, and an ear-splitting sound whistled through the speakers. It reduced Captain's Jace bellowing voice to a chaotic buzzing.

Footsteps hurried towards the interrogation room.

Sitara took a step, looked at the door and said, "You will not open."

A vein of indigo landed on the handle and locked it in place. A weight slammed against the door from the other side, but Sitara knew it wouldn't budge for now.

The Piper's eyes glittered. "You're part Fae, too," he murmured. "I knew I felt it when you came in."

Magic pulsed on Sitara's tongue, craving release after being buried for such a long time. She'd tamed her own mouth and muted the ferocious and daunting power that simmered up her throat for years. Now, it wanted to howl. Lethal and violent commands threatened to burst from her lips.

She could have ordered his veins to ice, his heart to burn, his eyes to plunge him into a darkness of complete horror. The formidable possibilities tempted her.

*You are still human, Sitara told herself. You are human,*

*you are human.*

She planted her palms on the table and looked into his tantalizing eyes. “You will tell me how to get them back. *You will.*”

A smirk curved his mouth. “You know, they might actually throw you in jail for this.”

“I don’t care.”

He examined her like she was a thread in a tapestry he meant to unravel without knowing which string to pull first.

“No,” he said at last. “I guess you don’t, do you?”

“Tell me. Or else...”

His lip twitched in amusement. “You think your little trick will make me talk? That’s cute. That’s very cute.”

She met his gaze without flinching before speaking in a voice of nightmares. “Your neck is filled with iron.”

Blue light crawled like insects on the Piper’s throat, and his breath hitched. He panted, but his eyes were alight with pure exhilaration.

She grimaced. “... Are you enjoying this? *You are messed-up.*”

He grinned as the trail of magic fizzled on his jaw. “Guilty as charged.”

“The children.”

“I don’t think so.”

“All right. Maybe I can’t make you tell me. But I can make your silence very unpleasant for you.”

“Oh, please do.”

“Galrind!”

Captain Jace’s voice thundered past the white noise in the speakers. The door handle rattled.

Still lounging in his seat as though he’d crowned himself king of the precinct, the Pied Piper studied her, his eyes twinkling. “Someone’s going to be on probation,” he sang.

“You’re going to be quiet,” she snapped. Ink-like smoke snapped his lips shut. “The only thing you’re allowed to tell me now is how to get the children back.”

Magic pulsed through the distance between Sitara Galrind and Sorrell, the Pied Piper. A rippling flux of power kept them apart yet bound them together, a strange tug on both their ribs, their very own gravity. Sitara’s magic dwindled, and her relentless stare became her only weapon.

Sorrell’s throat bobbed. He opened his mouth.

The door flew open. Sitara didn’t have time to turn.

Electricity droned behind her and brutally latched onto her neck. The darkness closed in on her, sucking all light out of her surroundings, all except for the golden flecks still shining in the Pied Piper’s eyes.

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Rain drenched Sitara's navy blue coat. The wind had bent her umbrella backward and rendered it useless. She'd stuffed it at the bottom of her bag before upturning her collar and shielding her head with a soaked magazine she'd never planned on reading anyway.

Water splashed all over her legs as she hurried through the deserted street leading up to her building. Despite the late hour, cars growled and raced through puddles in the adjacent boulevard. The rain blurred the city lights in the distance. At the edge of the narrow alley, a lamppost glowed and glazed the wet pavement in yellow light.

Sitara snuck under the thick gutter that lined the building's entrance and shuffled through her purse for her keys. Sodden strands of black hair had escaped her ponytail and stuck to her face. She grabbed her phone to aim its light inside her bag. Two texts from Mara Jace flashed across the screen. The young woman ignored them.

Nearly a month had passed since Sitara's encounter with the Pied Piper. One bold move had sufficed to ruin everything she'd ever worked for.

She tried not to let it darken her mood, but the looming end of her career was a growing lump in her throat, an anchor pinning her down to the bed each morning.

Her fingers brushed against a slab of cold metal in her purse. She was still fumbling to grab her keys when a shadow crept up on the brick wall in front of her.

Sitara turned and froze.

While the storm battered the entire city, it drizzled down on the Pied Piper, the suggestion of a rainfall around his silhouette. His coat was deep brown like rosewood, and his skin tone looked warmer than it had in the grim interrogation room. Instead of pale and sallow, it was light amber, closer to the rare pictures of him she'd seen before. His black scarf hid most of his dark green turtleneck, and the weather had tousled some of his hair. He smoothed it down and shoved his hands in his pockets. Before he did, Sitara recognized the same gray gloves he'd worn during their first meeting. She wondered if there was a story behind them, or if he simply liked to feel the wool on his skin, even when the climate didn't call for it.

He smiled. "Good evening, Sitara Galrind."

She tried not to look into his eyes. The eerie amber light from the lamppost magnified their unnatural shade. "I thought you'd gone back to Mornreeve for a while."

One of his eyebrows arched. "*Back* to Mornreeve? You've done your research. You know I don't spend much time there."

"Maybe you should consider it, given all the trouble you made on our side lately."

A grin crossed his lips. "Trouble is my middle name." She rolled her eyes. "And besides, things ended well for all parties involved last time. The children are back in their boring little beds, and I got my money. No harm, no foul."

*Things ended well for all parties involved.* Anger kindled in the pit of her stomach. It certainly hadn't ended well for her. She'd spent the past month telling herself that next to the safety of the children, her career didn't matter, but the comfort of that thought lessened with each day spent trying to occupy her busy mind.

Sitara adjusted the hem of her coat over her legs. "I'm surprised you took their deal," she said. "It was barely what you were promised in the first place."

He delved his hands deeper in his pockets and shrugged. "I grew tired of the little game."

She leaned against the damp wall. Rain dripped down from the gutter above her. "Well, good. You were right to agree. And right not to harm the children."

"Don't get any delusions. Just because I didn't kill them doesn't mean I didn't consider it. They just paid me before I could."

"How nice of you, to make sure my opinion of you is cemented."

"It's my pleasure." He paused. "So. You got fired, huh?"

Her jaw clenched. "I'm on probation. They're reviewing my case."

"To determine how dangerous you are, I assume. How long did you think you'd be able to hide your magic, anyway? Doesn't your little anti-Fae unit have detectors or something?"

“First, it’s not an anti-Fae unit. It’s a special task force that handles Fae-related cases. Second, as someone who spends a lot of time on our side, you should know those detectors aren’t worth shit.”

His laughter could have ripped the night apart. She didn’t flinch. “Cursing! Oh, I like it. There’s something about human curses. They’re so honest and simple, straight to the point. Fae curses are too showy.”

The keys were cool in Sitara’s palm.

The building’s entrance was near. She could have retreated to her apartment in a matter of seconds. She could have ended this discussion. She could have stopped lingering in the rain with him.

The Pied Piper bit the inside of his cheek and kicked a crooked hole in the pavement. “To think. You caught the big bad criminal. Helped save the day. But you’re not a hero to them, are you? You’re a monster.” He smiled. “Like me.”

She smirked to hide the effect of his words. “Maybe. But there are different types of monsters. I doubt even they can miss the difference.”

His grin widened, and her stomach iced.

“What? What is it?”

“You said *they*.”

She tightened her grip on her keys. “It’s late. I have to go to bed.”

“Wait.”

Something flashed on his face, an uncharacteristic lack of poise. He took a small step forward then straightened abruptly, as though he needed to keep himself from taking another one.

She narrowed her eyes at him, a warning not to inch closer.

“You know,” he said. “The stars look more beautiful, on the other side. They seem closer, somehow. Like they’re always ready to *devour* you.” His voice dropped to a lush and dangerous whisper on the word, a reflection of the thrilling consumption he described. “You’d like it there. How about a vacation?”

“You should be a travel agent.”

“Interesting thought. You know, I might give that a try. I bet I could sell a trip downtown for the price of a cruise to Tahiti.” He grinned again. “I’m very charming.”

“If you were so charming, you wouldn’t need a flute to get people to follow you.”

“Point taken.”

The silence that stretched out between them needled Sitara like a discordant note in a lullaby. For a moment, the Pied Piper stared at the water warbling through the gutter. He wiped his damp face with his gloved palm and rubbed his jaw.

“You know,” he mused without looking at her. “I could play my pipes, now. Steal away someone I like, for a change.”

Sitara laughed, a mask of derisive indifference. “I’m very flattered.”

“You should be. But the offer is real. It’d be profitable for me, to take someone like you to Mornreeve.”

Deflection felt safer than taking him seriously. “Always running after money.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean money. Profit comes in many forms. I do nothing needlessly or pricelessly, but cash isn’t the only thing that’s worth my attention. It’s a pointless currency on the other side anyway. If you’d seen Mornreeve, you’d understand.”

“Since I haven’t, why don’t you explain it to me?”

His smile held a trace of sincerity it had lacked so far. “How do you think Mornreeve was built? Mornreeve is an impossibility, darling, a beautiful anomaly. Like you and me.” He gestured between them. “Humans and Faes shouldn’t collide, yet they do. Most of the time, it’s pure devastation, a strange crime. But sometimes, it makes things like us, things that don’t quite fit anywhere. Not on the other side, and not on this one. Mornreeve is the same.” He slipped his hands back into his pockets. “It was created by magic like yours, by voices carried beyond the limits of physics, of reality, of the possible. I can play my music and make someone forget what their name is, but you... You’re a

maker. Your voice, your desire, it bends reality to its will. You're like the others that built Mornreeve, the architects. People who could say, 'This moonbeam will become a house', and the light solidified to make it so. Mornreeve is eternal, Fae-like, but what's human about it is that it's ever-changing, in constant mutation. What's built is rebuilt and is rebuilt. You could make your mark on it. Build a few things of your own."

All of a sudden, Sitara's heart felt too small and caged for the wildness that wanted to spill from it. She'd never thought of her strange magic as a means of creation. To her, it had always signified danger, destruction, a sin to hide and bury.

There were so many things that she'd wanted, and so many that she'd considered impossible for her. She'd seen magic as an unwelcome force that boxed her in and forced a part of her into hiding.

The idea that she could turn the impossible into a reality wrung the breath from her lungs.

She dug the tip of her key into her palm, a reminder that she was still human enough to bleed. "How would that be profitable to you, exactly?"

He shrugged again. "I have my ways. Besides, you grow bored after a few decades. I'm always looking for new investments." He adjusted the hem of his gloves. "Think about it."

“May I see them?”

He blinked. “See what?”

“Your flute. You carry it, don’t you? May I see them?”

She didn’t know what mad urge had pushed her to ask. He studied her expression, letting her request hang between them. He shook his head. “Maybe next time.”

She hid her disappointment well. “If there is a next time.”

“I’d like to think there will be. That’s my optimistic side. Don’t tell anybody I have one.”

A smile threatened to slide over her lips.

“And besides,” he continued. “You might not see the pipes tonight, but darling, soon, you’ll hear them.”

His tone indicated the end of their discussion.

He didn’t disappear in a flash or stroll back up the street. Instead, he wandered into the drizzle and melted into the darkness, his brown coat and auburn hair blackening like a late evening sky. His silhouette slid into the night like the last trace of sunset, until there was nothing but rain and glittering yellow light in his wake.

Sitara downed a long breath that filled up her lungs and hurried back to her apartment. She showered, slipped into her nightgown and crawled into bed.

The dizzying lights flashing through her curtains kept her awake for a while as she watched them glowing on her

bedroom walls. One second, the spines lined up on the bookshelves were emerald green, then sea blue, then lemon yellow. The lights came from a nearby store whose sign towered over the adjacent boulevard. Each night, it started flaring around midnight and didn't stop until right before dawn.

Sitara wondered if Mornreeve had 24-hour stores or any stores at all.

She curled up in a bundle of sheets, faced away from the window and stared at the bird silhouettes painted on the wall next to her bed. One of them lingered inside an open cage while the others soared over the headboard, delicate white shapes on shabby teal paint.

Sitara sighed, closed her eyes.

She opened them again when the music began.

A high note whistled through the night, then a quieter one, then a slow, teasing one that fizzled into a breath of air.

Goosebumps spread across Sitara's arms, and she murmured, "Oh, no."

The subsequent notes, forlorn and pleading, spiraled around her like creeping vines before diving into her chest. They inched closer to her ribs until they enclosed them, greedy guardians of the heart battering the bone.

The melody deepened to a darker, more feral rhythm that tightened its grip on Sitara's soul. The music flowed like a river whose current kept quickening, rushing towards the

vast and boundless ocean where drowning was inevitable, even welcomed.

Sitara turned over on her back, stretched out her arms over her head and closed her eyes once more.

Somewhere, in this world or the other, the Pied Piper played for her. He called to her. He beckoned her into his web of magic and promises and winnings. His music rolled over her like the tide frothing on the sand. It blew through her and scattered her thoughts, silenced her reason. She no longer felt the mattress underneath her. She was a child floating through a waking dream, a bird freed from a cage, a half-Fae girl whose only limits were the ones she'd made.

Like the stars from the other side the Piper had mentioned, it felt like the music would devour her, except it never did. The eerie, enchanting song hovered over her, like rain that drizzled down from the sky and stopped half an inch from her eager skin. It was a simmering storm refusing to thunder, the suggestion of a devastating tempest that would flood her senses if it roared. The music drew her towards a ledge without granting her the satisfaction of the fall.

It felt exhilarating. It felt dangerous. It felt like home.

Despite the call of the Pied Piper, Sitara didn't leave her bed that night.

When the melodies finally lulled her to sleep, she dreamed of building impossible houses out of sunlight, maddening bridges out of wind, wild gardens out of

shooting stars.

She woke up dazed and exhilarated and terrified, knowing that one day, those visions would refuse to remain tucked into her imagination.

One day, she, too, would follow the Pied Piper.

# *Border Songs*

Claire Patz

*Border Songs is a retelling of the ancient Chinese tale of The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl. The love story between Zhinü and Niulang is the story of Vega and Altair, and is celebrated every seventh day of the seventh month in the year. The meeting of the two stars in the night sky across the Milky Way has been celebrated in many Asian cultures since the Han dynasty (206 BC- 220 AD) with street festivals and exhibitions. The original myth is a story of two gods in the heavens who love each other so fiercely that they neglect their duties to be together. They are forced to be apart, separated by the Milky Way, and fated to meet only once a year on a bridge made of magpies. It all seemed to fit together*

*to set Border Songs in Chicago in 1892, one year before the Chicago World's Fair, or the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. I tried my best to keep the narrative accurate to the time period, and to add little touches that speak to the time the characters live in. The Mississippi River seemed to be the perfect Milky Way, and Marshall Field's and the Union Stock Yards the perfect place for our Weaver Girl and Cowherd to work. I threw in a few mentions of other myths, like the Red String of Fate and the Pied Piper of Hamelin, and added my own magical item, the Violin, and I hope the love shows.*

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The notes of his violin screamed through the loud darkness of the Chicago streets. The sound of the resulting song that flew from the strings was harsh, but not unwelcomed. It was beautiful, even in its desperation and impatience. An old man on his way home from the shift change faltered in his steps before he continued on into the dispersing city crowds, shaking his head. A small woman with dark hair and long fingers watched him turn the corner before deftly opening her second floor window and sitting out on the sill to hear better. Her bright face turned towards the moon, and her glittering black eyes silently kept vigil until she could hear the music slowly travelling closer and growing sweeter. Out of the alley trudged the violin player, his whiskers chafing against the crude leather chin rest. Seeing the open window, he stopped beneath it and

raised tired eyes to the dark-haired woman. Tonight was different. He was used to a solitary vigil of the dark streets, but here she was. His fingers twitched imperceptibly at the strings.

The song no longer screamed, but neither was it gentle. It swelled and pulled hard at her, threatening to snatch her right from her perch to see her shattered on the brick cobbles below. Her shaking gasp was barely audible, but after a few seconds she somehow found the wordless, answering harmony to the notes engulfing her and regained her head. Her rasping voice sang, fighting back at his song and coaxing the feeling further. The raw sound of them rose and fell, finally settling into something inexperienced but beautiful.

Vega stared blankly at the man below as the violin faded back into the soft notes of a lullabye. She tucked a loose strand of hair back around the knot at the top of her head and, noticing her fingers were shaking in the realization of her recent bravery, she let her hand drop. “A-ah, apologies,” she called, whirling and disappearing into her small dormitory.

Al made a half-formed noise, the bow discordantly lifting from the strings. “Wai-” But she was gone. It was too late to knock on the building’s door; this was the company housing district, after all, and he would be in as much trouble as she would if their superiors knew they were up after curfew. He sighed heavily and put the bow back to the strings. The bow lamented her departure before he turned

away down the road, committing the brick house and her dark eyes to memory.

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Before the sun peeked through the high-rises, Vega was up, boiling chopped chicory for her seven charges. She threw the last of the rationed fatback pork into her cast-iron skillet and mixed up another panful of cornbread, putting it on the stove to cook. Pulling a dingy copy of the previous night's Chicago Evening Post out of her apron pocket, she sat down at the kitchen table to read the newest muckraking. She didn't care too much for the stories; with these penny papers, she figured you got what you paid for, but it was something to occupy her tumultuous thoughts. The man with the violin always came on clear nights when the moon was bright. He must be one of the Irish, with all of his thick, dark red hair. Why did she insist upon running away last night? Why did she open her mouth? She never had before. He only ever passed by under her window on his journey through the streets. Why did he stop, as if he had planned to? She huffed and snapped the newspaper over. Who was he?

Vega's thoughts were cut short by the sound of shuffling footfalls making their way down the wooden stairs. Mercy was always the first one awake, the wiry mass of curls atop her head sticking out every which way and her eyes bleary. She padded into the kitchen in her worn slippers and robe, and made a noncommittal noise when Vega greeted her with a gentle "good morning." Vega smiled, set out a plate,

and poured the young woman a cup of chicory. Mercy grunted and gingerly sipped the scalding liquid, focusing on the hot tin mug in her hands and trying to gather the wisps of thought that floated through her tired mind. She vaguely heard Margarete and Cass thundering down the stairs and felt Cass' strong, purposeful fingers loosening her hair from its plait and attempting to pull a comb through it. "Christ, Mercy," Cass' low voice grumbled, ignoring the small gasp and muttered *tsk* from Margarete, "how does one even grow hair like this? It's a rat's nest!"

Mercy made another unintelligible noise and speared a piece of pork, setting it carefully on her plate, making sure to steer the meat clear of the chips in the secondhand china. Margarete sat down in her place beside Mercy and served herself, bowing her head in prayer before using a pocketknife to primly cut the meat in front of her. Cass pulled a few hairpins from her pocket and secured Mercy's hair in a low, twisting creation. She moved around the table to unceremoniously reach over plates and mugs and a precariously placed skillet to grab a slice of brown bread and the small crock of butter, much to Margarete's continued tutting. Violet was suddenly at Cass' left, one of her petite hands re-situating the skillet and the other deftly holding Cass' sleeve out of the grease. Violet's brown eyes were watchful as she prepared her plate and poured chicory for herself and Cass, but they lightened in faint amusement at the sight of Cynthia and Mary in the doorway. Cynthia lead the way, breezing into the room and sweeping into her chair at the foot of the table. Mary sat at her left,

her large frame engulfing the chair. They bowed their heads together, Mary whispering something to Cynthia that elicited a tinkling laugh from her and a grumble from Mercy. “It’s far too early, Cynthia. Take your sunshine out of here,” she grumbled, her fork clattering against the plate in frustration. Cynthia opened her mouth in protest, only to close it again at Mary’s fingers at her wrist. Laura grasped Mercy’s shoulder briefly as she flounced past, whispering a “stop that, Miss Sleepy,” before settling into her seat at Vega’s left. Laura straightened her glasses on her small nose, peering over them to shoot Cass a withering look. “And don’t take the Lord’s name in vain. It’s disrespectful.”

“Not my Lord, Laur,” Cass retorted, ripping a chunk of meat with her teeth and chewing, “I’ll try to talk more pretty, though,” she said, mockingly quashing Laura’s building bluster. Vega looked over the seven women around the table and rolled her shoulders, hoping to banish the lingering questions she had about the violin player from the night before. She didn’t know who he was, and it was unlikely that they would ever see each other again or have a chance to meet formally. She had other things and people to tend to, and she didn’t have time for the violin player, no matter how handsome or intriguing he was.

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Three city blocks away, Al poured out some coffee and added cream. He yawned and ascended the two flights of stairs to his stuffy attic room where he unlatched his window and climbed out onto the roof to watch the city

slowly awaken. Street lamps were being extinguished below him, and in the distance, he could hear the cries of paperboys starting as they heralded their early editions. He fished a crust of bread from his pocket and chewed thoughtfully on it. Who was that woman? He knew he would be hard-pressed to keep his mind on his job today. He silently went over the previous night in his mind, peppering his musings with sips of scalding coffee. He finally rose and slipped back through his window to get ready for the day. He stretched on a pair of suspenders and quickly tied his tie before jamming a cap on his head and rushing out the door to catch the streetcar out to the Yards. He pulled on his jacket as he ran, tripping over his ill-fitting shoes. Al waved back at the saluting figures in the distance, slowing his run to catch his breath and walk the rest of the way. Ira and Mack were already waiting at the stop with Reuben, one of his housemates, and they all acknowledged him quietly as he walked up. He nervously scrabbled around in his pocket for a small can of pomade and a comb, working the grease through his hair as he waited for the car to come. Today, he scoured the group of men and women around him, hoping against hope to see the dark eyes from last night looking back at him. He knew it was futile; she would probably be a passenger on one of the later streetcars. Purchasing cattle for Union Stock Yards had Al in to work far ahead of most laborers, and he usually used this time for chatting with his friends before they all had to slip back into the daily grind.

*Speaking of friends*, Al thought, rolling his eyes good naturedly as his other housemate, the perpetually tardy

Chip, came running up. “Sorry!” Chip huffed, leaning over to put his hands on his knees and breathe in large gasps. “I forgot my lunch pail, and then my cap, and then I had to make sure the door was locked...”

Mack, next to him, scoffed. “You’d forget your hair if it weren’t already attached to your head.” In reply, Chip grimaced and pulled a match from his pocket, idly striking it against the brick wall he leaned on. “Everyone here?” Al asked, looking around as the streetcar pulled to their stop.

“Yeah, yeah, Pa, keep your trousers on,” Reuben retorted, climbing into the car. Al shook his head and piled in as well, trying to focus himself on the day ahead.

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Vega spent her day rather uneventfully, considering her position as head of the Dressmaking and Alterations at Marshall Field’s and Company. Despite the fact that there was always something to do or oversee in the department, Vega couldn’t focus overall on the day. She sighed, briefly pausing to check herself in the mirror and straighten her shirtwaist with a determined tug. She mentally shook herself and attended to the customer at hand. She was an example, after all, and she didn’t have time for daydreaming.

“...the blue, I think; with a length of peach ribbon throughout,” the young woman finished, looking quite uncertain and flustered. “Although, the chartreuse...”

Vega’s eyes narrowed slightly, quickly eyeing the other fabrics strewn across the consulting area. Together, the blue

and peach would make an already garish ensemble look hideous. She squared her shoulders and interrupted the fretting woman. “Perhaps, miss, you would prefer a more monochromatic color pallet for your trousseau. You have so wisely chosen two dresses made from a lovely blush color, and we have an exquisite coral silk that was shipped in this morning.” Vega smiled at the red-haired bride-to-be. “The peach ribbon would fit so nicely with all three of those dresses, and we may even have a bit left over to send along to the jewelry department for your pearl necklace.”

The young woman stopped her bustling and blinked at Vega. “Ye-yes! You’re right, of course, but-” She looked to her mother, who was sternly chiding Cass about the misuse of lace on corsets, then back to Vega. “What shall I wear over it all? I don’t want to embarrass poor Henry when he takes me out to parties.” The young woman bit her lip, looking unsure once more. It was clear she was marrying into a family with “old money,” and Vega felt for the poor girl. She held up a finger and winked. “I’m not called ‘The Goddess’ for nothing. Let me see what we have tucked away in furs.” She swept towards the back room, catching the eye of Cass, who was still occupied arguing with the increasingly agitated mother of the bride. Pursing her lips and giving a sharp jerk of her head, Vega signaled Cass to quash the conversation and accompany her to the stockroom as soon as she could. She surveyed the rest of her department in an almost calculating manner. Everything, with the exception of the bride’s windbag of a mother, seemed to be going rather swimmingly for an average day.

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Try as he might to think of the dark-eyed woman from the night before throughout the day, Al could not find the time to focus on anything but his work. From the moment he walked under the large, turreted gate of the Union Stock Yards and lifted a two-fingered salute to Sherman, the bronze steer mounted in the center of the arch, Al was busy. He spent the day filing papers and checking steers, overseeing the arrival of each shipment of cattle, and preparing accounts for review until Ira knocked on his small office door and let himself in. “Shift change, Al. Time to go home.”

“Thanks, six already?” Al questioned, running a hand across his stubbled face.

“Yes,” he replied quietly, lifting Al’s jacket from the coat rack beside the door and held it out for him. “I’ll be an hour or so behind you all, I have some things to finish up here, but maybe I’ll catch up with you before you head out tonight.”

“Yeah, okay. Right.” Al shook himself and stood, shrugging on his coat and grabbing his set of keys. “Going home.”

Ira chuckled. “Go.”

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Vega watched the rising moon silently from the rattling window of the elevated cable car. The night was again clear,

and the lamplights were bright below her, splattering golden and copper light on the red bricks of the cobblestone streets. *Violin weather*, she thought, bemused, before she started, her heart lurching in something like fear. Violet, seated beside her, raised an eyebrow and gently grasped the cuff of Vega's sleeve between two fingertips. "I'm fine," Vega replied to the unspoken concern and gave Violet a small shake of her head. Why was she nervous? He probably wouldn't stop beneath her window again, or even remember their nondescript brick house at all. She had nothing to be anxious over. But what if he did remember? *What if he stops?* Vega scanned the sky once again, unsure if she should be excited, or if she should pray for rain.

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Al opened his violin's case reverently, his fingers blessing the faded velvet that lined the case and the worn, polished wood of the instrument. He cradled the violin in his large, calloused hands and hummed softly, thinking. If her window was open, he would stop. Just stop, not talk to her, just pause. Maybe wait for her to sing again? *That's unlikely*, he thought, setting the violin down and picking up his bow and tightening it. *She was so embarrassed about opening her mouth last night.* He held some rosin in his left hand and smoothly drew the bow across the waxy substance. The hairs would soon need to be replaced, and he knew he was dragging his feet about getting his own violin, but this one had been his Pap's. There was some almost otherworldly feel about the instrument that Al had never been able to find in other violins. This violin had seen

famine, and war, and death, but the music that came from it spoke of rolling mist and heather, and the small, lasting joys of home, and the certain shared reverence and deep, fierce passion of the watchers of stars. The violin only spoke of these things after nightfall, and his Pap warned him not to play of those things before the sky turned it's purple dark, or after Dawn's rosy fingers pulled back the curtains of the morning. Al raised his eyes to the fading light outside his window. Night was falling.

“Al, don't, don't do this to yourself,” Chip sighed from a corner as he used his pocketknife to clean his fingernails. “What is it- every time the moon is out, you go out playing that violin? It's odd, and you always come back looking like someone told you there were no more fireworks left in the world.”

Al let out a slow, steadying breath and settled the violin at his shoulder. “You don't understand,” he said tiredly, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “I have to go out there-”

“-to find whatever the blee bleh bah. I call bullshit on that!” Reuben called from his corner, where he hung off the seat of his armchair, upside down. He righted himself, huffing in frustration. “We all know about your Irish witch grandpa and his magical violin. It's bullshit, Al.”

Al raised a brow and scowled at the two. “It's not bullshit, and even if it is, what if I like playing? I can do what I want! America is a free country, after all.”

“Only free for rich boys that have money, and don’t need magic to find purpose in their sad lives,” Chip retorted, inciting a scoff from Reuben.

Al snarled at him and threw the rag he’d been using to polish the wood and help rosin his bow with deadly precision right into Chip’s face. “Shut up.”

Chip’s eyes glinted in fury. “Make me, magic witch boy.”

The wooden chair Al was sitting on crashed to the floor as the big man surged forward and tackled the other to the floor. Feeling rather left out, Reuben added a few well-placed kicks and punches before he was dragged bodily into the fight by Chip.

Al, Reuben, and Chip all halted at the sight of Ira standing silently in their doorway, his arms folded crisply against his broad chest. They stood, almost sheepishly before the younger man, Al managing to get one more good pinch in on Reuben before they quieted.

“Al, you’re late,” he said simply, silently daring Chip and Reuben to speak. “You’d better get out there before the light’s gone.”

This warranted a round of groaning from both Reuben and Chip, despite the severe glare they received from Ira. “Go,” he asserted quietly. “We’ll all be here when you come back.”

Al nodded, raised his violin and bow, and pulled the hairs across the strings a few times to test the tuning. He

shrugged a somber goodbye to his friends and slipped out his back door and into the gathering dark. The night welcomed him, wrapping around him in mantles of shadows and pockets of moonlight. He could hear the bickering voices behind him, already growing louder with laughter and good companionship instead of ire, and he smiled. Beginning his trek, his violin whispered and coaxed him forward with the same question it had been asking for years. *Where are you?* The question was quieter tonight, asking less desperately than it had been in a while; the song sounding like more of a plead. *Please come out.*

Al could walk this path blindfolded. He knew each indent, each missing brick and cracked stone. He knew where the carriage wheels and tire marks had made valleys, and which storm grates would clatter if you stepped on them. He let the music thrum through his fingers and coil around the strings, sawing at the hairs, stretching across the bow, and flicking out into the world the way an artist looped their fingers at a brush and splattered paint onto a canvas. This was art in its purest, most primal form. It radiated forth, unstable yet planned; the perfect contradiction. The sound was never quite polished; never quite finished. He knew that it worried his friends; the wildness and incomplete nature of this instrument. It had ruined his father. Neither Grady O' Buchalla, Al's grandfather, nor Donal Buckley, Al's father, ever truly found the 'song that played the violin to sleep.' Donal became a slave to the instrument, playing song after song, night after night, and trying on mates like one tried on clothing. The way Al

understood it, the violin only exacerbated Donal's natural wanderlust, and never let go. Grady raised Al, and from the moment he and his wife, Aisling, were presented with their son's progeny, they taught him to believe in the good and terrible properties of magic. Grady wove tale after tale of the violin; the joy and hurt it could create, given the hands of the player and the people the music attracted. And it was only after Aisling's death that he told Al of the song that would sing the violin to sleep. He could only describe what the song would feel like. He had never truly experienced it himself, but he spoke of a sigh of relief. A sound that would answer the question the instrument posed with a challenge, not a definitive answer. "When you meet the answerer, you'll know that a great adventure is starting. I thought I met my answerer once, but I let 'im go because o' mine blasted pride and the fear I had. Your grandmother never knew," Grady confessed. "And your father, see, he never quite found his answerer in only one person. And that's alright, you know. There can be more than one. But if you find your answerer, you work through it. You meet that challenge with every little part of you, every mite o' magic and care and each rutting drop of blood you have in you. Because, my boy, your answerer is worth the effort, no matter how hard the struggle."

Al looked up at the quiet brick house where he found himself and started, his grandfather's words fading into the stars that were pitching and wheeling above him. *Where are you?*

The song chided her gently outside her window. It pulled at her fingers like a child, wrapping around them and pulling her forward as if by some invisible string. She lifted the edge of her curtain, her breath shallow and her heart leaping about in her chest like a rabbit. What should she do? *What did it all mean?* Some strange man showing up on her doorstep, playing songs and waking u-

A strong hand clasped Vega's shoulder and reached by her to unlatch the window and throw it open. Two more hands found her face and cradled it gently between them, and through the darkness, she heard the sweet, low voice of Mercy whisper a breathless encouragement, and saw Violet's hand pull back the curtain to let the moonlight stream in. Cass guided her forward. "Well? Answer him, Vega."

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### *One Year Later*

Vega had seen the buildings unfold and unfurl like ferns. They were white; like the soft glimmer of pearls, like the harsh glint of sunlight off of Lake Michigan. There were stalls everywhere, and people had been coming for months and from all over the globe to see the marvels of this White City. This would put Chicago on the map, the officials said. It was all Vega could do to keep her girls focused on the inordinate amount of orders coming through the store, what with the excitement of the Fair practically barraging its way through the ornate doors of Marshall Fields'.

Mary and Cynthia had gone on opening day, slipping in through the throngs of people after hopping the fences in their voluminous skirts. They had come back, breathless and laughing, Mary carrying a small box of chewing gum that tasted like some unknown combination of fruits, and both of them looking rumpled and absolutely starstruck and in love.

Finally, in the early evening of a dark night in early July, Al leaned against the cooling hot stones of Marshall Fields' and stuffed creased Fair tickets into his pocket. He played with his sleeves, rolling and unrolling them again to make sure they were perfect. He silently took solace from the solidity and heat at his back, trying to calm his nerves. *She will love this*, he thought, smiling. Chip, Mack, Reuben and Ira were all with him; Chip rooting around in his pockets for a light to set off the pair of sparklers in his hand, and Ira managing to look both uncomfortable and unruffled in his stance leaning against the lamppost.

Vega exited, quietly herding Violet and Cynthia ahead of her out of the building. It had been another long day, and Vega was looking forward to collapsing into her small iron bed. Mercy and Laura had offered to cook a light dinner tonight, and Vega would not complain. She strode away, gathering such speed that the large, strong hand stopping her almost pulled her off balance.

And suddenly, he was kissing her. Out under the hot darkness pressing down on them, under the streetlamps that melted into the gathering dusk, in front of God and

everyone, he kissed her.

Her eyes were wide, her hands splayed out against his chest to push away, but she knew this mouth. She knew the smell of the musky, pine-y pomade and the silky, Braille feel of the scar that lived on the upper right corner of his lip. She could hear Laura titter behind her, and Cassandra's deep alto murmur "Lord have mercy," but she didn't care. She laughed around and into that mouth, and he pulled her closer. Al tightened his hold on her to smile at her friends; his voice a deep chuckle, "Hey, Cass. Jealous?"

Mercy stuck out her tongue at him, and Cass made a very obscene gesture, both of them hiding smiles.

Al took Vega's small hand in his and tugged her forward. "Let's go. We're going to be late!"

"What do you mean 'going to be late?' Where are we going?!" Vega cried, stumbling along behind him. "I have duties, and there's work tomorrow, and-"

Al flashed the two tickets at her, grinning as if they were made of gold. "The Fair, Vega. I got you tickets to the Fair."

She heard Cynthia squeak behind her in delight. "The Fair?! Oh, Vega, the Fair! Oh, Margarett, don't let her go in that..."

Vega felt her sleeve being tugged on by Violet, and looked up at Mercy and Mary, who descended upon her to corral her back toward the department store doors. "Wait for us by the loading docks. We'll be back in two shakes!"

Laura chirped excitedly.

Laughing, Al turned and kissed Vega again quickly, ushering her back towards the store. “Go, have fun. I’ll be waiting.”

The women burst back into the dressmaking department, unbuttoning Vega’s dress as they went. “The gold! Get the gold!” Mercy crowed, wrenching the black dress from Vega’s shoulders.

But it was Violet who held up a confection of white beads and dark midnight blue. It was a gown made for a princess, or a queen, or-

“Fit for a goddess,” Cass murmured, fingering the glittering beadwork. Vega knew in her heart that it was wrong, that the dress was for some rich woman not covered in bits of thread and the sweat of the day, but she held up her arms, unresisting, as Cynthia and Mary slipped the fabric on over her head. The smooth silk whispered over her skirts, settling into a small, graceful train behind her. The bodice grafted to her, showing a daring slip of skin at her back and showcasing her slim waist. Vega looked at her seven charges, her best friends, and grasped the skirts of the gown. “Are you all sure?” she whispered, her face red.

“Positive,” Laura replied in a no-nonsense tone, tying a simple necklace of glass beads around Vega’s throat. Violet led her over to a small settee and pulled a hairbrush from her pocket. She silently took out pin after hairpin from Vega’s tresses, letting the hair cascade down her back,

brushing as she went. The other six women were suddenly in their own borrowed gowns, each working quickly to tie laces and affix bows and pearls and earrings. Violet made short work of Vega's jet black hair, weaving in crystal stars throughout the loose waves and piling it atop the crown of her head in great roiling swells. Mary swooped in with a pair of hot tongs and carefully curled the flyaway pieces that escaped the impressive coiffure.

Vega took Violet's hand and stood, surveying the mess of a department and the beautiful specimens before her. "Well?" she said, her voice laughing. "We can always clean up and return all this tomorrow. Ladies? Let's go to the Fair!"

They stole quietly out of the loading dock doors, bustling out, one after the other. Cynthia and Mary clasped hands and took off towards the fairgrounds, Cynthia digging around in her pocketbook for a crumpled dollar. Laura took one look at Chip, his singed fingers, and the fizzling sparklers and laughed. She grabbed his sleeve and pulled him along. "Come on, you're taking me."

Cass looped her fingers through Mercy's and her arm through Reuben's. "Let's go make some trouble!" she whooped, making Margarete laugh and scamper along behind them, followed by an adventurous-looking Mack.

Vega sighed, satisfied, and met Al's eyes at last. She winked at him and stepped forward, slipping her small hand into his and grinning up at him. "Shall we?" he rumbled thickly, squeezing her fingers in adoration. "Yes,

please,” she confirmed, and they stepped out into the night, the silver moon above them.

Violet and Ira watched the two blend into the dark heat from their seat on the loading dock. Ira leaned over to kiss Violet’s proffered cheek before he snaked an arm around her middle and helped her jump from the docks to the uneven bricks below. She took his arm and smiled widely when he suggested they head home.

Al was convinced that tonight, especially, was the perfect night. There was something about the July air and the promises that hung in the air like the hanging incandescent bulbs strung between the street stalls lining the walkways between the larger buildings. They had spent hours together, looking at the new inventions and the various exhibitions. It was breathtaking, the showcase of American production and ingenuity. He knew that this was the atmosphere magic and passion thrived on, and, looking down at the lovely creature beside him, darting from stall to stall and new sight to new smell, he knew that chasing after her was where he belonged. She was the answer. She was the teasing, challenging, severe, all-in, no-holds-barred answer to the question he had been asking. He had known it for a while, and they had discussed futures before, but he finally felt as though this, this was the night for magic, and answers, and asking important questions. He dug around in his pocket, the simple gold band playing through his fingers. Fishing the ring out and clearing his throat, Al drew Vega’s attention as he knelt before her. “Vega, I was wondering, that is to say-”

“What in the nine hells do you think you’re doing, girl?!” a gruff, loud voice interrupted.

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Vega straightened from her place at the kitchen table at the sound of the back door opening. Al trudged quietly to her, and without preamble, hauled her shaking figure up from her seat and into his arms. He tucked her head into the crook of his neck and carried her the two flights of creaking stairs to her bedroom. Tucking her gently into bed, Al removed her sodden boots and placed them next to her side table. He then knelt on the floor beside her. The gown she wore shone in the starlight that winked through her curtains. It mocked them quietly, the gems and beads glittering coldly and reflecting dull light onto Al’s somber face. “What do I say to them, Al?” Vega sobbed, her hands clenching into fists and pressing hard into her eyes. “They can’t lose their jobs over this, they have nowhere to go! It’s all my fault! If we had been more careful, worked harder, maybe we wouldn’t have-”

“Vega, nothing would’ve prevented something like this. Mr. Fields is being unreasonable.”

“Is he, Al? We stole from him. We took those dresses and jewelry right out of his store and for what-”

“For the Fair,” Al sighed, realizing his part in the scheme. “I’m sorry, Vega, I should’ve stopped all that when you were heading back in. I knew that’s where you all were going, and I didn’t stop-”

“We all got caught up in the excitement. We’re all adults. We all should’ve stopped ourselves from playing Cinderella and just enjoyed the night as we were. I just- I had responsibility! I should have- I didn’t- and now they’re going to be thrown out, all alone!” Vega burst into tears again. Below them, they could hear the sound of the back door opening and the merry voices of the girls as they clambered up the stairs and talked in the kitchen. Vega turned wide eyes on Al, her face wan and tearful. He reached over and tucked a limp curl behind her ear.

“Listen,” he said quietly, his voice decided, “tomorrow, I’m going to run out and get a cart. We’re going to gather up the gowns and every last bit of the jewelry, and take it back to the store. You can wash and press them before we go in. I’ll help you. We’re going to fix this, Vega, and we’re going to present ourselves before Mr. Marshall Fields tomorrow and beg that he lets those girls keep their jobs. You might have to take the fall here, and I’m so sorry, sweetheart.” Al wiped a tear from her eye gently. “We’ll make it work out, somehow. I promise.”

There was a crash downstairs, and Al heard Chip laugh and Margarete shout in protest.

Al looked at Vega and tried to be strong. “Are you scared?” he asked, folding her hands into his and searching her face. She nodded, but her eyes held a serene acceptance as she sat up and began taking the crystals from her hair. Her shaking fingers betrayed her fear and sorrow as she placed the brilliant, shining things into Al’s outstretched and

waiting hands. Outside the room, their friends laughed around the table and laid next to each other happily in their beds, blissfully unaware that, on the seventh day of the seventh month of the year, on a night full of magic and beauty and life, the stars were falling like tears.

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Vega Kleid and Altair O' Buchalla stood before the man that held all their fates in his hand. They had both spent the better part of the morning working to sway Mr. Fields' harsh judgment away from Vega's housemates, ultimately convincing him to leave them out of his final decision entirely. Vega could live with this, she decided. *Anything as long as they're safe.* Maybe, she could find a small job doing something else, or she and Al could get married and they could live off of Al's earnings at the Yards. *This could work!* She thought, her mind racing desperately. None of it was ideal, but it could work.

"Ms. Kleid," Mr. Fields addressed Vega, "I will not dismiss you or your staff. You will, however, be kept under very close supervision by the rest of the administrative staff until a trial period of six months has concluded, and we reevaluate your position as the Head of Dressmaking. If any of your staff needs disciplinary action in that time, both you and the offender will be fired on the spot. I think this is fair, don't you?"

Vega had no choice but to nod. "Thank you, sir."

Behind them, the door opened, and turning, what Al saw

in the doorway made his heart stop and the blood rush from his face. His superior, Owen Lehr, bustled in, holding a briefcase in one hand, and hooking his spectacles over his ears with the other. “Apologies, Marshall,” he tutted, coming to sit in the plush chair beside Mr. Fields, “we had another situation that needed attending to.” The chair scraped against the marble floor of the conference room as Mr. Lehr situated himself and opened his briefcase to pull out a set of official-looking documents. “Now, then. Marshall, have you finished with the girl?” At Mr. Fields’ nod, the small, rounded man brightened. “Oh, good. Good.” He turned beady eyes on Al and began.

“Altair, the panel and I, we have been talking, and your performance has been slipping over the past year. Before, we couldn’t put a finger on why, but now, the way I figure it, you have two options.” Al raised his head, simultaneously terrified and curious. “Option one, you lose your job, we make you pay for the stolen goods this woman took, we deport you back to Ireland, but you keep the woman.” Vega stiffened and attempted to keep a scowl off her face. “Or, option two: you lose the woman, and keep your job, but at a cost.” Mr. Lehr held up a hand at Al’s start of protest. “Like I said, the Englewoods and I have been talking. We need someone we trust to go out West and invest in some good, Texas beef. You would spend a termed contract of ten years with Union Stock Yards purchasing cattle out West. Even if you still decided to stay together, you’d only be able to probably fit in a meeting maybe once a year. But, you would get to stay here in America and provide money for your

family back home. It's your choice, though." He held out a pen and the official-looking paper. "So, what do you say?"

Across the short space between them, Al's trembling fingers reached for Vega's.

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*One Year Later*

They agreed to meet in Saint Louis. Al would be coming down the Missouri River, and Vega would meet him where the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers joined. It was all very calculated, very planned, but she was still nervous. What if she had forgotten the way he felt with her? What if he had found someone else in that time, despite what his letters said? She shook her head and stared across the muddy waters at the approaching boat and the small figures scurrying across the deck. She took off her shoes, hopping around on the bank until she wrestled her feet free and stuffed her woolen socks into the toes of the worn leather and set them on the beach. The boat was closer now, and she let out a slow breath. Vega kneaded her toes into the soft mud, letting it squelch through them and ground her thoughts. All the doubts and worries and anger and loneliness, they had made it through together. They would make it. Love, she finally decided, was infinite in time and distance. Who knew what the future would hold for them, but -

Vega heard the chattering of magpies in the trees behind her, and their needy, begging cry spurred her forward into

the lapping water. She looked ahead, scouring the boat for any sign of Al's great shock of red hair. The riverboat was close enough now to make anchor and start ferrying passengers to shore. Vega waded out into the muddy waters, her skirts billowing and dragging behind her through the murk.

*Here I am.*

She heard shouting and laughing from one of the small ferrying boats, and then saw red hair arch through the air and into the river towards her. She grabbed large fistfuls of her skirts and slipped on the slimy, muddy rocks as she hurried forward. Al broke the surface and started swimming in great strokes, his heart skipping beats and his air coming in gasps.

*Where are you? Where are you?*

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Meeting across the Milky Way  
Through the varying shapes of  
the delicate clouds, the sad  
message of the shooting stars, a  
silent journey across the Milky  
Way, one meeting of the  
Cowherd and Weaver amidst the

golden autumn wind and jade-  
glistening dew, eclipses the  
countless meetings in the  
mundane world.

The feelings soft as water, the  
ecstatic moment unreal as a  
dream, how can one have the  
heart to go back on the bridge  
made of magpies?

If the two hearts are united  
forever, why do the two persons  
need to stay together—day after  
day, night after night?

~~~

仙

織雲弄巧，飛星傳恨，銀漢迢迢暗渡。  
金風玉露一相逢，便勝卻人間無數。柔  
情似水，佳期如夢，忍顧鵲橋歸路。兩  
情若是久長時，又豈在朝朝暮暮。

-Quin Guan

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# *Cinder and Blood*

*Barbara Becc*

*I love stories about reluctant heroes, about women who do stuff and about heroes who are not always good. This story is a twist on the Cinderella fairytale and my favorite fantasy tropes and stories. A vengeful queen, a runaway princess, secrets and dwarves, and fires in the country. A hunter who isn't quite like all others. A story of secrets and vengeance.*

~ ~ ~

"Do you understand what is being asked of you?"

The voice made the chandeliers tingle and was projecting 'royalty' as much as humanly possible. It came from a surprisingly young person, dressed in cloth more expensive than anything Hunter had ever owned all her life. The queen looked breathtakingly beautiful, though, she had to admit that. The dress under the red robe seemed to be spun from pure gold, and reflections danced over it like light fairies. It was mesmerizing.

The silence in the great hall began to feel cold, and Hunter realized that the queen waited for an answer. "Yes, Your Highness. I understand."

"You will bring Ella here, where I can oversee her punishment. Do not kill her." The queen sat back down, draping her robe around her. It made her look like she was sitting in a pool of blood. Hunter shuddered and hoped the queen didn't see it. Being trained to kill and actually killing were two very different things. She tried to avoid killing in any way possible.

Hunter wiped her hands on her pants and straightened. She squared her shoulders just a bit more, hoping it made her small figure appear stronger.

"You are an unusual girl, my dear," the queen continued. Hunter resisted the urge to roll her eyes at that tired old statement. She had heard it so many times before. Ever since she had decided as a little girl to reject her given name and role and do all the things that the boys did, she had been called unusual.

At first they thought she was just rebellious, running around in pants and high boots. They forced her to wear dresses, to embroider and sew, to cook and clean. She did what had been asked of her, but she put on pants as soon as no one was watching her and worked at the horse stables as much as possible. She didn't scream, she didn't cry, she just took off the dresses and snuck out of the kitchen.

At some point, and she still wasn't sure how it happened, the people at the Duke's county accepted what she was. She wasn't a girl, she wasn't a boy, she was just Hunter.

This wasn't the first job the queen had bestowed on her, but this was the first time the queen was sending her alone. Not that she minded it much — she always felt slightly threatened among a group of men and going alone was a nice change. But she would still sleep with a dagger held firmly in her hand. Old habits save lives.

The queen sighed dramatically. "I don't know why you dress and act like this, and I frankly don't care. You have proven yourself useful. My men didn't complain about you on the last job I sent you."

That was probably the highest praise anyone could ask for from Sir Jeremihah and his men. The old warrior had grumbled when she was assigned to his troupe and ignored her, but he finally taught her what he knew after she happened to save his life in a stroke of luck. He also addressed her as a he, which was weird at first but made it easier in the long run among all the men.

"I hope that you can instill some sense into Ella, make her stop. The girl is causing terror all over my lands, and my people are getting scared."

Hunter bowed her head. "May I ask a question, Your Highness?"

"Always with the questions." The queen sighed and played with the fur inlay on her collar. "Very well, speak."

"Why are you sending me alone? Why aren't Sir Jeremihah and his men on the search?"

"I need them here," the queen said with the definite kind of tone that allowed no further questions. "You will be given funds to hire help should you need it, but I can't risk to send my best men away at times like these."

Hunter swallowed a remark that it was always *times like these*. The words 'Peaceful Negotiations' were just not in the queen's vocabulary. She was constantly at war with some neighboring kingdom. Many lives were lost and fields not farmed because her people had to fight in wars. A few angry souls tried to bring in better times by getting rid of the queen but no assassination attempt had ever been successful. The guard protected her every minute of the day and some poor sod had to taste all her food for poison.

The queen dismissed her with a wave of the hand. The seneschall caught Hunter's arm before she left the room.

"I have some things for you, boy," he said and walked ahead. He also addressed her as a man, like Sir Jeremihah.

She left the castle on a small horse that fit her size, accompanied by a pony that carried supplies. The cook had packed her bags with food for ten people and the armorer had given her three swords and shields as well as a crossbow. The poor pony was clattering with every step.

Ella's first arson fire had been laid to the very kitchen she had just left. It was quickly discovered and the damage was minimal but the cook had been livid. She was ranting and yelling about it until they found the note written in charcoal on the wall.

*You know why.*

*Ella*

The cook had seen the note and not said another word for days. Even today, as she loaded up Hunter's bags with food, she kept looking at the wall where the note had been painted over.

Hunter followed the trail of arsons across the country. With every fire she inspected, Ella seemed to become more confident. Her first crimes were just little things, easy to extinguish. But the more recent fires were bigger, more dangerous. So far no person or animal had been hurt by it but the last arson had burned down a whole farm. The farmer and his family had been out on the fields and the old mother had managed to escape in time but the farm was lost.

Hunter came to the homestead just as a hard downpour killed the last flames. The family stood in front of the

smoldering ashes of what had once been everything they owned. The rain gracefully covered their tears as they turned and walked away. These were simple folk, working their farms and raising their families around here on the simple values of hard work and no complaints. They were not rebellious, not angry. They just resigned to everything that life threw at them.

As she had done at every arson site, Hunter searched the area for traces of a watcher. Holding her sword ready, she searched behind barns and shrubbery. She assumed that Ella would want to see her handiwork, that she would stay nearby and watch the fire. But if she saw a shadow among the trees in the distance, it was long gone by the time she got there.

After a week she had to admit that she wasn't making any progress. Farms still burned almost every day and she could do nothing to stop it. Sitting in an inn, she stared into her watered beer and picked at the scrambled eggs that the waitress had brought her with a suggestive smile. As it was her habit, she had covered her features with a hooded cloak and had made her steps heavy and her voice deep when she arrived at the inn. It was always safer to be a man out here in the country. It wasn't the first time that a waitress was flirting with the fresh-faced stranger who didn't talk much.

She took another sip of her cheap ale, ignoring the noises of the many people in the cramped inn. When she sat the mug down, someone was sitting at the other side of the table. It was a dwarf with long, orange hair and displaying a

carpet of chest hair in the same color under his wide open shirt. He looked unusual for a dwarf; his beard was cut short but Hunter decided not to ask him about that. He took a sip from his own mug and grinned at her over the rim.

"You must be Hunter," he said with an amused lilt in his deep voice. "How's the hunt for the fiery Ella going?"

"It takes longer than I expected," Hunter said, picking up another piece of bread with scrambled eggs on top.

"She's setting you up to fail, you know."

"Who is?" she asked before shoving the bread in her mouth.

"The Queen, of course. She lets the Heralds travel around, telling the story to the people. How you volunteered to find the Cinder-Ella, how she gave you a chance despite your strangeness."

Hunter almost choked on the bread. "Volunteered? I was ordered! I wasn't asked if I wanted to do this."

The dwarf laughed out loud. "That's even better. If you fail to catch Ella, she can claim that she was just too soft hearted to deny you this chance." He laughed some more, loud and hearty. "And then she can say that she listens to her people and will send a real man."

"I'm not just some girl. I'm one of Sir Jeremihah's men and he has vouched for me before."

"And nobody has seen him in a while," the dwarf said

with a smug grin. "You're on your own, and when you fail, it'll be all your fault. All the while, everybody is distracted and doesn't realize what's really happening."

Hunter swallowed the rest of the bread down with a gulp from her mug to hide her face. She should have known. She should never have trusted the Queen. "And what would that be, what's really happening?"

He stopped smiling and leaned forward over the table. "That's not something to discuss here."

Hunter shoved the plate away from her, suddenly not hungry anymore. "What do you want?"

The dwarf grinned again. "I thought you might want to hire some help and I wanted to recommend me and my guys to you."

"Why should I hire you? I could hire anybody."

The dwarf frowned at her. "Listen, Softcheeks, I have no doubt that you are capable; I've heard great things about you. But you are a girl who dresses like a man and that attracts some weird people. You can hire absolutely anybody but I can assure you that my group is the only one that will not bother you about how you look and act."

"I'm not..." she wanted to say *a girl* but that wasn't quite the truth either. It had become difficult lately to really know how she felt. "I'm not convinced."

"Let me introduce you to the team," he said and beckoned her to follow him. "My name is Docillric by the

way, I'm the boss of the Seven and One."

Hunter got up and followed him through the low-lit inn. Most people didn't care about the slim figure following a strong dwarf almost her size but she was aware of a few eyes watching them closely. "Seven and One?"

"You'll see."

Docillic led her to a table at the far end of the inn where a loud party seemed to be going on. Judging by heights, it was six dwarves and one human who had started to build a tower of bones they had picked clean. Docillic knocked on the table to get the attention of the beer chugging group, which caused the bone tower to tumble and garnered loud cries of protest.

"Come on Doc, we worked hard at this!" one dwarf shouted. The others chimed in and beer mugs clattered as they celebrated their unity in protest with another gulp of beer. Hunter tried to get a look at the human in the group but the tall figure was hooded and sat in a shadow. She could only make out a smile beneath the darkness.

"Lads, ladies, this is Hunter, a potential employer of us if you lot could behave yourself for one minute."

One of the dwarves, possibly a woman (it was hard to tell sometimes with dwarves) leaned forward and studied Hunter's face. "So you are out to catch the Cinder-Ella. I thought you were taller."

"You shouldn't talk about height, Tiny," the hooded

human said from the back with a grin visible on her deep red lips. Her voice was deep but clearly female.

"I'm normal for a dwarf!" The dwarf tried to reach over the companions to hit the human but Doc shouted something in dwarven at her and she settled back down with a grin.

"That tall one over there is my second in command, Snow," Doc said and the hooded figure nodded once. "The others here are Sebillic, Karrilic, Linnele, Deidrele, Honeyrele and Tiny Tinele."

"I'm not tiny!" Tinele shouted but she grinned at the same time.

Snow lowered her hood with a cough and leaned forward into the light. Hunter swallowed a gasp as she saw her face. Her skin was of a noble brown but she had a mark, white as snow, from her forehead over her eyes and nose down to her chin. It looked like someone had taken a paintbrush and painted a symmetric pattern on her face in white. Snow laid her hands on the table and Hunter saw more white marks on her hands and arms covering her brown skin.

Snow looked at Doc and frowned. "Isn't she employed by the Queen? If we work for her, we're basically working for the Queen. I don't like that."

Doc raised his hand with an intense look towards Snow. "Relax, princess of my heart, we don't even have to show ourselves. And living on the Queen's funds means reliable

pay at least."

"That would be something," mumbled the one called Karrillic through his beard.

"Any more complaints?" Doc asked. Snow still looked unhappy but she shook her head to the question as all the others.

"Then it's settled." He turned to Hunter and held out his hand. "The Seven And One are at your service."

Hunter stared at his hand. "I haven't yet agreed to hire you."

Doc grinned even wider. "Trust me, Softcheeks, you won't find a more dedicated and more trustworthy bunch anywhere near."

Hunter looked around and snorted. "In this inn that's a pretty low bar to hit."

Snow laughed out, clear and enchanting like music. It made her look incredibly beautiful and the other patrons fell quiet as if they tried to hear more of that beautiful sound. Snow quickly pulled up her hood again and shrunk into the shadows. She smiled from under her hood. "I like her," she said.

Hunter shrugged and shook Doc's hand. She liked this group and everybody else she could hire was either as trustworthy or even less than them.

"Well," Doc said, "have a seat then and let's make some

plans how to catch the Cinder-Ella."

"Why do you call her that?" Hunter asked.

"The people around here call her that. They know that her name is Ella, the banished daughter of the Duke, the Queen's previous husband. And now she sets things on fire with cinder, so..."

Hunter nodded. "I guess that makes sense. I still don't understand why the Queen is so open about all of this. I thought this would be a secret mission."

"Remember what I told you about setting you up to fail? She can twist the story in any way she likes and blame it all on you."

Snow leaned forward again, a predatory smile on her lips. "You got yourself a powerful enemy there but, lucky for you, she's my favorite enemy too."

Hunter tried to smile but Snow looked a bit too scary. "I've been following Ella for a while now and I'm sure she's watching the fires from afar but I could never find her."

"Of course not," Snow said. "She's watching you just as you watch her."

"You think so?"

Snow leaned in even further and lowered her voice. "I'm pretty sure she's even watching you right now."

Hunter wanted to whip around but caught herself and studied the reflection in the window instead. The inn was

packed, rain and harsh winds bringing in many travellers from the road.

"I don't see any women except for the barmaids," she said, more to herself.

Snow laughed out. "That's hardly an argument you and I can make, don't you think?"

It was true, of course. The Cinder-Ella would be in disguise, just like her and Snow.

Docillic stood up and paid the waitress. "Let's check on the horses, guys."

That seemed to be a code word, because the whole group stood up and left the room. Doc came out last and ushered Hunter and the group in front of him towards the stables. The stablemaster tried to stop them but a coin flipped into his hand made him settle back down on his chair, ignoring the group of seven dwarves and two humans walking through the stables.

They squatted down in an empty stable to discuss their options and for the first time Hunter felt hopeful that she could fulfill her mission.

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They didn't have to wait long for the next fire to occur. There seemed to be no pattern to the arsons but they all had a note written in charcoal somewhere that said 'you know why'.

It was a shoemaker's shop this time, close to the inn they had been staying in. Hunter examined the smoldering remains while the Seven and One circled the area to look for Cinder-Ella. Hunter poked through burned leather and shoes with a stick, unsure of what she was hoping to find. She wasn't really looking for anything because her proof was once again written on a wall with charcoal.

The shoemaker stood in front of the writing and shook his head. "I don't know why, I've done nothing. Why's she burning me shop down? I've hardly known her!"

Hunter stepped up to him. "But you have met her?"

"The Cinder-Ella? Well, she was always working in the kitchen and I usually got meself a wee little drink there when I was in the castle and I may have seen her there sometimes." The man looked nervous and Hunter was sure that he was not telling her everything.

"So, have you seen her or have you not?" she pried.

"Now's not like I was a talking with her..."

"But you..." Hunter started but stopped when her eyes were drawn to a figure in a large men's coat at the edge of her vision. She spun around and looked the person in the eyes. Golden brown eyes in a sand-brown face, framed by dark curls, spilling out from under the hood of the man's coat. Her lips pulled into a wide smile and then she turned and ran.

Hunter sprinted after her down the cobblestone streets.

The cloak billowed out and Hunter could make out a slim woman's body.

"Ella, wait!" she called out after her, stumbling over a broken cart on the way and cursing at her sword in the scabbard smacking against her shin. The person, who most certainly was Ella, disappeared around a corner; and when Hunter had picked herself up again and came around it, she was faced with the edge of the forest and no one in sight.

Footsteps became louder behind her. Tiny and Honey came up surprisingly fast on their short legs.

"Was it her? The Cinder-Ella?" Tiny asked, out of breath.

"I think so, yes," Hunter said.

"Snow said something like that," Honey said with her squeaky voice. Someone with a voice like that should not be carrying a battleaxe that tall but that didn't stop her. "She said that Cinder-Ella would be looking for you and she made us watch you."

Tiny leaned against the wall of the house to catch her breath. "You tall people are so damn fast. One second you were talking to that shoemaker and the next you were off like a rat on fire."

"Did you see her?" Hunter asked.

"The one in the big coat? Yeah, but that was about it. You think it was really her?"

"She saw me watching and smiled at me."

Honey squeaked. "She smiled? I thought she never smiled?"

"Maybe she's happier now than in that castle," Tiny said with a shrug. "I know I would be."

Honey nodded eagerly. "Yes, I heard they treated her pretty bad at the castle."

Tiny looked up to Hunter. "You lived there; did you know her?"

"Not really," Hunter said, thinking back to that cold building. "I lived in the barracks. I avoided the castle as much as I could. It's not a nice place." She shuddered at the memory of the queen screaming so loud, you could hear her down in the basement as the whole castle fell quiet. "What have you heard about her being treated badly?"

"You never heard that?" Tiny asked. The rest of the Seven and One came around the corner and listened in on the conversation.

"They don't exactly discuss castle gossip at the barracks, except for the boob size of the kitchen maids." Most people at the castle tried to forget everything about the place and its cold-hearted inhabitant if they could.

Snow snorted out an angry laugh. "Maybe they just didn't talk about it but I bet at least some of them knew. It went around the village a while back, how she was forced to work on her knees and how the queen ordered her work to be undone so that she had to do everything again. She

gathered the people around to watch the Duke's daughter, fallen from grace and beaten. She let them laugh at her."

A memory crept up, one that Hunter had wanted to forget, and she shuddered. She remembered coming back from a deer hunt and seeing the people spill out of the gate. Some were laughing and boasting but most of them looked embarrassed. After that day, the cook had lost her smile for weeks. But she never told Hunter what had happened.

"I doubt she will be back here anytime soon," Doc said, shouldering his crossbow. "Let's head back to the inn and get some sleep. I have a feeling we'll have to travel again soon."

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Hunter dreamed about faces walking past her, people pouring out of the castle's gates. They looked at her and their mouths distorted when they tried to speak. She jolted awake, sweat making her shiver and suddenly she knew why Cinder-Ella was laying her fires.

She shook Snow awake, narrowly avoiding a knife whipping out from under her blanket.

"Don't do that, boy," Snow rasped, shaking herself awake. "What is it?"

"I know why Ella is setting fire to those places," Hunter said, shaking in excitement. "She's taking revenge on all the people that watched her and laughed at her back when the queen humiliated her in front of everyone. I saw the

farmers, the shoemaker, the blacksmith. That's why the note says 'you know why' cause they all watched and laughed."

Snow looked at her, wide awake now. "How many were there?"

"I don't know, maybe 30? 40?"

"And we're up to what now, ten fires? Twelve?" Snow twirled the knife between her fingers in thought. "She's not done yet."

They settled back down but Hunter couldn't stop thinking about Ella. She remembered having seen her from afar sometimes, when she carried laundry out to hang. She had lived quite nicely as the Duke's daughter — a smart girl, well educated. Hunter had spoken to her sometimes, hanging on every word she had said, learning from her. But after the Duke's death, the Queen banished the girl, took her nice things away and made her beg the kitchen maids for spare dresses.

Hunter had watched her. She still looked so beautiful even in the old and torn rags. Her shapely legs peeked out under the too short skirts, brown against stained white. Her dark hair fell in tiny curls over her shoulders, so much more beautiful than Hunter had ever managed to make her own ratty hair look.

She remembered Ella smiling at her despite bloody blisters on her hands and scrapes on her knees. She remembered how she had to turn away because she felt herself blushing and she couldn't bear to watch her. There

was a pain in her chest whenever she saw Ella and she didn't know what to do about that.

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The next fire broke out at another farm. Hunter remembered seeing the husband and his wife among the crowd leaving the castle on that fateful day, their heads hanging down low.

When they arrived at the farm, the main building had been mostly extinguished, thanks to the chain of people with buckets full of water. Hunter was looking for the note again when sudden cries made her look up. The main house wasn't on fire anymore but a spark must have jumped over to the haybarn and the fire quickly spread. Under the roof, a window opened and the faces of two crying children appeared.

"Shit," Snow and Hunter said at the same time. The way down was blocked by the fire, and the window was too high up for them to jump down.

"A ladder! We need a ladder!" Snow yelled out, loud enough to wake people from their shocked trance and make them run. A few men pulled a ladder from a tree in the backyard and carried it over. Snow had taken off her hooded coat, ignoring the stares as the people got a good look at the marks on her skin. She shoved the coat into a bucket of water and put it back on then dumped another bucket over her head. Drenched, she picked up the ladder and ran towards the haybarn. Flames were licking out of

the roof and smoke billowed out next to the heads of the crying children.

Hunter dropped her weapons and followed Snow's method, making herself wet as well. She ran after her, towards the blistering heat of the building. Snow leaned the ladder against the building, the heat almost unbearable. She noticed that Hunter held the ladder for her as she climbed up.

"You have to leave!" she yelled at her.

"Shut up," Hunter yelled back, her voice barely audible over the roaring of the fire. "Hurry!"

Snow nodded and climbed up as far as she could. The ladder wasn't long enough to reach the window and she was beckoning towards the children to climb down to her. The smaller girl finally climbed out the window and when she hung on the frame by her fingertips, Snow could reach her ankles and pulled her down. The ladder shook but Snow lowered the girl towards the steps below her and Hunter guided the girl to the ground.

An earth-shaking boom sounded out as the roof caved in and the boy could only jump out into Snow's arms as a cloud of smoke billowed out of the window. Snow caught him but couldn't hold on to the ladder anymore and lost her balance. She fell backwards but Hunter grabbed her, crashing hard to the ground with the weight of Snow and the boy on top of her. Something cracked in her chest and the world went dark.

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When she came back to her senses, she was next to a water well on a blanket and Tiny was bandaging her chest. She hissed in pain and the dwarf looked up.

"Oh good, you're awake," she said, smiling in relief. "You broke a rib. That's gonna hurt a while."

Hunter tried to speak but a cough wracked through her body, making her whimper in pain. She coughed more, every single cough like a knife stab, and spat out a black clot.

"That's better," Tiny said, "get that stuff out of your body."

"How are..." Hunter rasped, almost coughing again just from speaking.

"The others are fine. You and Snow saved the kids and you saved Snow, you silly girl-boy. We just had to pull you both away by your feet before the building collapsed on top of you."

Hunter nodded a thanks, not daring to speak again for fear of coughing.

"Doc and Deidrele are scouting out a place for us to stay where you can rest and heal." Tiny stood and piled dirty rags in her arms. She called over to Karrilic, "Come on, help me with the washing and get some fresh water for us." Karrilic groaned but followed Tiny down to the stream.

Hunter's eyes were drooping. She tried to keep her breathing shallow; deep breaths made her ribs scream out in pain. But the most acute stab came when a hand came over her mouth and someone whispered into her ear.

"I'm sorry."

Hunter's eyes flew open and looked directly into the golden brown eyes of Ella. Hunter struggled to raise herself up but Ella held her arm down and her ribs hurt. She stared at the other girl. Her face was gaunt and dirty and still so beautiful, and she smelled of dirt and flowers. Hunter gave up struggling when she saw the tears.

"I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you." She took her hand from Hunter's mouth and looked around like a hunted animal, flinching at every noise she heard. "I only wanted to punish them."

Hunter strained her throat to whisper at her. "The people that laughed at you?"

"Yes, they laughed and cheered and now they're going to suffer for it," Ella sneered.

Hunter tried to yell but her voice came out only as a croak. "They had to. The Queen forced them to. These are poor people..."

"No, they all laughed when the cook beat me!" Ella pressed out.

"These people can't stand up against the Queen." Hunter reached for Ella's hand and whimpered as she touched her.

She felt the blisters on Ella's hand, the cuts and bruises and she stroked over a line with her thumb. "You are so smart, Ella, how can you not see that? You almost killed two children today."

"No, the house was empty, I checked," Ella said.

"Fire can't be controlled and you --"

Ella jumped up and ran away just as Tiny and Karrillic came back from the water stream. Hunter held out her hand as if Ella was still holding it. But her hand was empty and her heart ached.

"How are you feeling?" Tiny asked.

"Ella was here."

"Here? When?" The dwarves dropped the laundry and waterbags and drew their weapons.

"She just left when she heard you."

The two dwarves ran towards the shrubbery and looked along the path that ran parallel to the stream. But there was no one in sight. Hunter closed her eyes, a bone-deep tiredness spreading through her.

"What did she want?" she heard Tiny say a few steps away from her resting place.

"She said that she's sorry."

"Huh? I never would have thought she cared."

"I did," Hunter said quietly but Tiny still heard her.

"You thought she cared? Then why does she hurt all these poor people?"

Hunter kept her eyes closed, thinking back to the few times she she met Ella alone outside of the stables. "She was never mean or angry. She endured everything that happened to her without complaints. She was —" Hunter looked up at Tiny, seeing the disbelief in her eyes. " — she was always smiling."

Tiny shook her head. "I wonder what happened. Something must have made her snap."

Karrillic mumbled something under his beard. Tiny drove her strong elbow in his ribs and he winced and spoke up. "Some say that she got possessed by a fire demon."

Tiny laughed out. "Some say?" She scowled at Karrillic. "Don't believe everything the fishwives tell you. Fire demons don't exist."

Footsteps announced the arrival of the others. Doc, Snow and the rest of the group came to take Hunter to an inn but the tale of the events made them reconsider. Snow especially seemed to be thoughtful.

Doc sat down next her, placing his arm on her back. "Say it," he said. She looked down to him, the white markings on her face glowing in the golden light of the setting sun. He pulled her towards him, which looked a bit comical due to his shorter size, but Snow let out a breath and rested her head on his and Hunter could see how his presence calmed her.

"What do you want me to say, Doc?" she said with a sigh.

"Everything, princess of my heart. Everything that you've been thinking about for the last few days. Let's hear it," Doc said, leaning back to look in her eyes.

Hunter wondered what that must feel like, to have someone around to love, who loved you as much as Doc loved Snow. And Snow loved him too, it was obvious, even though she had a hard time showing it.

"First of all," Snow said, her voice louder as she was addressing everyone in the group, "I wonder if we endanger the people who live near the inn if we stay there. Ella seems to follow our own Hunter here and what if she gets it into her head to lay another fire near her?"

"She's not just laying fire wherever, she's targeting the people who laughed at her," Hunter spit out, only the pain in her ribs stopping her from jumping up.

"Yes, I know," Snow said, her voice calm and quiet. "But I think you agree with me that these people might have made a mistake but they don't deserve to have everything they own go up in flames or have their children die."

Hunter nodded, relieved that someone put the uneasy doubt in her mind into words.

"But I think she got one thing right," Snow said. "She deserves her revenge for everything that happened to her ever since the Duke died but she's focussing on the wrong target."

Hunter sat with her mouth open. "What do you mean?"

Snow fixed her eyes on her. "You're the one who's supposed to bring her to the Queen. What do you think will happen?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought that far ahead."

Doc chimed in. "This is all very convenient for the Queen, you know? She can make a big thing out of this, the betrayal of the step-daughter, a trial, a public punishment. All the while nobody notices that she started yet another war with Lower Bracton and that her troops live on rations and the fields in the kingdom lie idle."

"So you think I shouldn't hand her over to the Queen? Hide out in the woods, maybe go over the border to Lower Bracton?" The prospect of living alone with Ella like that made her smile. She saw Snow looking at her and felt herself blushing.

"Not quite," Snow said and a vicious grin spread on her face.

Doc looked up to her with a smile. "I love it when you look like that." His thumb traced the line on her cheek where the white pattern met the darker color of her skin.

Snow smiled back at him and placed a small kiss on his cheek. Hunter would never have thought it possible but Doc was indeed blushing deep red under his orange hair, all the way down to his bristly chest.

"Let's find that Cinder-Ella first and then I'll tell you

more of my idea."

The sound of a cracking stick in the woods made them jump. Twilight had spread over the country, casting everything in grey. Hunter raised herself up on her elbows, wincing in pain. Snow, Doc and Tiny were already on their way into the dark, their weapons drawn.

Hunter was struggling to get up as well but the pain reminded her why she couldn't do that. She fell back on the ground that was just barely covered by a blanket and strained to listen to the sounds of the hunters in the woods. They kept quiet, using whistles and trills to communicate with each other. They had spread out, covering more ground that way. But Hunter knew these kind of forests, old and overgrown as they were. Even in broad daylight it would have been hard to find someone who was hiding in the undergrowth. The darkness that crept over the land now made it nearly impossible.

After a long while, Snow and the others came back to Hunter's resting place. Snow piled soft branches with leaves against a rock for Hunter to lean against and started a fire close to her. She kept looking over her shoulder into impenetrable darkness of the forest.

Hunter beckoned to her to come closer. "You think it was her?"

Snow nodded. "Yes, it's just a hunch but she can't be far after she spoke to you and she seems to watch you anyway."

"She said that she's sorry that I got hurt," Hunter said.

She didn't know why she felt it necessary to tell Snow that.

"Yeah, I'd say she better be. She almost killed those children and us today."

"That was never her intention," Hunter spat, more defensive than she wanted.

Snow looked at her and her eyes were piercing in anger. It was gone after a moment and she sighed and sat down next to Hunter. "Listen kid, I understand this urge for revenge, believe me, I do. When my stepmother sent me away because she thought my mark was a bad omen, I dreamt of revenge every night. It was all I wanted for years. But revenge is a poison in your blood; it will cloud your mind and kill you slowly. Those fires will not undo Ella's pain."

A soft voice from the shadows said: "I know."

A smile spread on Snow's face. "Hello Ella," she said without turning around.

Ella came forward into the light of the fire under the watchful eyes of the Seven And One. They had their hands on their weapons but didn't move. Ella carefully stepped over a log and sat down next to Hunter. Her face was dirty and her curly hair was full of sticks and leaves, as if she had tried to dig herself into the undergrowth to hide.

Snow kicked another log towards the fire and sat down on it, next to Ella but not too close. She looked at Ella, the moonlight making her white mark stand out bright. Hunter

expected her to speak but she seemed to wait for Ella to talk first.

Ella was wringing her hands and Hunter stretched out her arm to take her hand. She flinched, staring at her hand.

Hunter waited until she raised her head and looked at her before she spoke. "I'm not going to hand you over to the Queen. And Snow isn't either."

Snow looked over to Doc and shrugged. "Sorry," she said, a sheepish smile on her lips.

Doc sighed and shook his head. "I always knew you'll be my ruin one day." A groan ran through the other dwarves but Doc raised his hand to quiet them. "Don't worry, we got your cut covered. It won't be a load but it won't be less than usual."

Tiny crossed her arms in front of her chest and glared at her companions. "If one of you mud-bugs as much as suggests that we hand the girl over for pay, I'm gonna punch your nose back to the High Mountains."

"Thank you," Ella said almost inaudible. "And I'm sorry for causing so much trouble. And sorry for bringing your lives and those children in danger and — "

"Enough with the sorrys," Snow said and shook herself as if all the apologizing caused an itch down her back.

"What is next?" Hunter asked with new found confidence. "You said you have an idea how we could take on the Queen herself. Let's hear it."

Snow raised an eyebrow at her demanding tone but didn't comment on it. "See, the Queen married the old king. After he died, she married the duke and since he has died too, she rules alone. She is queen by marriage, not by blood. She would have to give up the throne for someone with a more direct lineage."

Hunter nodded. "Yes, we know that but Ella is the Duke's daughter from his former marriage, she's even less related to the King's lineage."

Doc cleared his throat and all eyes turned to him. "She wasn't talking about Ella." He grinned while Snow seemed to try to hide inside of her coat. "There's a reason why I call her princess."

A collective gasp went through the group. Hunter stared at Snow, tracing the contour of her face. If she ignored the prominent white mark in the middle of her face, she did indeed have a resemblance to the pictures of the king that used to hang in every home.

"You are the lost daughter," Hunter whispered. "They said you were dead."

"I bet they did," Snow grumbled. "Yes, I'm the lost daughter, and the one who convinced my father that my mark was a bad omen was the Queen, my stepmother. They sent me away into the mountains at the care of an old woman. The only thing I ever heard from home was when Sir Jeremihah came up to our hut and told us of my father's death. And the next thing he told me was that the Queen

would not like it if I stayed alive and advised me to hide from her. I was 12 and on the run from the queen's hunters."

"But you could have claimed the throne anytime. It is your right," Hunter wondered.

"I was angry, yes but also terrified. Dethrone my own mother? I couldn't even imagine." Snow shook her head. "It's been almost 20 years now and I'm still terrified to face her."

Doc put his hand on hers and his thumb was softly stroking over her hand. "What made you change your mind?"

"You should know," Snow laughed out, "my short-legged, angry revolutionary. All this talk how the queen ruins the country, how bad she is for the people. I guess it rubbed off on me. Responsibility for the people and all that."

"Oh gods, what have I done?" Doc said in mock desperation.

Snow laughed and placed a kiss on his mouth. She took a look around, noting the expressions of the rest of the troops. "I understand if anybody feels uncomfortable with this. I can't ask you all to follow me."

Doc stood up and faced the other dwarves. "I'm in this because I can't let my girl do this all alone, but this isn't a job like any other. You are all free to go and separate yourselves from us."

There was a short commotion, mumbles and whispered conversations and then Tiny stood up and said, "It's as much our country as it is Snow's and the queen makes our lives as difficult as anybody's. We're in." Nods all around, a few raised glasses and the discussion was settled.

Doc took out a map and pointed to the location of the castle. "We can be at the castle in two days if we hurry."

Snow looked at Ella whose face had paled. "You'll be our ticket inside; we're bringing you to the Queen just as she ordered. We'll do it when she holds court, when there's lots of people around. It will still be a risk," she said with a glance towards Hunter.

Hunter nodded. "We could get arrested by the royal guard; they're under her orders."

"That's why we need lots of people there, witnesses," said Doc. "And the time is right. The people are getting angry at the queen, and not just the simple folk. Even the nobility is losing faith in her because it's their lands that lay idle. You can't expect nobles to live off old potatoes for long."

Hunter looked at Ella and realized that she was absolutely terrified. She scooted closer to her and placed her arm over her shoulders. Ella froze at the touch. Hunter wondered if she should take her arm away again but then Ella leaned to the side and settled against her. Hunter could feel her breathing slowing down and the tension going out from her shoulders.

"I'll protect you," Hunter said. "I won't let them hurt

you." She didn't know how she was supposed to keep her promise but she would do anything to protect Ella.

"All right, I'll do it," Ella said.

Snow let out a sigh of relief. "Good, then let's get some rest. Hunter here needs to sleep and you look like you need a good meal and some sleep too. We'll stay here for one more day and then make our way to the castle."

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The old man pulled at the reins and the donkey came to a halt with an annoyed grunt. Hunter and Ella climbed down from the cart and thanked the driver for helping them. He grunted just like his donkey but when Doc handed him a coin his face lit up and he drove on with a happy whistle.

Hunter looked up the path towards the drawbridge. It felt like it had been another life, another person that left through this gate to find Ella a few weeks ago. Now she had returned but not like she had imagined. Instead of bringing back the fugitive to become a royal guard in return, now she was here to overthrow the queen and make someone who had been a fugitive and a mercenary most of her life the new ruler. It sounded like a profoundly bad idea but the desolate state of the villages they had passed through, the neglect and the hunger they could see in the country, convinced her that Snow as queen could hardly be any worse.

Hunter put her hand on her sword to show that she was

ready to take on whatever happened. The pain from her rib made her wince. Ella came up to her side and Hunter gratefully put her hand on her shoulder, placing some of her weight on her to keep upright.

As they had expected, the Queen was holding court. People waited for their turn to complain, as the nobles were now voicing their concerns about the situation in the country. She looked bored, dismissing their complaints and threatening them with accounts of treason for their lack of faith in her.

Hunter showed her parchment with the Queen's orders and the guards let them go through. They entered the throne hall under the murmurs of the people, interrupting Duke Ganniston, count of the largest county in his complaints. He scowled at them, seven dwarves, a tall human in a hooded cloak and Hunter with her hand on Ella's shoulder. He opened his mouth to complain about the interruption but Hunter fixed him with a glare and shook her head. He was so surprised at her audacity that he shut his mouth and stepped to the side.

The Queen had leaned back on her throne and closed her eyes when the Duke had spoken but now she sat up and squinted at the group that had caused the disturbance in the routine. A smile spread on her face when she recognised Hunter. "Looks like my hunter has returned to bring me a gift. Step forward and show everyone the Cinder-Ella."

A hiss went through the people in the court and Ella tried to hide behind Hunter. People were yelling for her

punishment, wanting to see her hanged. Hunter looked at Snow, urging her to do something.

Doc pressed Snow's hand once and she nodded at him. She stepped forward but instead of addressing the Queen, she turned to the people in the hall. "People, I ask you to listen to me," she called out in a loud and clear voice. "We have brought you the Cinder-Ella and we know that many of you were hurt by her. But we have travelled all through the country during our search and what we have seen was a destruction by another cause. We have seen children go hungry while the fields lay barren because the capable men and women have been sent off to fight yet another war. We have seen stocks go bad because there was no one to take care of them, to shift the hay, to turn the apples. Yes, we have seen fires and some were even caused by the misguided actions of the Cinder-Ella but our country was not destroyed by her."

"Enough!" the Queen yelled from her throne. "I will have you court marshaled for blasphemy and treason! Who are you to dare to speak like that?"

Snow slowly turned around and dropped her coat. Her long black braids fell down her shoulders over a plain white dress in contrast to her dark skin. The white marks on her face and arms stood out like the white of her dress. She fixed her eyes on the Queen who stared at her with fear.

"My name is Aurora Marjani of the House of Berlen, the daughter of King Jelani. Unlike you I am from the king's bloodline and here to take my rightful place on the throne."

Murmurs in the crowd rose to a deafening noise, shouts of "the princess, the princess lives, a new queen, the mark is real, the marked princess has returned" travelled through the crowds. Doc made a sign and the rest of the Seven spread out into the crowd, raising their voices and shouting "Long live the new queen!" until the people chanted it with them. Doc nonchalantly strolled over to the rows of nobles and whispered something to them. They whispered among each other, looking from the Queen to Snow and back.

The Queen jumped up and yelled, "Arrest them, all of them!"

Hunter saw the guards hesitate and before they could step forward, she stepped in their way. "This is no longer your queen, you don't have to follow her orders anymore." She looked the men in the eyes. She knew them and they knew her. She had trained with them and even if they didn't like her that much, they still had once listened to her. She hoped they would listen again.

Duke Ganniston had watched the whole scene from the side and Hunter caught his eyes. She tried to put everything into her look; the hope, the desperation. The mood was at a tipping point. They needed just one thing, one sign to win over this court of people. Hunter pressed Ella's hand, praying to all the gods she knew for a miracle.

The duke gave her a nod and stepped forward until he was in front of Snow. The room fell silent. Duke Ganniston looked at Snow, at her eyes and her mark and then he lowered his head and went down on one knee. "My Queen,"

he said.

A gasp went through the rows. The other nobles stood up like one and walked over to Snow, one by one going down on one knee and calling her their queen.

Hunter looked back to the old Queen. Her face was contorted into a mask of controlled anger. She raised herself up to her full size and pointed at everyone in the room. "You're all traitors, dirty traitors."

A large figure of a man stepped out from the rows of the common people, taking off his hood. Hunter recognized him; it was Sir Jeremihah. He walked over to the guard and addressed his men. "I'm resuming command," he said and Hunter held her breath. What side would he pick?

Sir Jeremihah looked towards the old Queen and towards Snow, who stood still with the nobles on their knees in front of her. He turned towards her and bowed. "My queen," he said and Hunter let out a breath. Sir Jeremihah turned back to his troops and ordered, "Arrest Lady Wind and take her to her quarters. She is not to leave her room unless the Queen orders it."

The former queen faltered, her face ashen and her shoulders sagging as if under a crushing weight. She knew she had lost and she let the guards lead her off the throne pedestal without a word.

Snow was staring at the nobles in front of her, still on their knees. Doc stepped over to her and gave her a soft nudge in her side. She startled and cleared her throat. "You

may rise. I thank you for your trust."

The nobles stood up and returned to their chairs, leaving Snow standing alone in the middle of the hall. Hunter squeezed Ella's hand once before letting go and stepped forward to Snow.

"My queen," she said, barely hiding a grin at addressing her friend like that, "may I escort you to your throne?"

"You may," Snow said, holding her head high and looking as queenly as possible for someone who was used to walking through mud and rubble.

Hunter led her up the steps to the throne and waited till she had sat down before she bowed as much as she could with her bandaged rib and turned to walk back to Ella.

An inhuman scream made her turn back. Lady Wind had turned so quickly that the guards were too dumfounded to react. She jumped forward, towards Snow, her red robe billowing out behind her. She had a dagger in her hand, glinting in gold and jewels. It was a decorative thing but no less lethal.

The old queen shrieked again, raising the dagger and screamed, "You will not take this from me, you freak, you monster; you will not have this!" She rushed forward, the blade aimed at Snow.

Hunter saw Snow reach for her weapon at her side but as she wore a dress instead of her armor today, she had nothing to defend herself with. Hunter's sword was in her

hand before the thought had fully formed in her head, the pain in her side forgotten. She jumped in front of Snow, using her own body to shield her and holding out her sword to threaten the old queen. But before she could even shout at the woman to stop, the Lady Wind hurled herself towards Snow, ready to plunge the dagger in Snow's chest and impaled herself on Hunter's outstretched sword.

A sound like a sob left her and she sagged down, the hilt of Hunter's sword sticking out of her chest as her golden dress turned as red as her robe. She fell over, her robe spreading out on the floor at Snow's feet. Hunter knelt down and checked her breathing but Snow's stepmother was obviously dead.

A fearful silence had fallen over the hall. Hunter looked at the hundreds of faces staring at her and her throat closed up. But then Ella caught her eyes, smiling at her and Hunter could breathe again. She stood up and squared her shoulders, wincing just slightly and said as loud as she could, "The old queen is dead. Long live the Queen!"

Hunter looked around and saw the fear in people's eyes change to relief and hope. After years of neglect and suffering, the people had a new reason to live.

From hundreds of optimistic faces, the shout "Long live the queen!" branded towards her. But Hunter only saw Ella and her smile finally made Hunter feel hopeful too.

She stepped down from the pedestal and walked towards Ella. Taking her hand, she smiled towards Snow

and gave Doc a nod. They both dipped their heads, smiling at her. Hunter took Ella's hand and walked towards the door.

In the chaos of excitement, no one saw them leave and they were never seen again at court or in the kingdom. But occasionally packages and letters would arrive from foreign countries with spices and trinkets and stories written in two handwritings.

On those days, the Queen and her short-legged husband wore the happiest smiles.

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# *Clockpunk and the Vitalizer*

*HK Lune*

*“Clockpunk and the Vitalizer” draws from the Irish legend Táin Bó Cúailnge, also known as The Cattle Raid of Cooley. I originally planned to write a story based on a different myth, but when the Táin gave me better ideas, I moved forward with fresh inspiration. Despite trading a queen for a supervillain and a cow for a superweapon, I hope readers enjoy the story this iconic tale inspired.*

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Usually she was just Dolores Veta Garza, exhibit designer at the Cooley Museum of Art and everyday citizen of the mountainside city. She spent most of her time alone, enjoyed her work, and had plenty of time for her hobbies. Her family lived a few short hours away, and while Cooley had its problems, Dolores made a comfortable living within its borders.

When the time came to protect the city, though, she became Clockpunk! Defender of Cooley, Time Jumper/Slower! Beloved hero and superperson! With a black and silver suit fashioned by Dr. Awesome himself, two silver gears “jutting” from her back, Clockpunk kept evil great and small at bay. Her identity hidden safely behind a one-way visor covering her eyes and hoodie over her head, she feared no one and protected everyone.

Well, at least that’s how it started. Being the newest superhero in the seven-state region came with a lot of different requirements, not least of all execution. Dolores needed to prove her grit to the others, the more experienced heroes busy defending their own home cities. She had every intention of doing so as she sat in traffic, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel to keep herself composed. *Did I lock up my office? Is the curator’s new assistant cleaning up the old weapons corner tonight?* The museum wasn’t the real problem, of course. Nor were the glassy skyscrapers and frantic people rushing past her as her car stood nearly still. *Remember: seven seconds of slowdown, seven seconds of future sight. Everyone knows. Ha, ha. Even The Vitalizer knows...*

The news came earlier while she drew out floor plans for a new exhibit: hated supervillain The Vitalizer had entered the city. Dolores knew why: he wanted the Bull, a weapon only known to Dr. Awesome and its other builders. He nearly destroyed two other cities over the weekend for whatever the weapon was, and while Dolores didn't think it was in Cooley, she couldn't let him waltz in and trash the place to find out. *He's just as crazy and has the same exact powers as last time*, Dolores thought as she crept closer to downtown. *Be smart about your powers, because he'll be waiting for you to slip up. The real problem is whether you can keep it together and not act like a damn loser again. Every single time with you—it's a good thing he isn't quite in a killing mood.*

As she moved closer to his location, she took deep breaths. Dolores had a little...problem about this whole affair. She casted her gaze to her dashboard, the streets, the people, but the sunny city gave her no relief. The Vitalizer wasn't far.

Dolores took the nearest turn and headed down a tiny street devoid of life. She parked behind a hardware store; only screams further into the city met her ears. Regular clothes off, she dug her mask out of the trunk and headed off.

*Dr. Awesome has that helicopter*, she complained as she froze time in seven-second gaps, quickening her run. *Bloodwoman gets the tricked-out muscle car. I get to run, and I'm not even that great a runner.* People's screams blurred

into formless howls in between the seven seconds of slowdown and charge-up. Their panic lost all its energy. All Dolores knew was that she'd be exhausted by the time she reached her opponent.

Before long, past restaurants and insurance centers, she could spot The Vitalizer floating high up, ripping up sidewalks or something below. She tried not to stare at him—the thought of him spotting her pumped jitters into her legs.

She slowed down time twice more while she hid behind an acrid dumpster and wiped away the sweat on her chin. The city needed her ASAP.

Once she regained some of her breath, Dolores peeked out into the four-way intersection over which The Vitalizer hovered. Citizens scrambled behind cars and into storefronts as he watched cement and asphalt tear itself apart before flying everywhere. If only one of the other heroes could swing by...*This is going to be ridiculous...*

With him in midair, Dolores pulled out the Kick-Gun Dr. Awesome had given her. It was weak enough to not kill its target, but still packed a decent...kick. She slowed down time again and sprinted into the street.

There he drifted, arms crossed, staring down at his disarray. Dolores had him right in line with the muzzle of her gun. The Vitalizer's slo-mo laughter echoed all around the trees and cars flinging themselves back and forth. That was his power, after all: anything inanimate (plus the

occasional plant) close enough came to “life” at his command, acting upon his discretion. The Vitalizer left little but chaos in his wake every time he attacked something, and Cooley suffered the same. He was the bane of every superhero in a 350-mile radius. He stopped at nothing in the wake of his greed. He

was

the

most *gorgeous* creature Dolores had ever seen! That black longcoat! That evil-smiled metallic mask! That laugh! That charm! Just the sight of him made her knees weak. She lost control little by little every time they’d met for battle, no matter where they met or when. Even now it took her half the seven seconds to fire.

The effect of the little projectiles wouldn’t take real form until the slowdown ended; when it did, The Vitalizer lurched back from the force and fell halfway to the ground. Dolores kept the Kick-Gun pointed his way, even when he finally gave her the attention she so feared and desired. “So we meet again, Clockpunk,” he called to her in that rich, perfect voice. “Took you a while to get here.”

She felt her cheeks light up. “Uh, y-your destruction comes to an end here, Vitalizer! The Bull isn’t here, so search elsewhere before I have to kick your ass!”

*Ohhhhh, no. Look at the way the sunbeams fall behind him. Damn, he’s pretty.* “You get less and less composed every time,” the Vitalizer remarked, aware of her

discomfort—though probably not aware of where it sourced. “Traffic got you unsettled today? It’s a shame those ‘associates’ of yours are barely more competent. Oh, well. The answer’s no!” He whipped his hand to the left; five cars rushed towards her.

Dolores slowed things down and then tapped into her other gift, future sight. Focusing on her enemy still suspended in the air, she caught a vision of him about to tear up the street just a bit in front of him. That is, where she’d run after dodging the cars. She only had seven seconds for these sights, as well, so she ran backwards and fired at him again.

Just one of the shots hit him, somewhere in the upper arm. The ground nonetheless tore up beyond her, cracks and chunks of asphalt appearing where they weren’t seconds earlier. He’d misjudged, but The Vitalizer rebounded with a storm of the same asphalt flying her way. Dolores slowed down time and removed herself from the assault; out of harm’s way, she fired as many times as the Kick-Gun allowed. The step-by-step process of these battles didn’t escape her, and she thought, *This is how it is. Each sequence is seconds long: seven slow, seven normal, and repeat. Different day, same routine. At least it elongates the time I get to f—*

“Come now, Clockpunk!” the Vitalizer called as the slowdown came to an end. Cars behind her roared to life. “Are we going to spend the whole afternoon playing games? Tell me where the Bull is!”

“It’s not here!” she replied as she took to the sidewalk, running ahead of the vehicles charging after her. “Let’s be reasonable, shall we, Vitalizer? Continue your search where the thing might actually *be*. Leave Cooley at peace.”

He started laughing again. Despite being one of those villainous, ridiculous, boisterous things that nobody took seriously, it sent lightning through Dolores’s limbs. She wanted to put it on repeat as much as she wanted to shove her fist into his ribcage. “Sweet, stupid Clockpunk,” the Vitalizer cooed, “why the hell should I believe you? You hero types will say anything to get rid of me.” Trees along the path uprooted themselves. A falling streetlight missed Dolores by inches. “I’ll ascertain where the Bull is for myself, thank you.”

*Ugh.* She saw into the future and caught them both having not moved much. *I need to get him out of the air, or at least lead him from the main streets. How many pellets do I have left?* Dolores slowed everything down to check the Kick-Gun’s magazine. *Not much.*

She spared a glance across the street and noticed how close The Vitalizer hovered to a ten-story hotel. Glass walls decorated each floor, so if she could get to a high-enough floor in good time...“What’s ticking along in that head of yours?” the Vitalizer shouted from above a set of six palm trees. Another seven seconds gone. “Thinking of ways to stall?”

“Nope.” Dolores bolted back the way she came, headed for the flock of mindless vehicles, and cut across the

pavement. *He has to know I'm running low. Dr. Awesome seriously has to give me more to work with, lest this...this ne'er-do-well pound me into the concrete.*

Hm. Not the best choice of words.

The Vitalizer started to say something, but Dolores didn't hear it as she booked into the hotel's front doors. He had to know what she might plan from this, so she had to act fast. Into the nearest elevator she sprinted, past gold-tile floors and plush pink sofas that'd be trash if the supervillain caught her.

She guessed his approximate height in the air and jammed her fingers on the Floor Four button. Then she leaned against the dark wood panels of the chamber as the doors closed, soft electro-pop playing overhead. "Well, this is horrible," she muttered as she shook her legs. Sweat collected underneath her protective suit, and while there wasn't any blood lost, Dolores wanted to drop on the elevator floor for a good three hours. *Why can't I have super strength, or fly, or breathe acid, or something more active? It's all a roulette, and it sucks. I'm beat, but The Vitalizer's been in the same place since I got here.*

*No more time to complain, though.* An LED number display pinged when "4" showed up. *I hope I'm not far from the wall.*

When the doors split open, Dolores mustered all her strength into running at the glass across the hallway. Blue carpet and beige walls faded past her eyes, her vision

myopic—the man in black outside, the bright blue and gray surrounding him, were all that mattered.

She put her arms up as the glass came close. The world decelerated around her. Head down, but focus on point, she crashed through a cloud of glittering shards.

Unfortunately for her, shards had nothing on The Vitalizer. When she pulled out her fist, thinking herself secure in her superpower, time ran out. A palm tree to her side struck her like a baseball into the ground.

Thunderous force smothered half her body in pain, the other half scraping against concrete that left cuts on her suit and skin. Dolores let out a cry—she hadn't been hit this hard in, well, *ever*. “So predictable,” the Vitalizer said, now inches above the street. Blinking light circled the fighting pair, Dolores too overwhelmed to notice the cars themselves. “Your kind always is. One last time, Clockpunk: where's the Bull?”

She couldn't answer, save for with tears and sharp breaths. Her back felt like it might shatter, even with the suit's protection. “Considering that I've given you a good beating,” the Vitalizer remarked, “take a moment to answer. You aren't getting any safer.”

Dolores cracked an eye open. Even as The Vitalizer stood over her, having put her in this spot, few spots looked sweeter in Cooley...

A blast of blue-white fire plumed behind them both. Beyond the smoke, the blades of a helicopter hummed. The

Vitalizer sighed. “Well, there are your buddies. I’m not interested in a four-way, so until later, Clockpunk—that Bull still needs finding!” He took to gliding down the street, out of Dolores’s weak sight. Getting up to thank the other superheroes for intervening was out of the question.

Staying awake, as she discovered in the next minute, also proved too strenuous.

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Next thing she knew, Dolores stared up at a dark wall. A computer on a shelf hummed nearby, its screen light revealing a table populated by three other bodies. Wherever the door was, she couldn’t make it out.

Bloodwoman, Dr. Awesome, and Purple Quetzal stood staring at a remote on the table. The rest of the room, metal walls enclosing dusty floors, lay empty. *Superheroes to the rescue*, Dolores thought while she regained her senses. *How long have I been out? I should really carry a watch, being “Clockpunk” and all...*

“¿Está despierta usted?” Purple Quetzal asked without looking her way.

“I told you I didn’t speak any Spanish,” Bloodwoman said instead.

“S...Sí,” Dolores, the actual intended, said. She breathed in, ready to be reamed out for her failure by the others.

When she tried to sit up, fresh pain attacking her torso, Dr. Awesome walked around and pressed her back down.

She realized she lay in a stretcher, but she didn't care where it came from or why they had it here. "You're pretty banged up, Clockpunk," he said. "I don't want to say your back is bruised to hell, but...it's bruised to hell. Fortunately the rest of you seems all right. No major breaks or anything. I'm guessing the painkillers haven't kicked in?"

"Not really, sir," Dolores snuck out of her mouth.

"I half-expected The Vitalizer to go for the kill," he continued. "Bloodwoman, Purple Quetzal, and I couldn't have been defeated so easily, you understand, but it's good that you made it out alive. Not that The Vitalizer's gone to killing lengths, of course."

"He might for...for the Bull."

Dr. Awesome and Purple Quetzal nodded. Bloodwoman said, "Then we're in some shit. The Bull *is* here."

"What?" Dolores's eyes popped open. "Since when?"

"It hasn't been long, but it's been on a bit of tour lately in order to keep it safe. It's a matter of circumstance that our cow coincided with a jackass."

"Can't we smuggle it out? Like, before the Vitalizer gets to it?"

"Kind of hard to do when he's scrawling all over the city for clues. If we try moving it, who knows what'll get destroyed if things go awry."

Dolores slowly raised her hands to her cheeks. *Well, this*

*got waaaay worse. My city's getting ripped to shreds, and here I am with a bad back.* "See for yourself," Purple Quetzal said, interrupting her thoughts. "The computer screen."

Dolores turned her head to the monitor. With its light so glaring, she took a moment to focus. Dr. Awesome turned the volume up in the meantime. "...*the current situation being of The Vitalizer trashing MacGuinness Park in search of what Dr. Awesome referred to as 'The Bull,'*" a blonde-haired news anchor stated behind her desk. In the corner of the screen, a blue-orange sunset curled over a park trail; downed branches lay scattered everywhere in view. "*Authorities believe Clockpunk, or perhaps other superheroes, are on the way; at the rate the madman is uprooting trees and dismantling park fixtures, though, they need to be here yesterday.*"

The camera zoomed in on The Vitalizer sending two benches across a patch of grass to smash a small information booth. Someone recorded the vent from their phone several yards away, so The Vitalizer sent the benches at the kid next. Dolores felt sick watching it.

Then the criminal turned slowly towards the news camera. Hoodied and smiling as ever from the mask, he shamed Dolores into biting her lip without ever knowing his influence. "*It's well-known how to identify The Vitalizer by his getup,*" the reporter said, "*but if anyone has tips as to his alter ego, please alert authorities immediately by the number on-screen.*" 552-1838 on a black strip. Above the strip, people screamed for salvation.

Dolores turned away from the computer. Dr. Awesome turned the volume down and said, “We’re thinking of some other diversion to get the Bull out of here, Clockpunk. The Vitalizer’s looking in the wrong spot...for now.”

“Clockpunk could make a great diversion,” Purple Quetzal said. “Send her back out.”

“The Vitalizer will make quick work of her in this state,” Bloodwoman replied. “Have those painkillers even started to work, kiddo?”

“I guess.” Dolores stared back up at the wall. “You said no major damage, Dr. Awesome?”

“That’s right.”

She nodded as the other three discussed some possible options. All she knew was this: she said she’d protect Cooley, yet here she reclined with no idea where she was and Cooley under serious attack. In the three months since she took up the mantle of Clockpunk, Dolores realized she hadn’t done any real saving. She didn’t have any special gifts well-suited for this kind of work; she survived off the help of the people standing around her. *Help’s all fine and well*, she thought, *but what happens when they can’t come? Are we doomed?*

On the second level of the shelf rested the gears usually attached to her back. Silver with black edges, the accessories were a gift from Bloodwoman to tie the suit theme together. She and the men didn’t need themes or anything. Dr. Awesome had been a Navy physician and could conjure up

the hottest fire; Purple Quetzal's resplendent armor reflected his light control; Bloodwoman wore red, for when she inflicted control over criminals' self-control, forced bloodletting was a favorite tactic. Clockpunk needed something more to tie it all together, but so far the look didn't *quite* do it.

So Dolores relaxed against the stretcher to fill the void. A crisis still stormed in the city. "What are we doing right now?" she said, although she didn't expect an answer.

"Besides trying to move the Bull?" Purple Quetzal said. "Nothing yet."

*All right, Dolores said while she folded her hands. Perhaps they're better left to stew over this. I have no clue what the thing is, and I know Cooley the best out of this group. Bloodwoman suggested a "civilian vehicle," only for Dr. Awesome to say that the Bull wouldn't fit. If anyone needs to be up there...it needs to be...this girl!*

She slowed time in a sequence: seven slow, seven normal, for a total of three minutes. Despite not being much, it allowed her extra room for brainstorming. The computer's constant light alone kept her company through the stiller time, the voices of her compatriots too slow to register in full. *Now, we know The Vitalizer's wrecking everything. We know the Bull needs to go. It's apparent a distraction would be a decent bet. Me going out to fight him won't be effective, given the shape I'm in; it appears that my "coworkers" won't be heading to battle. Hmph.*

During one of the lapses in her power, she watched Dr. Awesome try – and fail – to sell the other two on giving The Vitalizer a fake location. *The Vitalizer isn't an idiot, so no. Frick me, he's cute. I can only wonder if he meant to put together the image he has instead of just cobbling together whatever worked. Either way, he's got good stuff going on.*

*He mauled me, though. I'm lucky my spine didn't snap and kill me. I should hate him, hate him, for all this. Maybe I'd feel better giving him a swift kick up the ass...*

Wait. Time resumed as normal. *Wait, there's an idea.*

“Doctor?” Dolores said.

“Yes, Clockpunk?” he answered.

“I have something.”

“What do you have?”

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Cooley stretched ahead like a disappearing act, the surviving streetlights waning as the roads fled into darkness. Not even the crescent moon did much to illuminate Dolores's way, scattered with chunks of metal and asphalt from one end of the way to the other. Car horns sounded elsewhere; nobody wanted to be here anymore, and she didn't blame them. She hardly wanted to be back aboveground at all.

The super team of superhero superbuddies planted a camera on her waist, streaming whatever might happen

next to a storage room below a parking garage. They probably saw complete darkness as she jogged along the way. Her bones felt heavy, her muscles dull with ache, but life went on. *No rest for the weary*, she thought.

She could *just* make out the Cooley Museum of Art's light beams several miles out and up a rocky hill. What with The Vitalizer not being an idiot, it made sense that he'd head there; the museum stored all sorts of things, so why couldn't it house a secret weapon?

According to Dr. Awesome, The Vitalizer traveled this route going on six minutes ahead of Clockpunk's return to the surface. He moved faster than her, but Bloodwoman started arranging a news bulletin about Dolores being out and about—he might fancy “toying” with the superheroine again. She hoped so. *I bet he would if he liked me*, she thought as she forced her legs forward. *Or maybe not, depending on the Bull's allure. Since this is reality, it doesn't seem like anything matters to him besides the damn thing. Who knows what he'd do upon getting it? Supervillain greed, ha ha. Ugh...*

Dolores heard smashing noises ahead. *Oh, crap, that can't be anyone else. Here's hoping he falls for it...*

“Hey, Vitalizer!” she shouted.

A hot dog cart whizzed past her head from the black. *Yep. There's my man.* “Is that you, dear Clockpunk?” he yelled back.

A lone streetlight cast white curves against his longcoat

after a few seconds. He skulked closer in the slowest of power, ready for a beatdown—dark, cool, badass, and oblivious. How could he realize she'd left her Kick-Gun behind, or that the Bull might be in his hands before long? “Am I wrong in presuming Dr. Awesome gave you something to put you back on your feet?” he asked her.

“You’re correct,” she answered.

“How nice. I’d hoped you wouldn’t be back to distract me for at least a week.”

“Yeah, uh, you hoped wrong.”

“If you are, for whatever reason, trying to stop me, let’s get this over with.” A couple of crickets chirped somewhere as The Vitalizer rolled his neck. Dolores thought of Cooley’s people, either on the outskirts or outside the city in fear of their lives, lest she get distracted by her enemy’s appeal. Why did he have to be hot?

“I’m not here to fight you,” she said. “I’m here to bring the destruction to an end.”

“One thing kind of leads to the other.”

“They don’t have to.” She put her hands up. “I surrender.”

“Okay.” The Vitalizer turned around to leave.

Dolores chuckled, hoping it sounded real. “You don’t get it, do you?”

“I don’t care.”

“If I told you where the Bull was, would you stop terrorizing Cooley?”

*That* made him snap back. “That might persuade me.”

“So long as you leave Cooley alone, we’re good.”

He stared at her for a while. To her slight indulgence, she entered one slowdown to make it last longer. At last, he said, “Don’t ever say ‘we’re good’ again. However...” The Vitalizer crossed his arms. “Give me the Bull, and I’ll relent. I didn’t come all this way to goof around.”

*This is what you consider “goofing around”? Damn.*  
“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Dolores put her hands down. “It’s me. I’m the Bull.”

The Vitalizer stared longer, arms drifting to his sides.  
“No.”

“Yeah.”

Silence. Then, “You’re just using that as a ploy to get me out of Cooley.”

“I wish it was.” *It totally is. It couldn’t be ploy-ier.* “I have to protect this city, and if surrendering myself is what it takes...” She slowed time again to sort her words. “I’ll go with no regret.”

She didn’t know whether he believed her, so she stood still in wait of a response. *Good thing slowdowns are not in his repertoire. He could come up with a million different*

*scenarios; on the field, though, he knows the moment could be gone with a snap of my fingers. The pressure's on.*

The Vitalizer put his hands on his hips, cocking them ever so slightly. Clockpunk thought her cheeks might burn bright enough for him to see. “No shit?” he asked.

“Would I come out here without my gun if I was shitting you?”

“Well, when you put it *that way*, this makes it all the easier!” The one streetlight near them went out before slamming the ground before her; as her sight plunged into blackness, metal squealed against blacktop before wringing itself around her chest. She stifled a scream—the painkillers weren’t perfect. She stifled even harder when the ache and the weight of the streetlight pulled her down. *This is overkill! Holy—*

Once the screeching frame made its last revolution around her, Dolores heard something that made it worse. The camera on her waist snapped in half like a *bitch*. Combined with the pole’s weight, she thought maaaaybe she was doomed.

Plastered in place, she had no choice but to wait for The Vitalizer to walk over. *Is this what an animal being constricted to death by a boa feels like? I need space. I can't move.* “One more thing, Clockpunk,” the Vitalizer said. A wave of his hand brought the twisted pole – and Dolores – a few inches from his head. Face to face. “In light of your... status, if you try anything, you’ll watch Cooley burn into

rubble. Understood?”

“I got it,” she said after a wheeze.

He took her chin in his hand, turned her head left and right, and let go. She didn’t know what to make of it. “Off with you, then,” he said, and Dolores went flying (yelling) into the air. He followed suit, and they shot off into the night.

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Dolores got nothing out of him—where he planned to take her, what he’d do next, or whether he had some sort of schedule for the next chain of events. Not that she had the nerves (or breath) to ask. The other superheroes out of the loop, Dolores possessed nothing short of her wits for this.

The Vitalizer found a ten-story condo building and picked an apartment on the highest floor. Went through the balcony’s sliding door no problem. Dumping Dolores in the corner of the living room, he nodded at a computer against the wall and waited for it to respond to his control.

While he did that, she looked around. Despite the lack of lighting, Cooley’s skyline allowed her a view of white carpet and blanched walls through the glass leading to the balcony. A white sofa faced a wall-mounted TV; behind those stood black shelves lined with indistinguishable trinkets. Art of wine bottles served as decoration. It might’ve been cozy if Dolores hadn’t been kidnapped. Her stomach growled.

*Wonderful. I have no clue what's happening outside, and*

*neither do my cohorts! She folded her legs before they got stiff. I really hope they're moving the Bull faster than The Vitalizer does whatever he's doing. Even if he catches on, he's gotten me out of the way...*

Her stomach grumbled again. “Hungry?” the Vitalizer asked. With the computer presumably functioning to his pleasure, he turned the TV on next.

“Sort of.”

He crossed the living room and disappeared behind a door. Dolores guessed it led to the kitchen. *Is he grabbing me something from the fridge? That's so sweet! I mean, I'm sure he wouldn't want "The Bull" to starve, but it's not like it's been weeks or anything. What a gentleman! He's so pure and*

—

The Vitalizer came back with something soft. “I hope you like donuts,” he said and left the chocolate-covered pastry floating right next to her mouth.

“I love donuts,” she said and took a bite. *Eeeee! He got me a donut! I'm so glad his superpower isn't mind-re—Oh. What if he can?*

He nodded and turned the TV volume up. She heard the news reporting on their little flight, though trackers lost them after a few moments. Dolores wouldn't care unless they offered an update on the Bull, which would either mean the plan worked or the news blew her cover. Since neither happened, she took another bite and wondered about her captor. Was he hungry? Not hungry, too hyped up

on this heist to care? Did he expect Cooley to offer money for her return? When was he going to take off that coat and/or hoodie? Mmmm.

Three fourths through the donut, she got bored. Her bound arms and back hurt. Surely The Vitalizer didn't just plan on watching the tube all night. "Part of your powers lets you make things levitate?" she ventured to ask, since fighting was out of the question. Talking could buy her decent time.

Not that she didn't want to hear his voice, of course.

"It does," he said as the news glared off his clothes and mask.

"Ha. That's pretty cool." *Now why did you say that? He's going to think you're some weak superhero loser impressed by any stupid thing! He'll think you're trying to schmooze him up! You damn nerd...*

The Vitalizer turned away from the TV but rested his gaze on the floor instead of her. "The real question is, Clockpunk, what are *your* powers as the Bull?"

"That's classified." Dolores slowed down time, her heart thumping against her ribcage. *Am I playing this too close to the chest? Too close to the fire?* She finished the donut. Time resumed.

"Ahhh. I guess that was the wrong question." The news reported on the mass exodus happening on the western end of Cooley. When The Vitalizer lost interest in the stream and

faced her, her heart pounded faster. “What matters here is how we activate and use them.”

He walked over and squatted a foot away from her, that electric smile even more menacing in the gloom. Well, half-menacing, half-pleasurable. She felt hot everywhere, her blood alive and heavy, and couldn't look straight at him. At least he couldn't tell with her face mask. “Admittedly,” he said, “this could all be a ruse. I thought about that. You might not be the Bull; you might be the Bull and destroy my prospects.” He put his thumb and index finger on her chin. She couldn't breathe. “Let's have a look at your powers.”

“I, uh, really wouldn't. This condo might not be able to handle it.”

“This isn't my condo, so that's irrelevant.”

*Maybe now is the time I should start looking for a way to escape...* Dolores couldn't see past The Vitalizer's head, though, which didn't give her much to work with. *But what works against this guy? What angle will trip him up?* Nothing came to mind. Bartering? Intimidation? (Yeah, okay.) Payment?

...Flirtation?

“I hope you aren't stalling,” the Vitalizer said before she had anything at disposal. “I will beat your powers out of you if the need arises.”

“It's...”

“Come out with it, Clockpunk.” The Vitalizer dropped his

hand; the metal around her tightened. Dolores winced. “The way I see it, I’ll either have the Bull or one less superhero bothering me. If not one, the other will do.”

Come on come on COME ON. You’re going to be pinched into two pieces!

“W-Well...” she started.

“What?”

Dolores sighed. At the end edge of her sigh, she slowed time again. *Something that’ll take time. I need t—I know.* When time carried on, she bit her lip.

Looked right at The Vitalizer.

“I need to be in a...certain frame of mind for it to work.”

“And what frame is that?”

“One I get from being with other superheroes, not from being tied up: calm.” She allowed herself a little grin for coming up with something so clever. “Much as it breaks my heart to say, I’m not getting that sensation here.”

The Vitalizer stared at her. It started to creep her out, insofar as she wasn’t kind of into it. *His chest is right there. His crotch. Somebody help me. I’m trapped in here. Aren’t the authorities looking for me?*

Dolores braced herself for anger whenever he answered. Instead she got: “All right.”

“What?”

“All right, I said.” The Vitalizer stood and snapped his fingers. He walked back to the white sofa; the streetlight dragged her along with him. “If we sit here long enough, you’ll get there.”

*He’s getting comfortable, the asshole!* Dolores thought while she watched him sit, cross his legs, and flip through the channels. *Channel surfing!* “What do you like, Clockpunk?” he asked.

*O-Oh my gosh...He’s interested in what I enjoy...NO! No! You know better!* “Murder investigation documentaries.”

“I’m not convinced that’ll make you calm.”

“Sure it will.”

He put on a documentary about birds instead. “Now, Clockpunk, I’m still left with what you actually *do* with your particular gift.”

The streetlight tightened again. *Oh, shit. He’s giving me a countdown.* “Are you going to tell anyone my secret?” she toyed. *OKAY! What’s the most outrageous extension of your current powers? Hurry!*

“You know I wouldn’t, sweetheart.”

*Hee, hee...Oh, stop! Focus.* “When I’m in my zone, I can stop the entire city for an hour. I’ve tried it out on Cooley a few times. It’s cool.” She looked to the documentary for a moment and watched a blue heron stroll through a stream. Grass swayed behind it in the sunshine. “Couldn’t let Dr. Awesome and the others have access to me?”

The Vitalizer paused, perhaps more into the TV than she thought. “No,” was all he said.

Once more, the light pole tightened. *Jackass...like I don't know he's doing it...* Dolores needed something more: time. The one thing that made her “famous.”

They sat around a little while longer, Dolores pretending to be captivated by the bird onscreen. She was more interested in scanning her surroundings, hopeful that something could deliver her from The Vitalizer, but she couldn't let him see that. As far as she knew, he'd be content with her death—better now to be quiet.

It didn't last. The Vitalizer exhaled, Dolores's bonds at their most constricting. She sucked sharply for air. “Clockpunk—” he began.

“Th-There's something else.”

The streetlight squeezed her so tightly, she felt like her lungs would shoot out of her mouth. It burned, burned her muscles and skin. *Perhaps, in any other context,* she thought, *one might call this “kinky.” However, I can't stall much longer. I know he's considering just ending me.*

“And here I thought we'd be honest with each other,” the Vitalizer said. “Cooley *can't* mean that much to you if you've just been lying.”

“No, no! It's about my ‘Bull’ gift. If—If I'm really happy, that works, too. Gives me the energy to go for it, y'know.”

The Vitalizer leaned over, elbows on his knees.

“Something tells me you aren’t going to find such delight where we currently are.”

“No, but it’s the truth.” He stared at the wall in response. “Could I get another donut? I’m still hungry.”

Her captor stood and walked around her. As he walked across the carpet, she slowed time and whipped her eyes back and forth. *Damn it. Nothing I can use. There’s one last thing I can try...* Time went on; so did The Vitalizer. She slowed time again as soon as she could.

She bent one leg. The streetlight pinning her to the floor made it near unbearable to move, but with labored breaths she got on her knees. She initiated another slowdown cycle and, her body threatening to break down, got to her feet. Not supposing she had more opportunity to experiment (nor that The Vitalizer wouldn’t try to get back ASAP), Dolores sat back down. *I can’t screw this up. I have to be fast, clever—better yet, both. How tall is this sofa?*

Dolores had a concept brewing in her brain. Whether or not she could do it was the question, but she had to try. Maybe The Vitalizer wouldn’t immediately off her if she messed up—a huge risk, though sitting around waiting for him to hear of the real Bull’s departure at any moment worried her more. *I got myself standing, she thought, so if I seriously push myself, maybe I can...*

He came back with another donut, this one with the added treat of sprinkles. Flicked it near her face before retaking the sofa. Put the news back on. Dolores’s heart

threatened to burst out of her chest, but no updates came. Nothing about the Bull surfaced. She got to eating.

Part of her wanted conversation, but The Vitalizer wouldn't care. She bet he had all sorts of stories to tell, plus a story might calm her down to unleash her "Bull powers." On the flip side, she appreciated thoughtful men; a brief image of them cuddling in silence almost made her choke on the donut. "Don't tell me you're going to choke yourself," he said while she coughed.

"No." A little donut chocolate spread on the skin by her lips. "There's a learning curve for eating levitating food."

He cocked his head in agreement. As she got the donut into her stomach, she let chocolate spread further over her mouth and cheeks. "I can't finish the damn thing, Vitalizer," she complained. "If I had my *hands*—"

He put his hand out to telekinetically shove the remaining donut into her face, not bothering to look away. Some old white journalist on a panel insulted The Vitalizer, a "sociopath unchained" and "greed-driven asshole," so the insulted party watched to hear what else. *Adorable*, Dolores mused. *The Vitalizer thinks this is funny, huh? What a chill guy.*

Her donut gone, the moment had arrived. She looked at the villain a while longer, resolving not to hurt him too badly, and set her plan in motion. "Can I sit on the sofa?" she asked.

"I guess." The wound-up streetlight took her up with it

to the couch cushion.

She relaxed her neck and butt. The Vitalizer sat a few inches away, but this arrangement wouldn't work. She kept what calm she could. "Thanks."

"Uh-huh."

"One more thing."

"What is it?" he asked flatly.

"My face is a mess."

"You want me to clean your face?"

"I mean, it doesn't *have* to be you. Just tell a wipe or something to do it."

The Vitalizer groaned and got up again to find a wipe. He looked back at her while he headed for the kitchen a third time; she smiled back but got no response. *All right, she told herself. He'll cross the living room as normal and come around the left here. So long as my balance is good, I think I can get the advantage. He can probably tell I'm up to something—be smart, Dolores.*

Right as The Vitalizer went through a little hallway, Dolores froze everything and got back on her knees. Time let up, but she grunted her way to a squat. *Come on, come on, she pleaded with her body. I need to get on top.*

Footsteps sounded in the kitchen, followed by some appliance scraping the counter. *He's kind of accommodating for a superhero hijacker. He's cute! But he isn't stupid.*

Dolores stood up straight, one foot on the sofa's arm. *I'm quite obvious coming out of the kitchen, so if I squat here...*

With one more slowdown, she judged the height and power needed to get up. Content as possible in her situation, she crouched a second time and stared at her legs until her unsuspecting not-boyfriend returned.

The Vitalizer showed. She watched him walk halfway, and then turn left, and then...

While he rounded the way back to his seat, Dolores sent everything into slowness. *Hold*, she asked her powers. *Please hold.*

Seconds one and two: she stood.

Three: one foot landed on the arm.

Four and five: she balanced both feet. *I need more time!* She strained her brain to keep things still. *They call me a superhero, and it takes all I have to put seven seconds on hold!*

Six and seven: aware she'd run out, she forced herself onto the back of the sofa and hopped into the air—at The Vitalizer.

She saw time sink in and his head shift in her direction.

When Dolores thought he'd snap those beefy arms and fling her against the wall, he stopped. Her head hurt, more than she thought it would for a few seconds' strain, but she got herself one more second. In that eighth second, the two

came together.

As in, she dropped him. Aching all over, she pinned him to the floor in one fell swoop.

They both shouted from the impact, The Vitalizer having the stronger reaction. He kicked, he groaned, he tried to shake Dolores off, but to no avail. She didn't know what she did – broke his ribs, broke nothing – but when he tried pulling at the light pole wrapped around her, she felt nothing but a tug. He couldn't lift her off, and as The Vitalizer gasped for air, Dolores understood. “Y..You can't use your powers!” she said, as if reconciling the notion to herself. “You're under too much stress, aren't you?”

He growled and kept fighting, failing to knock her off along with lifting the sofa beside them. Dolores wrapped her legs around him to make sure she didn't slip. “This is four, five hundred pounds on your chest. You aren't going to be shaking me off.”

“Sh-*Shut up*,” the Vitalizer snapped between sucking in air.

*It's weird, having his lower chest and back so close to my skin*, Dolores thought. *Hm. Okay, stop, need to negotiate.* “So,” Dolores said right before another slowdown. She lifted herself up and slammed herself back on The Vitalizer's chest.

He cried out, although it *sounded* like he tried to stifle it to save face. *Now he's in pain like I am. Vengeance satiated.* “Here's what we'll do, Vitalizer,” Dolores said over his

groans—resisting her own urge to groan. “I’m going to keep beating you with my binds. It will be agonizing. The only way to lessen it up will be to get this pole from around me.”

The Vitalizer coughed some more before saying, “As if there’s only one solution to—”

Dolores went into another slowdown before crashing into him again. “It’s *your* only solution,” she said as he writhed in utter distress. “I might not have the strongest or most efficient superpowers, but you’re operating on my time now.”

It annoyed her a bit when he tried sitting up. She knew he was tough, willing to fight through the pain to get what he desired, but why wouldn’t he stay down? “Stop it!” she said in spite of herself, slowing time again to keep The Vitalizer incapacitated. With another slam, he cried out even louder. “We are both tired and battered. Don’t make me h...Don’t make me kill you.” She stopped herself before she said the damning words: *Don’t make me hurt you anymore. He would’ve heard all the reluctance he needed to get over on me.*

The Vitalizer stopped moving. He couldn’t even take a decent breath. Nonetheless, a wheezing chuckle escaped his throat. “You aren’t going to kill me. Anyone with...with eyes could see that.”

“Smart.” Dolores allowed herself a grin. *Resilient bastard. Every time I ask, “Why you?” I stumble upon a good explanation. It’s reaffirmed whenever my mind locks on you.*

“I don’t have to, though. One good knock to the head will do well enough.”

She didn’t commence another slowdown just yet. The Vitalizer didn’t fight back, and neither did she. They stared at each other for a bizarre moment in time, the quiet tones of the TV the only noise besides their strenuous breaths. What did he see when he looked at her? What did he feel? She knew she couldn’t let him lie here, recovering from the trauma with every passing moment, but it could be so nice to rest against him in a friendlier context...

*Sigh.* She wanted to sleep. She wanted to eat 80 loaves of garlic bread and watch Netflix for two days. *No rest for the weary.* Here came the next slowdown, Dolores forcing herself up—she had less motivation for this pummeling than the others. She quite relished gravity’s pull when she landed back on The Vitalizer.

With one last loud grunt, he yielded. “All right!” he spoke, panting. “All right, Clockpunk.”

“Great. Release me.”

The Vitalizer’s hands drifted to her metal-bound back. He took the deepest breath possible, and at once the streetlight drew away.

Dolores stayed on edge as her body came free. She anticipated a fight as soon as things looked relieved, leading her to take a quick glimpse seven seconds into the future.

In that gloom, he grabbed her neck. Dolores came back

to the present and, as soon as she could move her pounding arms, jumped off him into a slowdown.

The streetlight thudded against the ground when it slid down her body. She had two options, the front door or the balcony. Since she assumed the door locked, she charged to the balcony and slid open the glass exit. Three seconds went to climbing onto the railing, but she needed at least seven to recharge. She waited a couple more in real time.

The Vitalizer yelled her name – her superheroine name – and gave her the motivation to jump.

*I think this is my first time jumping off a building, she thought in freefall. Should I be excited or terrified? The wind feels amazing. The Vitalizer had better not fall after me. All she heard was wind, the dark city cool around her limbs. Only a hot bath could feel better.*

As the ground closed in, Dolores heaved a long, proper sigh. She'd tried this before, but never from such heights.

She slowed time. The rushing buildings around her, the soothing gusts, inched like cold honey past her eyes. Though she still descended, she met Earth at such a slow rate that she landed on both feet without added injury—much as she needed to check into a hospital, Dolores still had her will. She booked down the street, past the condo complex into the streets.

Right before time resumed, she made out a humming sound somewhere ahead. *Please tell me that's Dr. Awesome's helicopter searching for me, she thought as she ran. Every*

inch of her screamed to pass out on the pavement, but it was either the other heroes or The Vitalizer.

Cracking, crushing noises sounded behind her. She threw one glance over her shoulder and saw The Vitalizer hot on her trail, ripping up everything he could throw at her. *He's up and after me already?! Damn, he's fast!* She turned forward and pressed her body further. *What's more is that he's mad as hell. I can't let him reach me.*

Mailboxes, benches, and small trees whooshed past her arms and ears. She slowed time to take a turn, both dodging the hail and leaving The Vitalizer's sight, but knew this path led to exhaustion. Once the slowdown let up, the shops around her fractured off their foundations in pursuit of her. *Is he going to try crushing me or something?* Dolores kept her ears perked for that humming noise, despite the rumblings of brick-wood-plastic at the edge of her back. *Burying me in rubble? Please let that be the helicopter coming towards me.*

Oh, hey, if The Vitalizer's causing all this havoc...maybe they'll see it from above.

They could not miss it. Cooley lay quiet besides the storm in Dolores's wake; she didn't know where all its people fled, simply that they weren't here to take from the display. While she slowed time again, the relative silence struck her. *I did it. Cooley's citizens got away. My plan worked! Yeah, Cooley's sustained grievous damage, but not its people! Not its people.*

She had to stop running for a bit, so tired she thought she'd collapse. Her hand rested against a tree, and though The Vitalizer demolished a bus up the street, she had to dig deep. That humming came into clarity as she wiped the sweat off her lip. *It is the 'copter. Where...?* She looked through the canopy for it.

A searchlight beamed into view. *Finally I'm at the end. No stopping now.* With another slowdown, Dolores pressed on towards it. She didn't care to judge how far the light strayed, for as long as The Vitalizer didn't beat her to it, no problem!

Failing to give him due notice did her no favors, however. While sprinting across a boulevard, the tree she'd just left caught her on the calf. Dolores grunted and stumbled but kept going. A yield sign jabbed at her thigh, breaking enough skin to make her pants damp. *He's catching up! I can't get a break!*

The third slowdown, started on the brink of a spinning traffic light grazing her back, lasted five seconds. She felt the difference; she wanted to panic. *Not good not good NOT GOOD.* "Clockpunk!" The Vitalizer shouted over the screeching roar of half a bus—Dolores turned back to see it driving up the rightmost lane with him on top. "Mind yourself! You're a valuable commodity, remember?"

She ran down another boulevard at the limit of her strength. He followed. Her vision grew spotty, her legs shaking. Her mouth was dry; her lungs shriveled beneath her ribs. She had one more slowdown in her—

Heat licked up her entire body from behind. A blue-white tower of flames crash-landed between her and The Vitalizer, and when she revolved to take it in, she fell to her knees. She sucked in all the hot air she could handle, unconcerned with the megalomaniac on the other side. The helicopter hovered a little ways away.

When the tower disappeared, The Vitalizer looked ready to attack. Fortunately for Dolores, Dr. Awesome appeared between them. Bloodwoman and Purple Quetzal walked up beside her. Aware of the blood, sweat, and chocolate frosting still on her, Dolores let the cleaner-kempt heroes do the energy-wasting. “It’s been a while, Vitalizer,” Dr. Awesome said.

“So it has,” the Vitalizer said with a cough. He drifted down off the bus. “Pleasantries aside, I’ll take the woman back.”

“No, you won’t.” The doctor put his fists on his hips and said, “Clockpunk comes with us.”

The Vitalizer clutched his gut but kept his ground. “The Bull comes with *me*.”

Dr. Awesome leaned his head up. “Ahhh. The Bull. As a matter of fact, the Bull is already out of Cooley; it’s not going with any of us. Clockpunk’s never even seen it, villain.”

Once more, The Vitalizer stared everyone down. Dolores got the sense that he really kept his gaze on her, but it didn’t matter. He couldn’t reach her with the other three there.

Instead, he let out a soft laugh. “I figured. I should have gone ahead and killed her—”

“You won’t be killing anyone,” Bloodwoman interrupted.

“I suppose I won’t.”

Relief flooded Dolores at those words. She was done. She could rest. “Leave Cooley,” Bloodwoman said. “If you stay, you deal with us. What you came for is gone, so consider this an act of mercy.”

Another lapse of silence passed. The Vitalizer ended it with a series of coughs before lifting his hands. “An act of mercy, then. I concede.”

He turned to the city’s other end. Dolores knew he still wanted the Bull, even if none of them knew where it ended up. In the very least, she found solace in knowing he wouldn’t return to her home for it anytime soon. “Another time, heroes,” the Vitalizer said as he walked away.

“One thing, though, before I forget.” He cast his masked face to Dolores. “I’m impressed, Clockpunk. You might be my new favorite of this pathetic bunch.”

She blushed like crazy. In fact, she had to fight off a smile as he shot off in the night air—good thing her body crumpled up into a ball, too worn out to do anything else. Bloodwoman picked her up for extraction in the helicopter, but Dolores chose sleep over everything else.

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Dr. Awesome, being the sole superhero who knew her everyday identity, tended to her injuries with a nurse they both trusted. She recuperated over the next few days in peace.

She recuperated further at home once released. First thing she did was hop in the tub, the steaming water eking out every last ounce of soreness left.

Next she cried for a minute over The Vitalizer, at how she'd brutalized her crush despite him deserving it. Remembering the newfound respect he showed her before disappearing helped calm her down, but she never wanted to hurt anyone that badly again.

Then she called her mom, updated the museum on her “car crash injuries obtained during the rush out of the city,” and got back to her normal life. She ate, played video games, slept, and worked as she typically did. In spite of the Cooley destruction, she commended the other heroes for removing the Bull. In spite of her life's duality, she found no need to complain. And, in spite of The Vitalizer's chaotic deeds, she still giggled when she saw his picture on the news.

When Dolores saw herself, though, she smiled more. She saw a hero more suited to the job than maybe anyone, even Dolores, originally believed. The next time Cooley called for Clockpunk, they'd get her—happier and proud of herself, as she should have always been.

## *Collector's Edition*

*CDP Morkert*

*The original myth Collector's Edition is based off of is one part dragon hoards, and one part the myth of basilisks and weasels being mortal enemies. Honestly Morkert researched about weasels being able to kill basilisks by peeing into their nests, and was so tickled that an entire world was built off of that one fact. Here's some advice: If it makes you laugh, think of writing something about it.*

~ ~ ~

Looking at the library from the outside, most

immediately assume it's a used book store. They would be partially right, and could purchase various old and new paperbacks off the racks and rickety shelves. It smelled dusty, looked dustier, and had a strange atmosphere of mysteriousness that didn't fit such a small place. The only thing that kept patrons coming was probably the elderly, somewhat petite, librarian. Or what most assumed as the used book store owner. He was more than alright with either descriptor, as long as you were polite and didn't knock over the piles of tomes that were stacked near the check-out desk. That was a pet peeve of his. But on the whole, he was a welcoming sort, and often the tiny library would be a refuge of peace and safety.

The librarian's name changed every thirty years or so. Some called him by old names, but not often. Those ones, those few who knew the old names, were the librarian's favorites. The old names were for those who had been around as long as he had. And all of them, every ageless one, were precious. If the librarian hadn't taken a liking to the written word so early in life, he might have considered collecting immortals rather than books. But perhaps it had turned out better for everyone. Past history with the librarian's western cousins forcibly taking away people for their collections didn't bode well health-wise.

To say the librarian was eccentric was precisely true. He had a small, fluffy, cream-colored Pomeranian as a pet that was kept behind the desk, or sometimes napped on the counter when times were slow. He organized the books to color, rather than to titles, or authors, or any reasonable

way to sort books. He had a small table where there was always hot water, but no tea or coffee to add to it. And well, there was the back room to consider. But he didn't talk about the back room to just anyone. So only his favorites knew about that little oddity.

One of said favorites entered the library one day with a bit of a harassed expression on their face partially obscured by the goggles that covered their eyes. Of course this one always seemed to be harassed, but the librarian never asked out-right out of politeness. All would be told in time anyway. The patron paused at the entrance and bowed slightly, and the librarian bowed his own head in acknowledgement. Such a respectful young one. Pulling out a mug, the librarian set it on the counter, causing the small guard dog to lift his head to observe the newly arrived patron. At the sight of the dog, the expression on the patron's face eased into one of affection, "Hello, Byron."

Byron sat up, tail swishing softly as the patron pet his head and rubbed his ears. A fond smile found its way to the librarian's face at the display, and he scooted the mug a bit closer. The patron took the mug, bowing their head gratefully, and fished a tea bag from their coat pocket. The librarian lifted Byron to place him on the floor, and the dog followed the patron to the hot water, beginning to pant in excitement over the visitor. "Long time to be gone," the librarian commented, bringing his own mug to his mouth.

The patron stiffened a little, but kept preparing their tea in silence. The quiet settled a bit, the librarian in no hurry to

learn what had transpired to the young one on their last adventure. No doubt it had to do with that rivalry of theirs, if they were still doing that. Honestly that should have resolved long ago, based on how long those two had been competing against each other. Treasure hunting was dangerous, and the librarian didn't necessarily agree with what the young one did. He knew that the items and places that were found had been abandoned, and so the contents there forfeit, but still... There was some uneasiness thinking about such things being taken away from where they were placed by their original owners. Perhaps that was the old way of thinking now. Immortals had to keep busy somehow, especially with the old forms weakening and changing. He himself couldn't remember the last time he was able to hold his old form for more than a few hours. Ah, those were the days.

Not that the librarian spent some of his own time betting on the two adventurers to assuage his own boredom. That would be silly. But if he did have a bet going, his young patron better win in the next ten years. Otherwise the librarian might be out of a few choice boxes of tea to an old serpent in Scotland, and that would just be terrible all around. That old snake could be so smug.

Cup of tea in hand, the patron came back to the counter and retrieved a small book from an inside coat pocket. They carefully placed the book in front of the librarian, and starting sipping their tea. The librarian got the impression there was a struggle taking place on whether what happened should be shared, and instead of asking, the

librarian took the book and flipped through a few pages to verify it was still in one piece. As usual, the book was in pristine condition, just as it had been when it was checked out. It had taken many years for this young one to earn the librarian's trust to check out the rarer books, but he had never regretted giving it to them. These old things liked to get fresh air every now and then anyway.

"Still using Dolion as a name?" The librarian thought this was an innocent enough question, especially because he hadn't seen this patron for almost three years. The relaxing of the patron's shoulders reassured the librarian somehow and even more so when the patron replied, "No. It's Pagos... again. Just don't tell the weasel." Before the librarian could ask why, Pagos interjected quickly, "And you? May I still call you by Jiang?" Nodding firmly, the librarian set down his mug, "Of course. Just don't tell the weasel." Pagos snorted, and then quickly returned to their mug in embarrassment.

Laughing, Jiang took the book and moved to lock the front door. Byron, knowing what this signified, bounded to the back wall and sat, barking twice before returning to his panting. Pagos almost snorted again, but cleared their throat to cover it up. Young ones could be so adorable. Jiang almost wished he could convince Pagos to settle down and help out with the library, but he knew it was still too early to bring it up. Plus that rivalry Pagos has been holding onto for the past few hundred years was, Jiang assumed, still going strong. The hoard Pagos gathered by now must be impressive.

Approaching the far wall, Jiang motioned for Byron to move back, and although he obeyed he barked once in annoyance. Pagos tutted at the dog, setting down their mug to kneel and motion for Byron to come. Byron scampered forward, and happily allowed Pagos to hold him, looking every inch a royal assuming their throne. Jiang laughed again, just barely resisting doubling over at the hilarious image. He so loved little dogs. Such a huge amount of arrogance in such a small package. Jiang would never tire of it.

The wall had a large bookcase, almost covering the entire length of it. Jiang tapped a few of the books on the tops of their spines, then ran a finger down the spine of a lavender colored paperback. There was a shutter that rocked the bookcase, and then it folded, accordion style, to the left. The two immortals walked into the entrance of Jiang's back room, and the bookcase closed behind them.

The pride and joy of the librarian spread out into an almost cavern-like structure, stairs from the now closed off smaller library leading down into a lobby area. The lobby was circular, and bookcases spread from it like rays of the sun and continued on a great distance. Here, the books did not seem to be sorted in any way. Jiang didn't find the need to do so, since he at least had a decent idea where everything was. As they walked down the staircase, Jiang began muttering, going through the mental inventory of his library. Taking a right at the foot of the stairs, Jiang ran a hand along the third up shelf, a strange content humming coming from the books as they were touched. Pagos kept

their distance, always a bit unnerved at the apparent awareness of the books. Petting Byron to calm their discomfort, Pagos followed Jiang closely, knowing one could easily get lost without the librarian's guidance.

It took them awhile to get to the right bookcase, but soon the librarian was climbing up the side of one like a gecko, shifting to his more reptilian older form. Jiang placed the returned book on the second shelf down, five books in. The book almost seemed to relax into its place, the edges softening. Jiang tapped it, making a pleased sound, "They are always glad when you take them out, you know. They enjoy your adventures." Pagos was unsure if they were reassured by this information, or a bit more disturbed than before. Not that Pagos didn't like books, but... It just wasn't often such things could like someone back. How objects would even enter a self-aware state was beyond them, but they supposed it had much to do with the librarian that took care of them. And some remnant magic that comes with the subject matter they contained, perhaps? Pagos was beginning to think that it was worth a few decades of their time to tackle the question with intense study. Maybe someday, when their old form thinned and travel over rougher terrain became more difficult.

Jiang climbed the rest of the way up the bookcase, surprising Pagos by slipping out of his clothes and sliding along the top of the weathered wood a bit before looking down to regard his visitor, what could be gathered of his old form coming completely to the surface. The dragon could not reach his old size, but he was still impressive to look at.

His scales still maintained a glossy green-blue, but his mane was faded and cat-fish whiskers almost as long as his body. His deer-like horns also seemed aged, knotted like ancient tree branches. The wood creaked as Jiang settled, bringing his claw to run through his beard in what appeared to be contemplation. Pagos, self-conscious now that their elder had changed his form, reverted to their own old form instinctively.

Thankfully Pagos' old form was still human-sized, and so they did not need to disturb Byron too much in order to shed their clothes. Their more reptilian features came out, brownish scales hardening and bird-like legs causing them to toe off their shoes and stretch out their long toes. Raised ridges above their eyes sprouted, as well as a crest on the top of their head that started at the center of their forehead and ended at the back of their neck. They held Byron with one claw as they adjusted their goggles to make sure they didn't accidentally turn Jiang or his dog into stone. Hidden buttons at the back of their pants were undone, and a spiked tail slithered out, swishing twice to make sure no fabric was caught. Byron struggled a bit, but after Pagos shivered once in relief they returned to devoting both arms to Byron's comfort, and he settled immediately. Pagos might well have been mistaken for a newborn dragon of the east if not for the deadly tail and eyes.

"Now that we are both a bit more comfortable," Jiang brought his tail forward to swing lazily in front of the bookcase and craned his head to look at Pagos from a higher vantage point, "I'll hazard a guess and say you need another

book or two." Pagos winced slightly, turning their gaze to Byron as they carded their claws through the thick fur, much to Byron's approval. Jiang waited. After a few moments, Pagos responded softly, "Yes. The weasel... I mean... Hori. Hori got the tapestry before I could..." Jiang hummed in sympathy, but said nothing else to respond to this new information. The sudden use of the kamaitachi's more rarely used names intrigued the librarian, but commenting on it would likely be unwise. It caused one to wonder, however, just how this rivalry of theirs was developing. Most interesting indeed.

"Well, any contents in this library are yours to use. I know any of my books will be safe in your charge." Ducking their head, Pagos tried to hide their embarrassed glee at the compliment, but Jiang could see the quavering grin from where he was coiled. It often surprised Jiang how prideful Pagos could be, any treasures lost to the wind weasel often met with much brooding on the basilisk's part. But every creature had their soft spots, he supposed.

Pagos suddenly seemed to remember something and became a bit somber, looking up at Jiang as their crest lowered closer to their skin, a sign of trepidation. "Do you... have any books on the wells of Longwitton?" Jiang thought for a moment, toying with his beard as he mentally sifted through his catalog. Longwitton sounded familiar, but he couldn't place why. After accumulating so many books, he found some difficulty remembering every single subject in them. Wells, wells... why would Pagos feel hesitant about asking where some wells were? He could remember

precisely where to find books on that area of Great Britain, however. Intent on finding this information, and suddenly curious, Jiang lifted himself from the bookcase and glided through the air above Pagos, twisting toward where he might find the books asked for. Pagos followed close behind, soon needing to put Byron down in order to run unimpeded. They hated when Jiang took off like that. At least he doesn't float completely over the bookcases like he used to. Pagos wasn't sure if they could climb and jump across them fast enough, not without tipping a few over. Again. Hot in pursuit of the basilisk was Byron, barking in indignation at having to speed after his former transport.

Jiang was soon circling the bookcase he had been seeking, slithering down to the third up shelf to pull the eighth book to the right. It was a larger tome, an atlas of Great Britain. Jiang always had better luck recalling particulars of places when he could see where it was on a map. But before he could even find it on the worn pages, he had a sudden memory of where he had heard of Longwitton before. Many years ago, in the age where his western cousins had been hunted to near extinction, there had been three wells of healing. The Wells of Longwitton. A dragon with scales of emerald, their name not even recorded, took up responsibility to guard these wells, using their ability of camouflage to protect themselves from intruders. Humans, angry that they could not use the wells whenever they pleased and fearful of what they could not see, called for the dragon's death. Just one drop in the vast ocean of murders that would occur in those years.

The Age of the Hunted. That was what many immortals called this time. Not that any year is free of bloodshed, or destruction of the mysterious. But it was a time when news began traveling faster, and there was an awareness of what was taking place miles away that had not been present before. Jiang remembered well the torture of the daily news he'd hear from travelers and letters from acquaintances in the thick of danger. The fear, the disquiet. The need to begin hiding.

A shudder wracked through Jiang, as he curled around himself on the top of the bookcase. Pagos knew Jiang hated recalling this time. Why the young one had seemed uneasy now was clear. The time when legends slowly twisted, to erase or rewrite the lives of immortals and humans as the ability to record the past and present became more accessible... a blessing and a curse, to those who had magic in their blood. The atlas still in Jiang's clutches, he smoothed the page he had wrinkled in his claws as he had been seized with memory. A great sense of agitation was suddenly present in the library, as the books sensed their librarian's mood.

Pagos, feeling the change in the air, slowed as they approached the ancient dragon, who was still peering at the contents of the atlas. Guilty, and somewhat ashamed, Pagos came closer with a lowered head, not raising their eyes to the librarian. They had known they should have found the information somewhere else. Anywhere else. To cause any discomfort to Jiang was to Pagos a great offense. But there was a reason why they sought these specific wells. And Jiang

was their greatest confidant, so seeking information elsewhere almost seemed to be a greater snub than bringing the past to mind.

“Tell me, small one. Why do you wish to know about this place?”

Wincing at the flat tone Jiang used, Pagos scratched at the floor with their feet, unsettled, “The wells had great healing properties. If there is even a chance of there being any of the water left... I wanted to know. Collect some, if possible.”

Closing the atlas with a loud snap, Jiang peered down at Pagos, softening somewhat at the sight of the other’s clear regret at bringing up such a sore subject. “You have been seeking many items of healing, the past few decades. The tapestry is the first treasure in a long time that had nothing to do with it.” Pagos adjusted their goggles nervously, but said nothing in response. Byron’s loud panting filled the awkward atmosphere as he shuffled to Pagos, dancing around their feet, demanding with a few barks to be lifted into their arms again. Pagos, a startled laugh escaping without their consent, knelt down to pick up the dog and began gratefully petting Byron’s soft fur.

The heaviness of the air lifted somewhat, Jiang calming as he gazed at Pagos and Byron. He knew that the basilisk meant no offense at bringing up the past, and their need to know, to explore, was something Jiang would always admire. Truly, this basilisk was the closest Jiang had to an offspring. Ties to those of his own species were strained

with age, mistakes, and the tangled politics of immortal beings. Dragons were a proud race, especially those from China. As the old forms faded and humans stopped seeking advice and favors, the need to preserve what was past seemed to be the only thing on the minds of eastern dragons. The future was hardly ever considered relevant. Jiang himself thought that way for many years, trying to collect books of the past, to hide and lock away as much of the old tales, myths, and stories as he could. But as immortals and humans alike came to him, asked him for his help and information, and as he got to know them... he slowly realized what was already written wasn't the end. There was still more to write and experience.

Jiang returned the atlas to its place. "I do not know what came of those wells, after their guardian was... lost. It is unlikely you will find anything left of those healing waters. I can tell you where they were, but that is all." Coiling beside Pagos, Jiang tapped a claw on Pagos' head, something he did often when Pagos thought they had done something wrong, "Do tell me what became of the place. It will be good to record for seekers of the future."

Finally meeting Jiang's eyes, Pagos nodded slowly, "... Yes, of course. Jiang, I am sorry if..." Jiang tapped Pagos' head again, "None of that. You worry over your poisonous nature, I assume?" Pagos tensed, once again looking away from their elder. Right on the mark then. Jiang patted Byron's head and then took flight to the lobby of his library, calling behind him, "You did not worry so much in the past. I hope nothing happened."

Pagos watched Jiang leave, following a moment or two after, anxiety at being lost lessened now that they were closer to the lobby. Being a basilisk, Pagos could kill with either direct eye contact, or with poison they excreted from sacs in the back of their throat. The poison was so volatile, all one had to do was touch it or even inhale its fumes for a short time to be in danger of death. Jiang was right in that Pagos did not worry too much about it, since they did not have much occasion to use their poison. But... well, things sometimes got out of hand on their expeditions and... they had their reasons for wanting to be safer.

In the lobby there was a large table and several chairs, as well as a small desk shoved to the side with writing supplies. Jiang shifted to his more human form, also retrieving a robe he kept in a desk drawer just in case he ever needed it. Beginning to sketch out a map, he wondered for the hundredth time if he should try to dissuade Pagos from their exploration. There was no telling what leftover magic or creatures were remaining at those wells, especially considering their powerful properties. But as usual, Jiang decided to keep his peace. It was clear Pagos had some kind of goal every time they went hunting, and adventuring was a tried and true way for immortals to become more aware of the world and how they would make their place in it. Besides, Pagos would not be alone, since that kamaitachi followed them most everywhere.

When this had all begun, Jiang had gotten the impression that Pagos and the weasel had started this treasure hunting contest to find an alternative way to kill

each other. Direct confrontation had always ended in stalemate. And those two had centuries of conflict behind them between their two species. Then again... Jiang turned to look at Pagos as they entered the lobby.

Byron, set down by Pagos as they came to the desk, snuffled at Jiang's feet a moment before snapping his attention to the entrance of the library, ears twitching and panting ceasing as he listened. Jiang looked at the entrance as well, a bit annoyed, "Someone is trying to get in." Pagos hissed softly, changing back into their more human form and beginning to approach the entrance to take care of whoever was trying to invade Jiang's territory. A hand on their shoulder stopped them, "I will take care of it. Follow close behind, if you would. Just in case." Pagos nodded, and Jiang mounted the steps out to his smaller, more public library. He had a very good idea who was trying to pick the lock to the door leading to the street. It was almost a tradition at this point. He had never had Pagos present when he had this particular visitor, however. He almost looked forward to their reaction. It would likely be priceless.

The bookcase folded, and Jiang moved quickly to the street entrance, flicking the lock and opening the door. Tumbling forward with a muffled curse, the kamaitachi Hori spilled into Jiang's library, somewhat damp because of the drizzle that was now misting through the town. Jiang heard a strangled sound of surprise from Pagos, and loud barks of anger from Byron at the intruder. Hori winced at the high pitched sounds, looking up at Jiang, a sheepish grin on his face, "Almost did it. I'm gonna surprise you some day,

old man.”

Jiang disliked being called old man. He also disliked Hori to a small degree. But the immortal was also young, and Jiang felt some need to at least try and help this one mature somehow. The rivalry with Pagos, surprisingly, had helped much with this, but... “Turn off the alarm, will ya? I swear I ain’t here to spirit away your three volume novels.”

But before Jiang could comment, Pagos strode forward, Hori’s face changing quickly from surprise to a wide grin, “Hey, lookit who it is-” Pagos grasped the collar of Hori’s thick jacket, dragging him to the door again amongst a squawk of protest, and hurled him into the street. As Hori sputtered something that sounded half apology, half mockery about the tapestry he had been able to snatch from the basilisk’s claws, Pagos closed the door again, throwing the lock back into position and huffing in disgust. Jiang, shoulders shaking in suppressed glee, tried his utmost to keep his expression neutral. Just as he thought. *Priceless.*

Byron circled Pagos, excitedly barking in victory at the intruder being banished from his master’s home. Pagos patted his head, but then rounded on Jiang, who failed at stopping a snort of amusement from escaping. Pagos glowered at their mentor, “What was *he* doing here?” Jiang finally let a smile break free from his façade, “He often comes around to ask where you might be heading next. I promise I say nothing about your plans.” Jiang was about to further assure Pagos that his back library and well of knowledge was not at Hori’s disposal, but stopped short

when he saw a very deep blush cover Pagos' face. "He... asks about me?"

...Well.

Well, well, well.

Jiang's eyebrows betrayed his curiosity at Pagos' reaction, reaching impressive heights as Pagos realized what they had just asked, "Not that I- That came out wrong. I just meant- I didn't expect him to- Stop smirking!" Wrestling his expression into one of at least a neutral smile, Jiang continued to stare at Pagos with eyebrows raised. Pagos huffed again, stomping back into the back library, Byron following while happily panting.

A tentative knock at his door forced another snort of laughter out of him, and Jiang opened his door, voice sugar sweet as he addressed the forlorn looking Hori. "Yes?" Hori made a face at Jiang in momentary defiance at not being let in, but sobered instantly, seeming nervous as he pulled at his coat sleeves, "The lizard isn't really all that mad, right? Sometimes I can't tell..."

...Well.

"Why don't you ask them the next time you see them. And maybe stop calling them lizard. They only respond to what you yourself throw at them. Although I suppose I should just be happy you two have stopped trying to murder each other." Hori laughed, voice cracking a bit, "I guess that's true... Old habits, you know?" Jiang sighed heavily, thinking of ancient fights and rivalries. What could

have been prevented if only there had been some understanding given despite bad blood long past. “Old habits indeed.”

Hori gave another nervous laugh, adjusting his increasingly wet newsboy cap, “You don’t think you might... put in a good word?” Jiang pretended to consider, hand running through his beard before replying with a polite, “No” and shutting the door in the immortal’s face. If Hori couldn’t handle Pagos’ temper, Jiang did not see a reason to attempt to help him. Those two were on their own to figure out how to handle each other. And the way things seemed to be progressing...

For a moment, Jiang thought he should say something to stop whatever was developing between the two rivals. It would perhaps be safer. There were not many basilisks or kamaitachis left to the world, but there were enough to warrant a possible social banishment from both if something should... become official. There was such bitter hatred between the two immortal races, surely any alliance would not be accepted.

And then, Jiang remembered that the old ways had no bearing anymore. So many times there were better paths to take, newer routes that weren’t even conceived of in the early days. If something were to happen, if two immortals of opposing species came together, what was the worst that would happen? What would be lost? Nothing that Jiang could see, except the gain of evidence that the future held possibilities that no one had thought of. And besides, the

consequences were for Pagos and Hori to consider, not Jiang. He would be there for Pagos, for advice and an ear as usual, and perhaps words of caution. But the prevention of progress was not his way. The concept of new magic and fresh power from other sources than the old ways, if anything, encouraged Jiang. The entire reason he even opened his back library to a select few was the hope of innovation.

Byron ran to Jiang, a commanding bark demanding attention from the librarian. Jiang knelt down to ruffle Byron's fur, a deep chuckle rumbling through the room. He needed a vacation soon. It had been too long since he last traveled. Perhaps Pagos could recommend somewhere to go. He had every faith that whatever the young one recommended would be a fantastic experience.

"He didn't give you any trouble, did he?" Jiang looked up to Pagos, who was glaring at the door that Hori had been so recently thrown out of. Lifting Byron into his arms, Jiang let out a loud laugh before responding to Pagos' confused look, "No trouble. But I have a few suggestions to one up that one before he can catch your scent again."

Pagos lit up, smile twitching to life on their face as Jiang continued, "But none of that phoenix egg nonsense again, I know that look. Come on, let me finish that map. And give me a hand with putting some books away, won't you? My last visitor was an enthusiast on the Holy Grail, and you know how that always goes."

Jiang would say that the magic of the world was not

dying, as many immortals feared. It was simply transforming. The old magic was not being restored as time passed, but that did not mean there was nothing coming of it. Perhaps there was a new magic being made. Old times repeated in new ways. Jiang could only hope that he would still have some space on his shelves for them.

# *Rapunzel*

A.S. Volk

*I love comedy, especially slapstick, irreverent, intelligent humor. I adore the works of Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett, and I still watch Monty Python's Flying Circus ad nauseum. I chose Rapunzel, a story about a young girl with insanely long hair who happens to be sheltered by a mentally abusive woman, because it's such a classic story with a questionable moral. And, while there's really nothing all that funny about it, especially for the time it was told, I wanted to show just how silly fairy tales could be when a little twist is put on them. So, how could I take a tale of woe, for most part of it, and turn it into something that would make me giggle? Why, gender-bend, of course! I also love the idea of poking a little fun at current events and trends because life should*

*never be taken seriously. With crossed fingers, I hope the readers find this version of Rapunzel funny enough to laugh at; preferably with lots of snorts and groans.*

~ ~ ~

Once upon a time in a far away land, there lived a young couple who, despite their hatred for social conformity, were married and expecting a baby. They lived in an up and coming community on the outskirts of a tiny kingdom that was known for being hip and trendy. Farm-to-table gastropubs littered the streets. Vintage clothing shops sat on every corner. Every single bard who played in the craft ale houses used a second-hand lute to conduct their original pieces. Harmony abounded within the country.

During the summer months one week was set aside by the king and queen for the subjects to attend a grand music festival. Infamous musicians and performers from the far reaches of the globe traveled to become a part of the immensely popular event the queen had dubbed “Coacharella” because of the influx of coaches and wagons that filled the roads. Everyone in the kingdom looked forward to the festival, although heavens forbid they ever show their excitement outwardly, and perused the shops and cloth-makers for the finest scarves, plaid prints, and floppy hats.

The young couple, named Atticus and Daisy, were also

preparing for the week-long show. Daisy was nearing the end of her pregnancy and began to have strange cravings for different foods. Atticus attempted to satiate her desires but found it more and more difficult to obtain the foods she requested. Money was tight for the couple. The Coacharella tickets were costly and they didn't want to be the only two out of the entire kingdom who weren't there. Atticus promised her they would make ends meet somehow and Daisy put her faith into him.

When the week of the festival arrived they packed up their few, but stylish, possessions, and headed for the great, open field where everyone gathered to watch musicians and artists perform pure, perfect songs that hadn't been ruined by selling out lyrics to mass-marketing bards who played only for money and not for the sake of music. Daisy's cravings only worsened and the baby in her belly wasn't about to settle for the mediocre replacements Atticus brought back from the food vendors. Nothing she ate was being accepted by the little gourmand living inside her.

Atticus was at his wit's end. He sat in their tent and watched helplessly as his beloved wife suffered. Until, one afternoon, halfway through the festival, a new tent was pitched next to them. The sign outside read "Stevia: Wise Mystic and Magic-Assisted Life Coach". An older woman, who he assumed was Stevia the Wise Mystic, sat outside the tent and washed a basket-full of the most beautiful leafy greens he had ever seen. Immediately thinking of poor Daisy, he waved to the woman.

“Ho, there, woman!” he called.

The woman regarded him with skepticism and snorted in derision. “How dare you insult me with labels!” she exclaimed.

“Many pardons,” Atticus apologized, seeing the error of his ways by not asking her first how she preferred to be addressed. “I say, you have many bunches of kale before you. May I ask, are they organic?”

Another snarky snort came from the old woman’s long, crooked nose. “Of course they are! No chemicals of man shall be poured onto my finest rapunzel kale.”

“Splendid!”

“Why are you speaking to me, young person? Can you not see that I am busy?” She gave him a cold frown.

“Apologies again, wise one. Would you be willing to sell me some of the rapunzel? My wife; she is ill and will not take the food I give her. She requires only the best of the earth and your leaves are perfection.”

Stevia shook her head. “My rapunzel is not for sale.” And, with that, she disappeared with the basket of kale behind her tent.

Atticus sat there in the dirt close to tears. Inside their meager shelter, Daisy stirred in her sleep. She groaned and whined, clutching to her endowed belly. He wiped a strand of her hair off her forehead and kissed her cheek.

“Whatever it takes, my love, I shall find the cure for your malaise.”

Later that evening, when Buggy McGeesburg took to the stage, Atticus snuck into Stevia’s tent. She had left earlier to go watch the show and he took that as an opportunity to take a small portion of the rapunzel. Granted, it wasn’t good to steal from anyone, especially from a wise mystic, but Atticus was out of options and he wasn’t about to watch his wife and unborn child die because some snooty witch was being stingy.

In his hands was the mass of beautiful, emerald green leaves. He should’ve stopped at once, but it all looked so delicious. Three large handfuls of the produce were carefully tucked in his woolen slouch beanie. He started to creep out of Stevia’s tent when, suddenly, the crystal ball which was resting on the small, round table in the corner lit up. Stevia’s wrinkled face, distorted by the shape of the sphere, scowled at him.

“Why are you stealing MY rapunzel kale?!” the life coach demanded.

Atticus froze in fear, the leaves clutched protectively in his embrace.

“I beg of you, oh wise Stevia; let me have the leaves! I shall pay you for it. My wife grows weaker by the second, and I fear for the wellbeing of her and my unborn child.”

“I do not want to be paid for my precious crops. They are mine! I sowed the seeds, I watered the soil, I fussed over

them for many weeks! Rapunzel is a finicky heirloom varietal and it must have the perfect amount of sun, fertilizer, and artisanal fountain water in order to grow. I daresay that a lazy fool like you would ever appreciate the work that went into rearing them! Now, put them back before you bruise the stalks!”

Tears dripped down Atticus’ waxed mustache. “Please, oh powerful life coach! Have pity on my family. I will give you anything if you show us a little kindness and allow me to feed my beautiful Daisy with your extraordinary harvest.”

A wicked smile loomed on Stevia’s wall-eyed face. “Anything, you say? Very well; take my precious kale! But if you do, then you will promise me your firstborn child for the theft. What say you?”

Atticus thought it over. Surely, this old bat was trying to scare him. What kind of a person would actually demand a child in exchange for a few leafy greens? She couldn’t possibly be serious; seriously!

He shrugged and crept out of the tent, snorting “whatever” as he exited.

The rapunzel kale was accepted by Daisy and the baby. Although she demanded it be grilled first with grated aged goat’s milk cheese and good vinegar as toppings, she managed to consume one plate and immediately asked for another. Atticus was overjoyed.

When the Coacharella festival ended Atticus and Daisy

packed up, both making sure to passive-aggressively ignore Stevia's angry scowl when she looked their way.

“Remember,” the old life coach croaked and waved a crooked finger at Atticus's fine beard, “you promised me your first born child for my rapunzel. I will be along soon to collect!”

Atticus shrugged and helped Daisy into their simple, classic wagon driven by a small, foreign-bred mare. A few days later the baby was born. Daisy and Atticus doted and loved on their precious son but couldn't decide on a name. They were in the middle of such a debate—Atticus wanted to name him Celery but Daisy liked Griffin Samuel—when there was a loud knock at their door.

A chill crept down Atticus' spine. Cautiously, he tip-toed to the door and opened it.

It was Stevia.

“What do you want?” he grumbled.

“I've come to collect my payment for the rapunzel kale you stole from me,” she croaked.

Atticus reached into his man bag, which looked suspiciously like his mother's old leather handbag, and produced a coin purse.

“So, you are a reasonable crone. How much do I owe you, then? Two shillings? Three?”

Stevia craned her head around his shoulder and pointed

directly to Daisy who was sitting in a rocking chair nursing her son.

“That is what you owe me,” she said. “The child.”

Atticus laughed at her and shook his head. “You cannot have him! You could not have been serious about such an exchange. A child is not worth three handfuls of kale, even if they were organic and non-GMO!”

“Nevertheless,” the witch said and smiled, “you made a deal with me. And should you break a deal with a magic-assisted life coach with the kind of influence and powers I possess I shall make sure that you are cursed to give only bad reviews in taverns that you enjoy frequenting for the rest of your life. Even if you liked the food!”

Atticus shuddered. He was considered important in his community and didn’t want that kind of a reputation to be taken from him. Besides, he and Daisy were still young; they could always have another child. With a few words of coaxing, he took the newborn baby from his wife’s arms and placed him into Stevia’s bony hands.

“Look; give him only the finest goat’s milk from locally sourced farms, okay?” Daisy wept. “And absolutely no synthetic wax if he’s going to grow a beard!”

A gentle smile crossed the old woman’s face as she looked down into the baby boy’s sweet face. She tucked the soft, plaid blanket under his chin.

“Fear not, child. I shall treat him with all the love and

respect he deserves.” And, with that, in a flurry of colorful skirts and beige sweaters, Stevia left with the infant.

Years went by and the child grew strong under Stevia’s healthy, gluten-free, vegan care. He was beautiful and sensitive and kind to all the animals around. Stevia named him after her precious kale because giving him a common name was just so last age.

When Rapunzel was twelve years old she took him to a safe space, otherwise known as a tower, and told him this was where he was going to live until she thought the world was acceptable enough for him to explore. He was given every luxury she could afford, which on a magic-assisted life coach’s salary was actually a lot. The tower resembled a much-coveted loft apartment, furnished with luxurious tapestries, antique sofas, refurbished tables and chairs crafted from rare woods, and a library so great that no one else in the kingdom but perhaps the royal family had such a collection. Rapunzel was also given a golden lute with a secret magic spell within. No apprenticeship was necessary to play the instrument; he plucked the strings and the most beautiful, most original music flowed around the tower.

He grew into a handsome young man with hair as lovely as any maiden’s. His eyes were as green as the leaves of the prized crop he was named after. So fair was his voice even the birds cried to hear him speak or sing. But the one feature Stevia prized above all others was the beard he had been able to grow. Lush, soft, and the color of the finest straw, the beard had grown to such lengths Stevia wondered

just how much about him was magic and how much was from his perfect upbringing.

When he was eighteen the beard was so long that Stevia no longer need to use the tower's stairs to visit him. It draped down from the one window, nearly brushing the ground below, allowing her to use the golden facial curls as a living rope. She would stand at the base of the tower and cry up "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!" Down would fall the soft, silk-like tresses, and Stevia would cling to the beard as her son pulled her up.

Stevia made sure that Rapunzel was raised with a healthy dose of fear along with his carefully prepared diet. She told him to never trust another person. Men and women alike, with the exception of the boy and herself, were wicked, poison-filled fools who relied way too much on material possessions and preyed on perfect souls. If he wanted to remain unscathed and uninfluenced by such evils then he would heed her advice and stay in the tower. Rapunzel, wanting nothing more than to make his mother happy, agreed to never leave.

The king and queen had a daughter named Avery. Since they prided themselves on being modern parents, despite the fact that they ruled an entire country, they allowed Avery to do as she wished. Beautiful and proud and privileged, Avery spent most of her time taking things that were considered obsolete and making them popular again. Such an example was the old linen scarves with embroidered flowers that no one seemed to like much.

Avery, a trendsetter by great standards, began to wear them, which were meant to cover the grey heads of old maids, around her elegant neck. The kingdom tax collectors saw an immediate rise in the purchase of linen scarves across the country.

Avery loved the idea that she was “a big deal” to her subjects. And she was pondering on that fact as she rode her favorite horse, A Different Color, down a strange trail she had never noticed before. The trail took her deep into the forest. She nearly turned the mare around to get back when the sound of the most amazing voice captivated her and kept her moving forward. The dense wood opened to a meadow. Sitting in the very center of the flowery fields was a tower. The music was coming from there.

The princess was about to steer A Different Color closer when she spotted an old woman approaching from the other side of the field. She led the horse back into the woods and watched, with awe, as a long gold rope dropped out of the window at the crone’s demand. Her mind began to turn with ideas. She couldn’t resist a good mystery, and if she could solve the riddle of who was behind the richly philosophical song that beat out any current indie bards she heard playing before her parents then she would be celebrated even more.

She returned the next day, waiting for the witch (and, no she wasn’t labeling her; she was wearing one of those pointy hats magic-enhanced people fancied) to leave before she made her move. Her heart throbbed with emotion as

the beautiful voice returned to grace the secret meadow. Clearing her throat, and adjusting her many scarves, Princess Avery prepared to find a way to meet the owner of the angelic voice.

“Hello there,” she called up, and the song stopped. “Verily, I have heard your song and, if you should choose, I should like to meet you. Do come down from there!”

“Excuse me?” the singer asked. “Who are you to demand me to come out of the comforts of my home? And how did you find this place? ‘Tis secret!”

“‘Tis my parents’ kingdom, and I go wherever I please!” she retorted.

“You are a royal?!” the crystalline voice exclaimed. “My mother has told me that royals and nobles are nothing more than pompous fools who know not of real struggle. What do you want?”

“I have already told you, therefore I shan’t repeat myself!”

“Fine. Then don’t.” She heard an irritated sigh followed by the sound of a lute being softly strummed.

The princess pouted for a moment, arms crossed over her bodiced chest.

“Fine! I’m leaving!” she shouted.

“Goodbye.”

She marched over to A Different Color, grabbed the

saddle's pommel, and was prepared to mount her ride when her pride began to make way for her curiosity once more. Rushing back over to the tower, she slapped her hands against the stone bricks and decided that, since no one else was there to see her grovel which meant no repercussions for her uncharacteristic actions, it wasn't out of the question to at least beg for a teeny glimpse of the stranger.

“Please, mysterious musician! Wilt thou leave me unsatisfied?!”

A snarky snark rushed down to her and the music stopped again. “I’ve read that book. Highly overrated. Too many people die in the name of young lust.”

“What?”

“That ghastly book where two teenagers from feuding families fall in love. Everyone dies. Reported to be very existential and romantic. I don’t agree.”

“This is absurd! I’m speaking to a wall! I do not speak to walls; I am a princess!”

“Well, you could just ask to come up.”

“What?”

“Ugh!” the golden voice sighed. “Look, I can’t come down because I have no way of getting down. However, if you want to meet me all you have to do is ask. I can pull you up by my hair.”

“Your hair?!”

“I have already told you; I shan’t repeat myself,” he mocked.

Avery pushed herself back and stared up at the only window in the tower and asked for permission to come up inside. A long, thick braid of the most beautiful golden hair she had ever seen fell down. The thick tasseled end, held together by a brilliant blue silk bow, brushed against the grass. She pulled up her sleeves, hiked up her many skirts, and grabbed hold of the rope of hair. When she signaled that she was on and holding tight, she found herself being pulled upward.

She rolled into the window, gathered her pride and her scarves, and turned to meet the tower’s occupant. A sharp gasp exited her mouth and her eyes grew wide with wonder. Why, it was a young man! The most beautiful man she had ever seen! He wore the most posh clothes, which were actually vintage breeches and twine suspenders over a loose linen shirt made popular by Buggy McGeesburg two full decades ago (so stylish!). His mustache was so perfectly waxed that not a bristle was out of place. And the beard! Oh, the glorious beard that grew from his youthful jaw, woven into this magnificent rope, had been laid in a neat, thick coil at his booted feet.

Princess Avery turned away, for dramatic flair, and placed her dainty hand over her heart. She looked at him over her shoulder, batting her lashes.

“Forgive me of my sudden shock, but who are you, fair gent?”

“Rapunzel,” he replied.

A confused expression crossed her features. “Rapunzel?! As in rapunzel kale?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

Oh dream of dreams! How wonderful was this day! Not only did she discover that the owner of the most amazing singing voice was incredibly handsome, and blessed with perfect facial hair, but that his name was so odd that it was painfully trendy! The universe must have been on her side.

She reached for his hands, causing the lute to drop to the floor, and took a deep breath.

“Dearest Rapunzel of, er, The Tower in the Mysterious Meadow, I, Princess Avery the Eye-st—“

“First,” he corrected.

“What?”

“I think you mean First, not Eye-st.”

“Well, that is how it is spelt on mine birth record! Don’t interrupt royalty when they’re speaking.”

“Sorry.”

“No worries. I, Princess Avery the First, do invite you to leave this abysmal place and accompany me to the Palace!”

She could hear it now! All the great praise bestowed upon her, the royal bugles playing their grand fanfare as she and this angelic person strode proudly into the throne

room, the subjects cheering her on because she found the next big thing...

“Um, no.”

The bugles in her imagination went flat.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I like it here. All my stuff is here. And if Mother has seen that I’ve left she will be furious.”

“But—I’m the Princess!”

“And? You can’t just think that because you are this princess I’ll do whatever you say. How privileged you sound! It must be checked.”

“Oh,” she said and let go of his hand. “But I do not wish to leave you. Why, I would like to establish some kind of meaningful relationship. Or whatever.”

“I should like that, too. Or, you know, whatever, as well. You could come to visit while my mother is away. She has Divining Classes every Thursday and Spirit Cleansings on Monday evenings.”

And so it was decided that Princess Avery should visit Rapunzel while Mother Stevia was out.

For several weeks it seemed that the secret visits between Rapunzel and his greatest admirer, and fan, would remain, of course, secret. Princess Avery was quick to proclaim her love to the beautiful man and his beautiful beard. She brought him presents each time she came to the

tower; fine scarves of linens or exotic fabrics from lands far from the tiny kingdom, books on philosophy, flowers to make crowns for his head and to weave into the golden facial hair, and the finest mustache wax crafted from non-modified beeswax. Rapunzel graciously accepted the presents and found that he, too, was starting to have significant feelings for his only friend. He listened to her moan and complain about her problems while he composed songs for her. He also had issues with Stevia which he shared with Avery.

“You should come with me, fair Rapunzel,” she said and gripped to his hands dramatically. “I shall take you away from this dismal tower so you can bask in the light of the sun and receive great praises from the commoners! Oh, how they would love you as I do!”

“But my mother—“

“Your mother is selfish keeping you here! Do you not wish to think for yourself? Do you not wish to be free to choose which kind of tea you prefer to drink rather than the watered-down versions of cheap swill she feeds you? Wouldn’t you like to dance among the alleys of the royal library in order to read the books you find interesting instead of being forced antique practices that died out, like, two decades ago?” She waved a tome before his face.

He took the book she had been gripping as she made her speech and stroked his mustache curls

“Is underwater basket-weaving antique? I was hoping to

one day try it.”

Avery snorted and threw the book over her shoulder then threw herself into his arms.

“Oh, my lovely love! Leave this dreadful hovel and we can live in the renovated stables whilst my parents provide us every luxury we wish! Would that not be *avant garde*?”

Seeing how his presence made her happy, and the fact that he did, indeed, care greatly for her, he agreed to leave with her. Soon. They just needed to find an appropriate time in order to tell Stevia that he wished to go on his own. After all, he was an adult and she owed him that chance.

However, that chance never came. For when Stevia came to visit him the next morning after he agreed to leave with Avery she discovered a small piece of evidence that he hadn't exactly been alone all this time. She found a copy of Buggy McGeesburg's autobiography in his bookshelf. Not being a fan of the self-inflated bard, she knew she had never given him the book and demanded to know where he found it.

Rapunzel lifted his chin with pride, straightened his straw-woven fedora, and proceeded to tell her the truth.

“Mother, I have met a woman and I wish to leave my home to live semi-independently with her. It is well within my right as a modern man and a member of society.”

Stevia, as predicted, was furious. Her perfect boy had been tarnished by outside forces. She was determined to

discover just who it was that fed him all these lies in order to make him wish for company elsewhere beyond the tower.

“I should meet this person who has perverted you! And when I do, you shall be sorry you ever tossed your beard down to anyone but me!”

And, with that, she cut off the beard, leaving it jagged and unkempt, and tied it to the hook he used to pull her and, more recently, the princess into the tower.

Poor Rapunzel was distraught. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Not only was he to suffer Stevia’s wrath but Princess Avery was about to learn just how protective his mother could be.

The next day, which was meant to be Stevia’s weekly divining meeting with the local magic-assisted life coaches’ coven, she waited for Rapunzel’s lover to arrive. Just as expected, Avery’s voice floated up to the top of the tower, asking for him to let down his “hair”. With a wicked laugh at her son, Stevia tossed down the braid and pulled the princess inside.

As you can now imagine, things got awkward rather quick. Avery pulled off her face the strange spectacles of deep gray pieces of glass she had just invented in order to see things a little “darker”(in truth, they helped keep the sunlight from blinding her and she debated on having copies put into production). She stared at the old woman in shock and then down at her de-bearded love.

“You!” she shouted. “You are the wicked crone who has kept him from living his own life! You-you heartless hoarder of perfect perfection! Thou art so very pathetic!”

“How dare you call me pathetic, you royal brat!” Stevia shot back. “I have given my son every luxury he could’ve ever wished to possess, but you came here and filled his head full of cheap promises and stupid art and books on elitist nobodies who have stolen good songs from talented bards!”

“Buggy McGeesburg is a national treasure, Mother! You just cannot comprehend good music when you hear it,” Rapunzel stepped into the argument.

Stevia regarded her son. With anger he had never seen from her before, she ran at the princess and pushed her out of the tower window. Avery let out a harrowing scream as she fell but discovered, thanks to her ingenuity and love of ironic fashion, the scarves she wore in thick layers around her neck had billowed out and allowed her to gently float down to land safely on the ground.

“I shall come back for you, Rapunzel,” she shouted. “And I’m bringing my father with me!”

She galloped away on *A Different Color*.

Hours later, she returned, just as promised, with a small army of palace guards and her father the King. Gallantly, he dismounted his large horse, took a moment to fall to one knee, and stretched out his long, red cape to showcase the royal crest of a bejeweled eagle fashioned on his back. He

curled his upper lip and nodded in thanks to one of his guards as his steed was secured.

“I thank you, my good man. I thank you very much,” said the King in his rich voice.

A loud fanfare of bugles played and Stevia craned her head out of the window. The head guard called up to her to demand she descend from the tower and allow Rapunzel his freedom in the name of the king.

“I shall not come down, I tell you! My son wants nothing to do with your trollop of a daughter!”

Hearing her harsh words, the King pointed a heavily ringed finger at her and began to shout.

“I say now, small mother, should you defy the demands of the king, who happens to be me, you shall suffer greatly!”

Princess Avery hopped down from A Different Color and stood next to her father. In her hand was a scroll case.

“Tell her what we discovered, Father!” she said. “Tell her that we know the truth about her son!”

The king nodded and gave a gallant pose as he unrolled the scroll used to record the births of all children in the kingdom.

“I say!” he began, “According to this scroll, which lists all legal parents to children born under my royal rule; in regards to the man known as Rapunzel, you are not the mother!”

A loud gasp echoed across the meadow.

A second head appeared in the window. Rapunzel stared at Stevia in shock.

“Is this true?” he asked.

Stevia shook with fury. “Your parents did a crime against me! Those entitled fools thought they could steal my precious, organic kale! I warned them. They took my kale so I took you. They made a deal!”

Another gasp sounded from the king’s guards.

Rapunzel felt real anger for the first time in his young life.

“You’re a liar,” he said. “I never want to see you again!”

He grabbed hold of the long braid of his detached beard and slid down, leaving Stevia in the tower screaming in rage.

Avery met him with a hug and a kiss after she pulled a few scarves away from her mouth. After the reunion, she mounted her mare, pulled her love up to sit behind her, and followed her father and the guards out of the meadow.

Stevia was eventually taken from the tower and arrested for kidnapping. As punishment for her crime she was forced to live the rest of her days in a home for forgotten elderly folks who spent their time knitting unfashionable wool socks and eating sauce made from cultivated apples.

Rapunzel reunited with his true parents Atticus and Daisy, and two other siblings, who instantly loved him the moment they met. He never went back to the tower where he had been living the majority of his life. Instead, he ordered the structure to be torn down brick by brick and rebuilt into an alehouse where he could play his music. He gained a small but posh following of music-lovers who came from far lands to hear him sing and play his lute. He was even offered a gig at the upcoming Coacharella but because he didn't believe in "selling out" he refused the kindness.

With the King's blessing, and a rather showy ceremony thanks to his Royal Highness, Rapunzel and Princess Avery entered a legally-binding domestic union (marriage, but they didn't want to label the relationship) and lived in the refurbished stable just as she promised. Eventually, his beard did begin to grow back although he never allowed it to reach the lengths it had once been. Princess Avery continued to set trends throughout the kingdom varying from large, floppy hats to gentlemen's jerkins for the ladyfolk. She was quite proud of the so-called "androgynous look" she made famous during one winter. And Rapunzel was never happier.

And, as is said at the end of all fairy tales, they all lived happily ever after.

# *The Substance of a Shadow*

*Megan Fuentes*

*In Peter Pan, Peter's shadow can detach himself, just as easily as Peter detaches the dark and grown-up stuff that dares to approach his thoughts. This is Shadow's side of Peter and Wendy's first encounter.*

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Shadow has done this all before, and he will do this all again. Now, under normal circumstances, the act of abandoning your master like he did would be seen as

dangerous, dishonorable, and downright unforgivable. For the shadow of Peter Pan, however, we make an exception.

Being a shadow is no easy job in the first place. Few know this, but shadows catch all the unhappy thoughts of a person and keep them, so as not to have the mind of their master plagued. But shadows, being part of a whole human being, are fallible. They can also grow weary. For these and other reasons, shadows can leak and spill their contents. Perhaps you've experienced this during a sleepless night, or after a traumatic event. In any case, we can pardon our shadows because most of them try so hard and work without coffee breaks.

Can you even imagine the weight on the shoulders of Peter Pan's shadow?

"I want always to be a little boy, and to have fun," he says. This leaves Shadow no room for error. Every unhappy thought must be hidden for Peter to be able to fly. Every mature musing must be erased from memory. Even a glimmer of a growing pain is quickly gutted from his subconscious and gathered into a secret place even Shadow dares not visit.

Luckily, Peter was born with an exceptional shadow. Not once did Shadow allow his master to suffer the worries grown-ups do. This level of attentiveness in exhausting by itself, but Shadow does not just work—he sees. Shadow follows Peter Pan on every adventure in Neverland, a witness to the rotten treatment of the Lost Boys and the merciless maiming of Captain James Hook. He tried not to

think about it, but in a way Shadow blamed himself. He had wielded a dagger just as Peter had, and mimed laughing after tossing it into the shadow-crocodile's mouth. Not to mention that Shadow doing his job so well is what helps keep Peter a boy in the first place, as boys can only be made men when their shadows allow bodies to grow and musings turn to melancholy.

Not too long ago, however, Shadow tore himself free. The scene of the crime was a tidy two-story in London. Being a good little shadow, he had dutifully accompanied Peter on his many Earthly excursions. All of these had been to the Darling residence for many moons. There, Peter and Shadow his while they listened to the eldest Darling child tell her brothers marvelous stories. Cinderella, The Three Little Pigs, Jack and the Beanstalk—all of these and more were part of the regular rotation.

There can be no doubt that harboring Peter's unhappy thoughts turned Shadow into something of an old soul. There can also be no doubt that his old soul fell for sweet Wendy, and that is why he did what he did when Peter started to fly back to Neverland before Wendy had said good night. How dare he not please Wendy by having Tinker Bell flit by as a thank-you for letting them listen? How could he not find himself wanting to stay not just until the lights were out, but forever?

Shadow clutched the drain pipe outside the nursery. Peter, confused and—though he'd never admit it—frightened, he yanked and he pulled and he jerked Shadow

to get him to come along.

“C’mon,” Peter whispered, “you can’t stay, you’ve gotta come!”

Shadow would not allow himself to be separated from Wendy, and thus allowed himself to be separated from his master. Both boy and shadow heard a dreadful snap, and one became two. Shadow smacked into the side of the house as Peter went tumbling skyward. Seeing his master fly off without him made Shadow feel awfully guilty, but this was soon forgotten when the Darling young lady spoke as she snuffed out the candles.

“Good night, John. Good night, Michael. Good night, Peter Pan. I *know* he’s listening, John—I can feel him.”

Shadow’s spirits sank. Couldn’t his sweet Wendy tell that it was he whose presence she felt? No, he realized. Humans are not accustomed to separating shadow and master. If he could alert her, or even her shadow, he could explain everything.

Shadow slipped between the window doors and into the Darling nursery. It was just as he’d pictured it, except for one thing: the dog house. He’d forgotten about Nana, the nurse! She was already awake, and bared her teeth at him. With a growl, she attacked, sinking her shadow’s teeth into his leg. Nana would not let go, no matter how much Shadow tried to wriggle free. This awoke Wendy, who sat up and gasped.

“Why, Nana! Naughty thing, have you stolen Peter’s

shadow?”

“No,” Shadow was desperate to shout, “I came here for you! I love you, sweet Wendy!”

He was not heard. Nor would he ever be, Shadow was now aware. Wendy clicked her tongue and made Nana give her Shadow. She folded Shadow most painfully, stuffed him in a drawer, and locked it.

“There. Now, when Peter returns, I can give him back his shadow, and he’ll be ever so happy.”

Shadow wanted to scream, to weep, to be able to do anything at all. He would not be able to slip out without Nana catching him again. Powerless to stop fate, he spent all night and all day in the tiny drawer. He told time by noise: John’s snores stopping meant it was time for the Darling children to get up, Michael playing by himself meant Wendy and John were off at school, and so on. He was heartbroken when Mr. Darling roared that Wendy would no longer sleep in the nursery, and wished with all his heart to die as humans do.

And then came the night, and the arrival of shadowless Peter Pan. Wendy took Shadow out of his drawer, and I think you’ll agree no shadow or master ever felt such pain as he when the girl he loved sewed him and the boy he loathed back together.

That is why we make the exception.

## *The Way Down*

Anna Goss

*This story is based on the myth of the Niobids as retold by Ovid in the **Metamorphoses**. I initially wrote this story for a fiction writing class during my undergrad. I thought I was fascinated by the myth of the Niobids because of the violence, but after I wrote it, and in each iteration of my editing, I realized that the more interesting spaces for me to inhabit were the characters. The Ovid version of the Niobid myth is just over 150 lines long, but within those lines the majority of what is given is dialog from Niobe, dialog from Latona, and then the slaughter of the Niobids (Niobe's children) by Apollo and Diana. So in my retelling I have focused much more on the individual characters, especially Diana (Diane), hoping to tell more of a human story than a myth.*

~ ~ ~

It began with something as innocuous as a text message.  
***Call me. Love Mom.***

Diane sighed, wishing her mother would stop signing text messages. “It’s my mom,” she said to Sarina, who looked confused.

She gave Diane a soft smile. “Do you want me to order us dessert?”

“You know what I like.”

Diane found a bench outside the restaurant, stretched her legs out into the paths of passersby, and called her mother.

“I haven’t been able to get a hold of your brother. Where is he?” Tonya asked.

“Paul is on tour, Mom,” Diane said. Years of conversations with her mother started and ended with her brother; any expectations to the contrary were foolish.

“Will you call him, honey?” Tonya asked the question as though she and her son talked every day, like Paul hadn’t stopped answering her calls three years ago.

Diane knew full well Paul wasn’t going to answer a call from her any more than he would a call from their mother. Not while he was with Jacob.

Tonya continued without pause. “When you get a hold of him, let him know that I need to see him. And you. Both of you. Come on home. It's been so long since you've been home, and I miss you, Diane. I miss you and Paul.”

After Diane hung up, she tried calling her brother. The phone didn't even ring. After leaving as short of a message as she could manage, she sat outside for a few more moments, just breathing.

“I have to go,” she told Sarina.

Sarina frowned up at her. “But berry tarts.”

Diane hesitated, halfway to picking her purse up from the floor. “I can come see you in Atlanta.”

“You can also help me with these berry tarts,” Sarina said.

Diane smiled and slipped back into her seat, shaking her head. She smiled as they polished off two whole berry tarts and kissed goodbye on the curb outside the restaurant.

In the cab home she stopped smiling when her phone buzzed with a text from Paul: *I hate Long Island.*

~~~

Though it was the house Diane grew up in, Tonya Cavallo maintained a state of flux in terms of decoration; the home Diane remembered was constantly, even in her childhood, being subsumed to the construction of an ideal villa. Diane and Paul had shared a room from the day they

were born until puberty, when their mother conceded that there may be a need for the two to have separate spaces. She brought in a construction crew who added a wall down the center of the old bedroom and connected the two with an annex inside what used to be the door.

Tonya liked it warm and humid. Tropical. Said it was better for her skin, and she didn't go outside unless it was over 70 degrees anyway. It disturbed Diane to think her mother may be right. Tonya Cavallo was probably just starting her sixties (age was a question Diane didn't dare pose to her mother) but she looked like she was Diane's older sister. Diane's pocket buzzed as she shed her jacket; the good luck text from Sarina made her grin.

“Hello, Mom,” Diane said as she entered the sitting room.

The house was in a Palace of Versailles mode. Exterior light oozed in from every massive window, stretching across the dark wood floor, illuminating the marble veneers of the walls. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors embedded in the walls alternated with Baroque paintings in gilded frames. Tables and lounge chairs upholstered with a subtle mint pattern populated the room.

Tonya sat delicately on one of the chairs. She inspected her daughter with narrowed blue eyes as she had appraised many works of art and business deals. Even while sitting, her body gave the impression of perpetual motion, like a shark that would suffocate if it stopped swimming. Something about the bright sheen of her skin, especially in

this room filled with refracted light, and the colors of her lips and cheeks and eyes proclaimed an eternal youth boiling underneath the surface.

Diane sat in a chair across from her mother, crossed her legs at the ankles out in front of her. Tonya smiled. Sitting in silence, Diane watched as her mother tensed and relaxed muscles all over her body. Since Tonya wore what amounted to an evening gown, pale peach, sleeveless, Diane could see as she progressed from forearms to upper arms, to pectorals. Tonya relaxed for a few moments and rolled her shoulders back. She fussed with her hair then looked at Diane and rubbed her fingertips together.

She rubbed her fingertips together with all the zeal of a fly about to settle on a carcass.

“Paul here yet?” Diane asked.

“No,” Tonya replied, her tone demure. “But how have you been, darling?”

“Fine.”

“You know, honey,” Tonya said, “I really think you should consider running the company.”

“Company is a generous term for your business, Mom,” Diane said and realized her mother wasn't looking at her anymore.

Paul had entered the room.

Diane hadn't seen him in person since he left on his

most recent tour, so she stood up from her chair and turned around to greet him as Tonya rose from her couch and embraced her son. She rested her chin delicately on his shoulder and he bent his head over hers. Diane watched their hair, indistinguishable in shade, mingle. Diane had always been jealous of her brother's hair. Diane had hair the color of a potato. Paul had hair the color of spun gold. And blue eyes that glistened with secrets. He looked like their mother—more than Diane did, anyway—the same feminine curve of the jaw, the same long straight nose, the same iridescent skin. His cheeks were always soft with downy unshaven hairs that had never turned into a beard. He looked several years younger than Diane.

“Mother. Diane.” He gave her a smile. “I hope you haven't been waiting long.”

Diane shook her head. “I just got here.”

Paul rolled his eyes at her over their mother's shoulder, his relief evident. “What do you need, Mom?” he asked, following Tonya as she resumed her seat on the couch. He sat next to her. She held his hand in her lap for a few moments. Diane sat down and stretched her legs.

“Oh, honey, I'm so glad you asked.” Tonya summoned a secretary who brought a covered tray and set it on the coffee table in front of the couch. “I was hoping the two of you could take care of something, if it's not too much of an inconvenience, of course. I would hate to get in the way of your careers.”

“You have people for that, Mom,” Diane said.

The polite smile Tonya used now differed so much from the maternal smile from Diane's childhood that she wasn't sure she was looking at the same woman. Around when Diane and Paul turned twelve, Tonya realized her children could be useful rather than just present, and the maternal facade fell away. When she smiled, it was like the skin peeled back from her teeth, every grin a skeletal grimace of flayed skin revealing bare bones.

“Honey, if this was business, I would have the business people take care of it. But this is personal, and I know you and Paul can handle it.” She lifted the cover of the platter, revealing a thick stack of paper and folders.

Diane picked up the top folder. “God, Mom, you killed a tree,” Diane said, hefting the dossier in her right hand.

“The tree was already dead, Diane,” Tonya replied, her tone crisp and cut.

Paul took the other folder. He laid it on his lap and flipped through the first few pages of the first file. “Who are these people?”

Tonya clucked. “Paul, you know better. I can't believe you've forgotten everything I taught you about tact.” She sighed, exaggerated the movement of her shoulders. “But since you asked, these are the Bardakis.”

Diane tensed. “Mom, what are you doing?”

“This needs to be taken care of, Diane. I want it taken

care of.” Tonya smiled again. “You need to understand these things if you're going to run the business.”

Paul looked at Diane, and Diane looked back at Paul, shaking her head, her lips pressed tightly together. He glanced sideways at their mother. Diane shook her head more fiercely this time, her hair flying into her eyes. “I have a job.”

“Honey,” Tonya said. “Darling, just trust me, okay?”

Diane closed her eyes and the dossier. “What are you doing?” she repeated.

“I have taken care of everything. I just need you and Paul.” She squeezed Paul's hand. He looked at Diane. “I just need you and Paul to take care of the problem. No one else can take care of it for me.”

Paul stood.

Tonya hugged both of her children. “Thank you for taking care of this. I couldn't imagine having anyone but you two do it.”

Paul grimaced. Diane forced her lips to smile.

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It wasn't the first time Diane had flown under an assumed name, and she doubted it would be the last, given her mother's propensity to interrupt the lives of her children. Diane stuttered once while giving a name she hadn't used in years and produced the corresponding

identification that had been wedged in the back of a box on the top shelf of her closet. She kept crossing and uncrossing her arms while waiting in the security line. Paul grinned into his phone and only hung up when he had to put it through the scanner.

At the gate Paul reached for his phone as Diane's started to ring. She answered without looking and asked Paul, "Can you stay with our stuff?"

"Our stuff?" He gestured at his suitcase set and her messenger bag. He sighed and shook his head when she glared at him. "Go."

Midway through a conversation full of half-answers, Sarina asked, "Are you okay?" She was frowning. Diane could hear her frowning.

"I don't know," Diane said.

"You just couldn't say no to your mother, could you?"

Diane walked down the terminal, paused to smell fresh pretzels baking.

"Now you have to come see me in Atlanta."

"Okay."

"I love you, you know."

"I know."

Diane waited for the silence from the line to indicate Sarina had hung up. She swallowed, pocketed her phone, and began the long walk back down the terminal to where

Paul sat. He barely noticed her return.

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Diane could feel the minuscule spikes of the concrete roofing needling into her blouse at her belly. She lifted herself up on her elbows, her chin resting on the stock of her rifle. The roof put uncomfortable pressure on her breasts when she lay prone. She rocked from side to side to adjust the neckline of her blouse. Earlier she'd wedged her phone down the side of her bra and now it was uncomfortably warm. It had rung twice while they'd been waiting. She didn't need to look to know it was Sarina.

"Stop fidgeting," Paul whispered.

Diane rolled her shoulders back and lowered her torso.

"Can we talk?" Paul asked.

"You just told me to be quiet," Diane said.

"I told you to stop fidgeting," Paul said. "I didn't say be quiet."

Diane leaned her head against her rifle and looked at him. "What about?"

"Are you doing okay?"

She turned back to look through the scope into the square below.

"I'm serious, Diane."

"Of course you are."

“Why are we here?”

Diane grit her teeth.

“Fine.” He sighed. “That's them, isn't it?”

Across the square below them, a man and woman in tailored suits exited a building.

“That's them,” Diane said.

~~~

The hotel room was improperly booked, containing only a single full-sized bed. Paul showered while Diane phoned their mother. Diane could hear the feral grin in her mother's words.

“You and Paul are doing a wonderful job, honey.”

Diane sighed away from the phone. Watched the steam pouring out from under the bathroom door.

“Darling, you know how much it means to me that you and your brother are taking care of this.”

“I know, Mom.”

“You tell your brother he's doing a great job, okay?”

“I will, Mom.”

“But I just wanted to say, just a small thing, really,” Tonya's voice oozed out of the receiver. “I think we really need to take of the entire problem. You understand, darling? Can you do that for me, honey?”

The line clicked off. Diane cleared out of the call and pulled up her texts. *Missing you*, said the most recent text from Sarina. *Give me an ETA to Atlanta?*

Paul opened the bathroom door wearing light cotton pajamas. “Your turn.”

“In a minute.” Diane stared at the screen, her fingers hovering above the keys. Her feet tucked behind the rung on the bottom of the chair.

“You could text her back.”

By the time she finished her short personal hygiene routine, Paul was curled up on his side in the bed, eyes closed.

As she walked towards the bed she shucked her pants carelessly, stepping out of them as she shuffled. She pulled her sweater over her head and threw it at the desk where she had been sitting earlier.

“You could fold them,” Paul said.

Diane stopped, turned around, wriggled a foot under the pants, and kicked them through the air to the chair in the corner. She came up to the side of the bed.

“Scoot over.”

Paul reluctantly rolled over and reset himself, lying on his back, hands at his sides. He grabbed at his pillow as Diane lifted the sheets and crawled in. Lying on her side, her face was uncomfortably close to his.

“Do you have to sleep like that?” he asked.

She yawned. “It’s how I sleep.” She wrapped her arm around the pillow under her head so he could only see one of her eyes.

They lay for several moments in silence. Diane’s breathing deepened. Her eye remained immobile, watching him.

“Diane,” Paul said.

She blinked. The half of her mouth he could see bared her teeth.

~ ~ ~

They caught a red-eye to save money, which also meant seats in coach. Paul slid into his seat, took one look around at the milieu, clamped his headphones down over his ears, and fell asleep. Or pretended to fall asleep. Either way it was a long flight, and Diane wasn’t going to deprive him of time to rest.

Diane didn’t sleep on planes. She never had. Instead she leaned back in the seat, her elbows resting on the armrests, the heels of her feet touching the bar beneath her seat. As soon as the haste of takeoff settled into a relaxed climb into the sky, Diane found her computer in her bag and pulled up the e-mails her mother had forwarded. One linked to an audio file. Diane slid earbuds in and let the audio play.

“You know the importance of family,” Naomi Bardaki said. Her voice was rich, deep, and thrummed out of the

earbuds. Diane turned the volume down. “I know the importance of family. Family is everything. And you trust your business to a woman who, frankly, is uninvested in her family. Look at her children. Two, and not even in the business anymore. But look at me. Twelve children, all of whom are as invested in this business, in our business, as I am. Twelve highly intelligent children who can be anywhere in the world you need them to be to make sure your business with us runs as smoothly as it possibly can. The Cavallos are much too small in this big world to make the difference you need. If you go into business with me, my family is your family. And my family is six times Tonya Cavallo's.”

Diane shut her computer. Her phone buzzed with a text from Sarina coming in over the WiFi. ***Safe flight! Can't wait to see you.***

“Who is it?” asked Paul

Diane clicked the screen on her phone off.

“You can talk to me, you know.”

Diane pulled a folder from her bag and slapped it open on the tray table.

“You want to tell me?”

“Her name's Sarina.” She flipped the pages of the file.

“Sarina?”

Diane stopped flipping the pages and tapped a

photograph. “Sarina Bardaki.”

Paul leaned over the armrest. Diane pulled her elbow to her side. “Diane,” he started to say something and couldn’t finish.

She leaned away from him, looking down into the aisle. Her arms crossed over her chest. Sarina's picture stared up at her.

~~~

Paul fielded a call from their mother the next morning. The phone rang as Diane stuck her toothbrush in her mouth.

“Paul, darling,” Tonya said. “I’m so glad it’s you. Has Diane told you I am so happy with the both of you?”

“What do you want, Mom?” He pulled on his shoes. The phone sat on the desk, broadcasting Tonya's voice into the hotel room.

Diane leaned against the bathroom door jamb, toothbrush hanging from the corner of her mouth. and frowned.

“Honey,” Tonya said. “I just called to say how well you’re both doing.”

Paul thought of the folder, the picture of Diane's Sarina staring at him. He looked at his sister's phone and saw the list of unread messages on the lock screen. Sarina. Sarina. Sarina.

“Paul? Are you there, Paul?”

Diane turned to spit in the sink.

“I’m here.”

“Now, Paul, I love you very much and I am so glad you’re taking care of this for us, for our family. I don’t know what I would do without the two of you.” Tonya sighed into the receiver, transmitted across the country as static.

“There’s just one more, Paul. One more. I know I don’t have to remind you how important this is, honey.”

Paul watched Diane’s screen fade to black, taking the ended call and the unread texts with it. He walked over to the desk chair and pulled his jacket off it. The leather was cool to the touch.

Paul straightened his jacket, looking at himself in the mirror above the desk. He could see most of the hotel room in the mirror, the rumpled sheets of the beds, the several towels he had used for his showers the previous night and this morning, Diane’s sparse toiletries clustered on the counter by the bathroom sink.

“Now you’re just being vain,” Diane said. She glanced at herself in the mirror, tucked a single hair back into her bun, then looked at him. She picked up their briefcases, held his out with her left hand.

He took it, let it swing in a controlled arc down to his side, felt the cold metal grip against the flesh of his palm. He raised his eyes to her and didn’t recognize the smile on her

lips. Diane swiped the car keys from the desk where they had spent the night under her sweater. She didn't touch her phone.

Paul hesitated at the door when he realized her smile reminded him of their mother.

Tonya's words rang in his ears as he took the keys from Diane. *"I know I don't have to remind you how important this is, honey."*

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"Does it make you nervous that Sarina is the last one?" Paul asked. His hands, in soft leather gloves, gripped the wheel.

"Does Jacob ever ask where your money comes from?" Diane asked.

The car grew silent. Paul fiddled with the radio dial. The radio was off.

"She seems like a good person," Paul offered.

Diane rubbed her fingers together.

"You know, we don't have to do this," he said.

Diane ran her hands over the smooth metal case in her lap, flipped the catches with her thumbs.

Paul looked down at the gear shift.

His sister clicked the pistol together. Holding it first in one hand then the other, she examined the mechanisms,

ran her fingers across the metal.

A gray sedan led them through the curves of the road. Paul followed at a discreet distance. Ahead of them the sedan pulled onto a small side street nearly hidden by dense foliage.

He parked behind it and turned to his sister. "You don't have to do this."

The metal case rested on her lap. She had her ankles tucked up against the seat. "I asked her to meet me."

"Diane." Paul blew out a breath.

She thumbed the bullet at the top of the magazine. In her eyes was something Paul had never seen before, and he realized how small she had become in the past weeks. He saw their mother in her smile.

She opened the car door and stepped out. Paul watched as Diane crunched along the gravel to the sedan, held the gun through the window, and fired.

## *Three Golden Arrows*

*Kat Lerner*

*This is not your grandfather's yarn of brave Robin Hood. When the Sheriff of Nottingham sets his sights on Maid Marian, will Robin be able to rescue her before it's too late? Who's rescuing who these days, anyway? Discover the long-hidden truth of the legendary "Robin Hood and his Merry Men." Enter Sherwood Forest at thine own risk.*

~ ~ ~

Each generation has told its own tales of valiant Robin Hood. To some, he was a champion of justice, using almost

god-like skills with bow and arrow to fight for the poor and oppressed. To others, he was a Communist punk, pure propaganda for those who espoused unabashed class warfare against the feudal job creators. Others still no doubt saw him as little more than a kleptomaniac with tight pants. None of these stories are true of course, as I'm sure will not surprise you. For when speaking of protectors of the common folk forced to live in the woods during the late Middle Ages, it is clear that Robin Hood and his Merry Men were in fact women, and even more obviously, witches.

Maid Marian, on the other hand, was every bit as beautiful as the stories told, though significantly less noble. Rather than presiding over ladies-in-waiting or courtiers, most days Maid Marian presided over sheep. She lived with her father, tending his flock, and asked nothing more. That day however, she also presided over the May Games as Queen, or at least that was what she was told as she was given a thorny flower crown and forced to sit in an uncomfortable chair for everyone to look at while they danced and drank. The office also apparently came with the inexhaustible and inescapable attention of the Sheriff of Nottingham, with full view of his insufferable goatee and bald head that resembled an overstuffed sausage.

“Another silver for my silver star,” the Sheriff purred, dropping another coin into the obscenely stuffed sack by Marian’s chair.

Marian closed her eyes briefly and longed for her sheep. Looking up, she watched a scrawny young man shuffle off

the field, head down and clutching his roughly hewn bow.

The Sheriff clicked his tongue. “Worry not for those so stupid as to think they could beat me at archery, and more importantly,” he said, jiggling the sack of coins, “so easy to part from their money. Should I buy you a present with our spoils, my pet?”

Marian fought the urge to grab a different sack and give it a good kick. “Good Sir, my neighbors are poor, and you offer them a chance to feed their families, pay their debts...”

“Their debts to me,” the Sheriff grinned. “Think not on losing our spoils to some flea-ridden miscreant, my queen, for I am known as the greatest archer in the country, and no man can best me.”

Unable to stand the way his beard stretched with his smirk, Marian turned away. Her gaze fell on a nearby tree, nailed to which was a wanted poster fluttering in the breeze. The drawing looked like a child’s creation, but the name stirred something nonetheless.

“What of Robin Hood?”

When no reply came, Marian looked back to find the Sheriff grinding his teeth. She stared until he noticed her eyes on him, jolting in surprise. “Pah!” he cried, waving a hand. “Reports are exaggerated. And besides, she dares not show her face in my presence.” Marian opened her mouth to argue, but the Sheriff grabbed her hand. “Now, enough of this. There is no need to worry when you are with me, m’lady. Oh, but you are right in not wanting me to spend my

money on a present, for what ornament could improve—”

Before he could finish his thought or direct his ale breath any closer, a hand was laid between them.

“Marian! It’s been ages since we’ve seen each other. I had hoped to meet you today.”

Taken aback, Marian looked up to see a woman dressed in a rather ill-fitting gown, wimple, and a face she had never seen before in her life. Marian almost said this when she realized the woman’s eyes were speaking to her, and with a thrill, she understood.

“I had hoped the same thing, my old friend. You must tell me everything about how your parents are, and all your siblings too.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Marian saw the Sheriff look back and forth between them.

“Of course, dear friend,” the woman said, leaning in, “but first I must tell you about the boy I hope will court me.”

“Well, I shall allow you two lovely creatures your privacy,” the Sheriff declared, picking up his bow. “I’m sure there are a few more fools who’ve drunk enough to try their arm against mine.”

Marian looked up at the woman gratefully, until she spoke.

“Not so fast,” the woman called after the Sheriff. “The game is archery, is it not? One silver coin to enter, and if the

challenger bests you, they win the whole bag?”

The Sheriff turned. “What of it?”

Still holding Marian’s gaze, the woman’s eyes twinkled. “I challenge.”

“What?” Marian and the Sheriff said at once as she dropped a coin onto the pile and picked up the challenger’s bow and arrows.

“My dear,” the Sheriff cooed, “such a sport requires strength ... precision ... acuity.”

The woman stepped up to the challenger line and turned doe eyes on him. “Then perhaps you would like to shoot first and instruct me.”

Visibly relaxing, the Sheriff accepted the offered bow and quiver. “Of course, m’lady.” He faced his target and drew back the string. “The key is a firm stance. Relax your bow arm slightly. Aim for the center of the target. Then, simply release.” His arrow flew and stuck the line between the middle and outer rings.

“Fascinating,” the woman said, aiming at her own target. With a *fwip*, her arrow flew and struck the center. Marian’s eyes widened, and the Sheriff’s smirk faded.

“Move the targets back,” he barked at two of nearby henchmen who were working their way through a bushel of apricots. Once satisfied, the Sheriff drew his second arrow and shot, hitting the inner part of the middle ring. He turned to the woman and seemed to bore a hole through

her with his gaze. Not appearing fazed, she aimed her second arrow and let it go, again hitting the center circle. She turned back to the Sheriff and smiled sweetly. The Sheriff's neck began to swell.

“It is unbecoming for a lady to play such games,” he said between clenched teeth. “I shall end this quickly.”

“By all means.” The woman gestured to the target.

Yanking his string back, the Sheriff aimed, taking a few more seconds than necessary, and finally released. It struck just inside the center circle. The Sheriff whipped back around, his mouth stretched in a smug grin. “You are more than welcome to forego your last shot and save your fine gown, m'lady.”

The woman hummed thoughtfully. “You're absolutely right, kind sir. I shouldn't spoil the dress.” And without further ado, she pulled it and her wimple over her head, revealing short hair that fell around her eyes, a green tunic over breeches and boots, and a sword that glimmered in the sun.

Marian felt every hair on her body stand on end. The Sheriff staggered back a pace before catching himself, setting his jaw.

“Robin Hood,” he declared unnecessarily. After the King and the Sheriff, Robin Hood was one of the most famous—or infamous—people in the country. This became evident as the band stopped in a fizzle of discordant notes, the crowd circling the archery field and murmuring amongst

themselves. Many seemed torn between trying to hide and shoving for a better view.

Robin Hood turned to look at the wanted poster tacked to the tree and clicked her tongue. “Now that reward is a bit cheap. Am I worth so little to you?” She smiled cheerfully. “It’s a lovely picture though. Give my regards to the babe who drew it.”

A muscle in the Sheriff’s jaw twitched.

“Oh, and before I forget—” Without breaking her gaze with the Sheriff, Robin pulled back the string of her bow and let loose her third arrow. Everyone’s head snapped to the target, where her arrow was still vibrating at dead center.

“It’s been a pleasure,” Robin said as she grabbed the sack of coins. “Well, it’s been an experience.”

Marian watched her take ten leisurely paces across the field before the Sheriff broke out of his stunned silence.

“Seize her!” he shouted to his henchmen, who after shaking themselves of their own daze, barreled after her with swords raised.

Marian’s heart leapt into her throat, and she was halfway out of her chair before knowing why. Robin, however, seemed to know exactly what she was doing, as she threw a black stone ahead of her and ran towards it. The henchmen hesitated as it exploded in a plume of smoke, and stopped altogether when from it a hazy, phantom-like

horse rose to its feet. Robin, however, didn't break stride. She ran straight towards the horse's hindquarters and sprang up to mount her, the horse breaking into a run that very second.

"It's witchcraft," one of the henchman whispered to another, his triceps quivering.

The Sheriff ran towards them, face reddening with both exertion and rage. "Of course it's witchcraft, you idiots! She is the most famous witch in the country! After her!"

And perhaps they would have, if it hadn't been for the dozen other women dressed down to their witch wear, perched atop their own enchanted horses, flicking and curling their fingers at the henchmen's lower halves.

"The Merry Maidens," Marian breathed, awestruck.

One by one, the henchmen collapsed on their bottoms, their pants yanked off at the ankles by an invisible hand. The Sheriff was the last to fall, his skintight black breeches flying to Robin's own outstretched arm.

Marian snorted the most indelicate snort of her life. However, it died in her throat as Robin met her eye and winked before turning her horse and leading the Merry Maidens charging towards the woods, disappearing like smoke.

Marian fell back onto her chair, trembling and feeling like she'd drunk too much wine.

"Alright, clear out, the lot of you! The Games are over!"

the Sheriff barked at the crowd, sending them pushing and shoving their way off the field. Marian didn't blame them. If the Sheriff was insufferable while in a good mood, she shuddered to think what he would be like after being publicly humiliated. Eyes widening at the thought, she slipped from her chair and bounded through the copse of trees back to her father's fields.

Unfortunately, she was not quick enough to avoid hearing one of the henchmen marvel that the Sheriff was not wearing underclothes.

That night, Marian finished her usual routine of shepherding the sheep home, cooking her father's dinner, cleaning the house, and climbing into bed. Once there, however, she found she could not sleep. The memories of Robin Hood played so loudly in her mind. After flopping over for the twelfth time, she surrendered. She checked that her father was sound asleep, grabbed her cloak, and slipped quietly out the door.

Marian had walked in Sherwood Forest before, but never at night, and never this deep. She reminded herself that Robin Hood and the Merry Maidens were in here somewhere, but wasn't sure if that should make her feel better or worse. Nearby, a trig snapping jolted her out of her reverie. Marian ducked behind a tree and watched as a young girl dressed in work clothes picked her way through the brush past her. Curious, Marian followed. The voice of her father in her head told her she should warn the girl and tell her to turn back. Though truthfully, she didn't want to

turn back herself. So they kept walking until the faint sounds of merrymaking hit her ears, and a few moments later through a final line of oaks, a raucous camp came into view.

Marian stared in open amazement until a reveler's loud cackle made her jump and hide herself behind a tree. Her heart thudded in her chest. She wondered if she was under some sort of spell. Why else would she have walked into the middle of a forbidden forest in the dark of night, straight into a camp full of witches and outlaws? Still, unable to help herself, she peeked around the trunk to get a better look.

Marian didn't know what she expected. If her father's warnings were to be believed, most likely human sacrifice. Instead, she counted three fires around which women clustered, some dancing merrily, some drinking, one sitting quietly next to a heap of mending. Marian recognized the Merry Maidens from the Games. To her surprise, several townswomen sat among them. Bursts of laughter broke the thrum of chatter often, bawdy and indelicate, but not cruel. As if pulled by magic, Marian leaned her ear to listen in.

"I wonder, should we donate the dresses we wore today?" asked one of the Merry Maidens. "Disguises can only be used once, after all."

"What I want to know is when we can fit these pants to us," another Maiden replied, flourishing a pair of brown breeches Marian recognized from the henchmen.

The woman with the pile of the mending jabbed the

needle through the fabric violently. “Well, if you helped, *Agnes*, it would get done faster.”

“Problem is,” a fourth woman piped up, “dresses are the only disguise that works these days.”

The women around the next fire turned.

“I heard the Sheriff officially banned women from wearing trousers. Can you believe that?”

“Aye, it’s true,” said a plump woman wearing barmaid’s clothes, “cept the the Sheriff’s men can’t tell a lady in trousers from a man, so they’ve taken to stopping every poor soul in breeches they see. Some of the pretty young fellas have taken to wearing dresses just to avoid harassment.”

“Quite the turn of events,” the third woman agreed, not looking up from her mending.

“Then we should give these to them, shouldn’t we?” the first woman said.

“Thank the Heavens,” the barmaid said. “My boy Bartholomew’s been complainin’ he’s tired of his blue gown.”

Shaking her head clear, Marian scanned the clearing for Robin Hood and found her kneeling before the girl she had followed to the camp. Robin drew out the sack of coins from the Games and dropped a handful into the girl’s pocket. Marian’s eyebrows rose, higher when Robin lifted the girl’s hand and kissed the back of it, leaving a faint silver mark.

As the girl curtsied and turned back the way she came, more Merry Maidens knelt and kissed her hands, leaving them like two shimmering stars against her skirt.

Marian watched women young and old filter in and out, some carrying gifts, others with not even a shawl around their shoulders. A few stayed, sitting by the fire with the Merry Maidens. Each left with a kiss and a pocketful of silver coins until the sack was empty.

As she watched, a lump formed in her throat. It was so unlike the hollow silence of her father's house. Gathering her cloak around her, she turned and picked her way back through the trees, finding the main path by the waxing moon. Marian listened to the crunch of her own footsteps, her brows drawing together. She had satisfied her curiosity, yet she felt more restless. The thought of returning to her bed in the loft above her father seemed as appealing as a night in the castle dungeon.

"Perhaps I shall stay with the sheep," Marian mumbled to herself.

"Perhaps you shall sleep in the stocks," a voice answered.

Marian jumped back, colliding against a nearby poplar. She whipped her head around, looking for the source of the voice.

"Do not hurt yourself, m'lady," the voice continued as a black-clad body stepped out of the shadows.

Marian's stomach seized, certain the Sheriff could see what she had seen just by looking into her eyes. Still, she drew herself up to full height and met his gaze.

"I have committed no crime in these woods."

"Sherwood Forest is forbidden, m'lady. 'Tis a crime to set foot here." She watched his lips stretch into a smirk. "But I don't care about that. It's a silly law, isn't it?"

"Sir, you wrote it."

The Sheriff ignored this, striding forward and ghosting a hand across her cheek. Crows cawed and flapped in the branches overhead. "This will of course be overlooked in exchange for your assistance."

The Sheriff's breath smelled of ale and rot. Marian pressed her back further against the tree trunk, bark digging into her spine. "What could I possibly do for you?"

His expression hardened. Slowly, his hand traveled from her cheek to cover her throat. "Tell me where Robin Hood is."

Marian's eyes shot up to see the Sheriff's turning bright and feverish.

"I know you were there. At the camp. You saw it. Take me there."

"Why can't you find it on your own?" Marian bit out. The Sheriff had hung people for less, but she couldn't stop the words. Robin Hood's name was like a spell cast over her.

“It’s protected by magic,” the Sheriff hissed, his hand tightening around her throat. “It must be you. I order you —”

“If you wanted an invitation so badly, you should’ve asked.”

Both Marian and the Sheriff stilled. Glancing up, they watched Robin Hood swing deftly from the lowest branch and land before them. She grinned crookedly, her eyes catching the moon’s silver glow. Marian’s heart tremored like plucked harp strings.

“Forgive me,” Robin said as the Sheriff stood fixed to the spot. “I assumed you wouldn’t be interested in all our lady talk. Do you desire to join our hair braiding circle?”

As if by magic, a ray of moonlight hit the top of his bald head, lighting up the clearing. Marian snorted under her breath, and Robin caught her eye and winked.

His body finally seeming to catch up, the Sheriff’s face purpled with rage. His hand slipped from Marian’s throat as he turned to face Robin. Marian took the opening and ducked out from between the tree and the Sheriff, tripping towards Robin’s side of the clearing.

“You should head home, Sheriff,” Robin said, holding his gaze. “One hears stories of outlaws in these woods.”

Not seeming to hear her, the Sheriff spat. “Lady talk. You are no lady, witch.”

“Oh, was that meant to insult me? Well,” she said,

pulling a sword from her scabbard, “I had better live up to expectations.”

The Sheriff snarled and wrenched his own sword from his belt, charging forward. Whispering unknown words under her breath, Robin spun around, sending the edge of her blade colliding with his. Light sparked, but not merely a reflection. It seemed to come from within, as if she had dipped it a blacksmith’s hearth.

“Oh no you don’t,” the Sheriff huffed and brought down his sword hard against hers. Robin held against it, and the Sheriff scraped his blade down like steel striking flint. The reaction was instant. His sword glowed white hot before bursting into brilliant red and gold flames.

The Sheriff dropped his weapon with a yelp, clutching his hand. Without missing a beat, Robin brought the tip of her sword under his chin, tipping it up.

“Goodnight, Sheriff.”

The Sheriff tensed, glancing from the blade to Robin and off to where Marian stood watching behind her. Robin pressed the edge more firmly against his neck.

Grumbling low in his throat, the Sheriff staggered backward. He looked down regretfully at his sword, flames still licking happily around it, before turning and stumbling through the trees.

Once he had disappeared, Marian’s gaze fell to the burning blade. “How did you do that? Why isn’t the fire

spreading?”

Robin’s lips quirked, a mischievous spark lighting her eye. She nodded towards the sword. “Pick it up.”

Marian paused, raising her eyebrows. “I beg your pardon?”

Robin stared back challengingly.

Eyeing her dubiously, Marian knelt down, her hand hovering over it. Finally, she reached through the flames to touch the hilt.

“It is still cool,” she said, raising it aloft. “It was only an illusion of magic?”

When there came no reply, Marian looked back to see Robin mirroring the awe she felt.

“You trust me.”

Marian startled, looking down at the magical flames encasing her hand. She knew it was foolish, but she supposed after the way she had spent the evening so far, it hardly mattered. Still, she felt a strange desire to argue.

“Why were you following me anyway?” she countered.

The question seemed to take Robin by surprise, and she looked almost abashed. Marian watched a lock of unruly hair fall into her eyes and itched to sweep it away.

“Well, uh, you followed me first?”

Heat flooded Marian’s cheeks. “I...I’m sorry. It was

stupid of me.” She shook her head. “I’ve done many stupid things tonight.”

“Just one,” Robin said, the glint returning to her eye. “Lurking as a phantom in the shadows for hours instead of joining in the fun.”

Marian nodded, not trusting her voice.

“Shall I give you a kiss then?” Robin asked softly.

Marian’s eyes widened. “It’s a little sudden, isn’t it?”

After a beat of silence, Robin snorted. “A witch’s blessing. It will make your foes uninterested in you, so that you may return home safely.” She ducked her head, catching Marian’s eye. “I believe you saw these when you were spying earlier.”

Marian made a small strangled sound in her throat and wondered if there was any quicksand nearby that she could fall into.

“Right,” she nodded, holding out her hand, “of course.”

Ignoring it, Robin stepped forward and held Marian’s cheeks, kissing her forehead lightly.

“You have worse foes than most,” she explained.

Marian froze, feeling her skin tingle. She wondered if a silver lip print had been left behind. It wasn’t until Robin stepped back that Marian realized she was leaning into Robin’s hands. She had to catch herself from pitching forward.

“I can escort you home, if you’d like,” Robin said, pulling out the shiny black stone from the May Games.

“No,” Marian rushed, more forcefully than necessary. Taking a deep breath, she painted on a smile. “My thanks, but I think an enchanted horse is likely to arouse more suspicion at this time of night.”

“You are too wise,” Robin hummed and dropped the stone back in her pocket. “Then I bid you good night, milady.”

“Goodnight.” Marian curtsied and turned out of the clearing, proud of herself for keeping her voice firm and gait steady.

“Other way,” Robin called behind her, making Marian jump. Turning, she saw Robin point in the opposite direction, a grin tugging at her lips.

Clearing her throat, Marian nodded and walked back across the clearing. She praised and thanked everything she knew when the forest’s shade finally enveloped her. Still, she couldn’t shake the nagging image of Robin stepping lightly through the branches overhead, just out of sight.

It was not an entirely unpleasant feeling.

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It was mid-morning when Marian returned at last to her father’s house. Her thoughts had been just as tangled as when she had left, if not more so, and she found her sheep made better company when she didn’t want to answer

questions.

This proved true the moment she slid the door latch closed behind her.

“Why were ye in Sherwood Forest las’ night?” her father asked, his voice low and dry like burning paper. He sat hunched over their small table, quill in hand, scrolls spread out across its surface and a pipe laid atop them, small wisps of smoke escaping the bowl. Her father didn’t look up. “The Sheriff was here this mornin’.”

“It’s alright,” Marian hurried. “He didn’t hurt me. He tried, but you’ll never believe who—”

Her father held up a bony hand, and her words wilted on her tongue.

“Walkin’ in those woods is a crime. Ye know that, girl.”

Marian nodded. “Whatever the punishment, I’ll accept it.”

“No need,” he said simply. “The Sheriff has offered t’ marry ye instead. Isn’t that a laugh?”

Marian almost did laugh. “What did you tell him?”

“Not much t’ say, really.” He scratched his quill across a piece of parchment. “No better offer’s gonna come for ye, unless the king ‘imself returns from the wars thirsty for sheep’s milk.”

Marian stared. “Father, who would take care of you?”

“Sheriff said he knows many a fine woman who’re

handy on a farm.” At that, he set down his quill and picked up his pipe, inhaling and blowing out a long stream of smoke. “Me bed’s been cold too long.”

Marian felt ice slide down her spine. Wordlessly, she opened the door behind her, ready to run back into the woods, only to collide into the Sheriff’s chest.

“Have you had enough time to prepare, my pet?” His hand ghosted over her throat, across the marks his fingers had made the night before. “Tomorrow shall be the day we wed.”

Fire coursed through her, turning the trail of ice to steam. She wrenched his arm from her neck. “Tomorrow will be the day you enter Heaven if you touch me again.”

The Sheriff stilled before letting out a deep, throaty guffaw.

“Oh, won’t this be fun.”

At the snap of his fingers, two henchmen appeared in the doorway and grabbed her on both sides. The world blurred around her. She struggled to break free, kicking out, scratching at the arms around her, but too soon a carriage door opened before her, and a blunt blow hit the back of her head. Her vision blackened, and her body sagged.

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“It has been too long since the good people of Nottingham have had the joy of a royal wedding,” the Sheriff declared.

Below the castle balcony, the crowd cheered their agreement.

The Sheriff placed a hand over his heart. “With our king away at war, for the holiest of purposes, you have had to endure me as a crude imitation.”

The crowd clapped politely.

“However, while we cannot all have the honor of fighting on the battlefield, we must remember that there is still a war to be won here at home. A war against darkness, against superstition, and against the Serpent’s temptation.”

The Sheriff paused, and a smattering of claps sounded.

“Which is why I have at last selected a wife. A bud plucked from pastoral innocence, but who can only blossom under the right care.”

Reaching out to his side, the Sheriff pulled Marian to stand before him. She was wrapped in embroidered silks that covered her bound wrists, her cloth-gagged mouth hidden behind a gauzy veil. His hands gripped her upper arms like a vice.

“I present to you my bride-to-be, Maid Marian, Queen of the May Games, and I hope soon, queen of all your hearts.”

While the crowd cheered once again, Marian shook to and fro, trying to wrench her arms from his hold. Finally, she felt one hand release, followed swiftly by the tip of a dagger blade pressing against her spine. She stilled. The Sheriff addressed the crowd.

“You see, our dear Marian is in danger, pursued by the outlaw witch who hides like a coward in the woods, hungry to corrupt our virtuous, law-abiding ladies and draw them into her cult of darkness.”

“Only on Saturdays if the weather is pleasant,” a voice called from the back of the crowd.

Marian’s heart leapt in her chest. The voice was unmistakable, not only to her but seemingly to the Sheriff too. His hand gripped her arm painfully tight, but she barely felt it.

“I think we’d better have a talk, Sheriff. But first things first.”

As if gentle fingers tugged at the hem, the veil slid from Marian’s face, and she watched it flick across the gasping crowd to Robin’s outstretched hand.

“Oh dear,” she said, “what a way to treat your betrothed.”

The crowd turned back to Marian, a murmur rippling through at the sight of the gag tied around her mouth. Marian looked back to Robin and saw real anger in her eyes for the first time, dark as a thunderstorm as she stared at the Sheriff.

“A trick of magic, obviously,” he spat.

At his words, the clouds in Robin’s vision cleared. She clicked her tongue. “I didn’t come here to argue, Sheriff.”

“Then why show your face?”

The corner of Robin’s lips quirked. “To offer you a rematch.”

Between them, the crowd buzzed in confusion, and a muscle in the Sheriff’s jaw twitched. “Why, pray tell, would you do this?”

“I play for Marian’s freedom.”

The Sheriff’s nails dug into Marian’s arm. “And if you lose?”

“My life.”

Marian’s eyes shot up. She barely heard the crowd rising to a clamor below her. Robin eyes locked with the Sheriff’s, while his neck worked as if struggling to swallow her words.

Finally, he turned to the henchmen at his side. “Set out the targets.”

Marian might have felt relief when the Sheriff left her side. She might have rubbed her arm where bruises were already blooming beneath the skin. As it was, all she could do was watch the crowd parting to allow Robin through to where four henchmen were dragging two target boards. Another carried their bows and arrows, white flags for the Sherriff, black for Robin, just like last time.

Before Robin could reach them, the Sheriff plucked out two of her arrows. “I will only release her if you best me in three straight shots.”

Around them, the crowd fluttered indignantly, but instead of arguing, Robin grinned. “I was planning on it.”

A vein in the Sheriff’s forehead throbbed. Marian bit the cloth gag around her mouth to stop a stream of giggles.

“White moves first,” Robin said, gesturing for the Sheriff to take his shot.

“No,” he said, drawing an arrow from his quiver. “Together.”

Marian held her breath as Robin nodded, moving to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Sheriff. In perfect sync, they pulled their bowstrings back and released. The Sheriff’s arrow struck the second circle, and Robin’s struck the center.

Behind them, excited whispers rippled through the crowd. The Sheriff gripped the handle of his bow until his knuckles turned white.

“Again,” he barked, yanking back his string.

Robin followed, and they released a second time. With a *thwack*, Robin’s arrow landed snugly next to her first, while the Sheriff’s veered off to the left, just hitting the inside edge of the target.

“Prepare yourself for our departure, milady,” Robin called as she nocked her final arrow. Sparing a look over her shoulder, she glanced up at Marian and winked. Marian’s heart thrummed. She wanted to stay in the safety of that gaze forever.

She stayed just a second too long.

Catching movement, Marian's eyes flicked to the Sheriff. As if in a dream, she watched him turn towards her, bowstring pulled tight, arrow pointed at her chest. She sucked in a breath, and a blur of color swam before her. Robin lunged towards him, sending him staggering back.

"You could have killed her," she cried, grabbing a fistful of his collar.

"Not at all," the Sheriff said, his lips curling around yellow teeth. "I have saved her."

Robin, Marian, and the crowd turned to see her third arrow sticking in the ground beside the target, still vibrating from being carelessly released. The Sheriff cleared his throat, pulled back his bowstring, and released his arrow without even looking at the target. It hit the outer circle. Marian felt a stone drop in her stomach.

"You have your tricks, witch," he said, "and I have mine."

Robin lifted her head slowly, as if in daze. She would not meet Marian's eyes. Around them, time slowed like a river freezing over. A group of henchmen circled Robin and dragged her out of sight. Marian couldn't hear the crowd's shouts or her own, even as her throat grew raw and her lungs screamed for air. Another henchman's meaty arm wrapped around her, and her world went dark.

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*I failed her.*

The thought ran circles through Robin's mind as she was led down a dank and dripping staircase to the castle dungeon. Her body felt like it was filled with lead. Finally, they stopped before the mouth of a tunnel, a burning torch bathing the stone walls in an eerie glow.

“If you thought your humiliation would be granted the quick reprieve of death, you were sorely mistaken.”

Robin did not flinch at the Sheriff's voice as he strode from the tunnel to stand over her. Instead, all the fog in her mind cleared, fire burning it away.

“It is not my humiliation, but the one who could only best me by threatening his own betrothed.”

Robin lifted her eyes to meet his, allowing every ounce of heat to blaze through them. The Sheriff winced, and the corner of Robin's lips twitched up.

“I would gladly sever head from neck this moment,” the Sheriff snarled, “but I have prepared for this day.” Grabbing her by the elbow, he pulled Robin around the corner. Robin gawked at what lay before her. Instead of the iron bars that surrounded every other cell, there stood shimmering rods of gold. It was like standing at the gates of Heaven.

“Why?” Robin breathed.

The Sheriff smirked. “I know your Merry Maidens will try to help you escape, and I know a woodland witch needs like metal to enchant like metal, just as you cursed my

sword with yours. Steel against steel.”

Robin looked back the Sheriff, realization dawning on her face. “But there is no gold. You seized every last fleck of it when the king left.”

“And what good use I have put it to,” the Sheriff said, looking up at it admiringly, “a gilded cage to hold a robin.”

“You’re mad,” Robin laughed. “Why not just kill me?”

“Oh, but where is the fun in that?” the Sheriff purred, stepping his closer. His eyes were black and wild. “Where is the fun in killing you while the Merry Maidens aren’t here to watch? Before Marian is with child...Before you beg for the mercy of my sword.”

Robin’s blood chilled at Marian’s name. The Sheriff took the opportunity to shove her past the open bars, her shoulder slamming against the back wall.

Robin listened to the clank of a key turning a lock, followed by retreating footsteps. Rushing forward, she grasped the bars and reeled off a spell, then another, and another. She closed her eyes and tried to channel her energy, gain control of just a piece of it, but it slid off the gold like water.

Robin opened her eyes. Her hands shook as they slid down the smooth metal, palms slick with sweat.

“I do not mind honoring my end of the bargain, my dear Marian, even if it was deceitful,” she said softly, “for how can I live knowing I failed you?”

~ ~ ~

Robin woke to the sound of church bells.

Jolting from where she had slumped against the cell door, she winced and yanked her head back through the bars, rubbing her neck as it popped free.

The church bells clanged on, loud and unceasing.

“Are they trying to call France to Mass?” she groaned, just before the penny dropped.

“The wedding,” she said. “Marian, you are already married.” Robin dropped against the back wall, hands tangled in her hair. “He has touched his lips to yours.”

Morning light filtered in above her, and she drew her knees to her chest, covering her eyes as if it burned.

“Your capture is my fault,” she mumbled. “I followed after you like a stray dog, and the Sheriff used you to seek vengeance against me. All I wanted was to protect you. I am nothing but an arrogant, straw-brained fool.”

“You forgot theatrical with impressively quick reflexes.”

Robin’s head shot up.

Standing bathed in the glow of a burning torch, Marian smiled broadly, her cheeks flushed, hair askew, and more beautiful a sight than any Robin had ever seen.

“I’ve come to rescue you,” she said.

Robin stared at her as if she was a ghost. “But the

church bells...”

“Oh that?” Marian nodded above them. “The Merry Maidens are creating a bit of a distraction, with the help of most of the townswomen...and the men who received the Maidens’ dresses. They looked quite fetching. In any case, we should probably make haste.”

Robin pressed against the bars. “Do you have the key?”

“Not as such, no,” she said.

Deflating, Robin shook her head. “Marian, the cage is gold. I can only enchant metal with a tool of the same metal, and the Sheriff seized all the gold in the country. I am powerless.”

“Then it’s a good thing the Sheriff is too proud to let his betrothed be seen with a ring of *commoners*.” Marian held up her left hand, showing a thin, golden ring on her third finger. Robin’s jaw fell slack.

Wordlessly, Marian pulled the ring off and reached for Robin’s hand.

Robin smiled crookedly. “It’s a little sudden, isn’t it?”

Marian glared, but could not stop a smile from tugging at her lips. “Just for that, I shall not allow you to give me your witch’s blessing.”

“No?” Robin raised her brows.

“No,” she said, sliding the ring onto Robin’s finger. “I’m going to give you one instead.”

Robin froze, and Marian took advantage, leaning forward and kissing her lips. All at once, a swell of magic bloomed in her. The ring on her finger glowed white, but she didn't even notice. She gripped the bars between them, and they turned soft in her hands. She pulled until, with a final groan, they gave way. Without breaking the kiss, Robin rushed forward and gathered Marian in her arms. She thought she would drown in the feeling of her solid weight against her, alive and safe. She hoped she would.

"I believe we have a corrupt government to overthrow," Marian whispered.

"Indeed we do," Robin agreed, while wrapping her arms tighter around Marian's waist. She would let go soon, and they would fight, and she would clobber the Sheriff with one of his gold prison bars.

Just not yet.

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## *About the Authors*

*In order of appearance:*

**Mari-Anne Copeland:** M Copeland was born and raised in the British Midlands, and is currently on the way to qualifying as a teacher. Trained in science but hopelessly in love with words, there have long been grand machinations for a high fantasy novel, but then, isn't there always?

They write for fun but does not do so nearly as much as they should, and whiles away free time playing Dungeons and Dragons, doodling or at the cinema.

You can find Mari-Anne on tumblr at [entirely-the-wrong-sort.tumblr.com](http://entirely-the-wrong-sort.tumblr.com).

**R White** lives in Edinburgh, and spends much of their time wishing to be older, taller, or somewhere else, preferably with more dragons. They can usually be found daydreaming, obsessing over magic, or under a pile of notebooks somewhere. While they're doing their best, they're still too

young for many of the things they'd like to do in the future, including one day publishing their own novels, travelling the world, and getting degrees in English Lit and History.

You can find them on twitter: [@mindhowyego](#)

**Audrey Rose B.** spends her days daydreaming about magic and starlight. She hides in a little cozy nest somewhere in Canada with her lovely husband and her three darling cats. She likes to turn her thoughts into words and write them all down. Sometimes, they turn into stories that she hopes to share with her fellow dreamers and fantasy lovers.

You can find Audrey on tumblr at [snowflakemirror](#)

**Claire Patz** is 25 years old, and lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. She grew up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and has always loved Chicago and its history. She spends most of her days trying to find her way in life and finding the next dank meme, if she's truly honest with herself. She loves to laugh and and apparently likes to write author bios that sound like dating profiles. She is a huge baker, an avid reader, and she loves the kind of songs that remind her of polished oak wood bannisters in dappled sunlight. As you can probably tell from her writing, she is also cheesy as hell. If you are so inclined, please feel free to visit her on Tumblr ([the-glass-box.tumblr.com](#)), or on Wattpad ([chaussettebaby](#)), or on Twitter ([@patzforclaire](#)).

**Barbara Becc** is a German woman who lives on the internet and feels half as old as she really is. She loves writing stories, and she's also a sorceress of all things computers, an engineer, a mother, a good cook and a master of procrastination.

Barbara has a tumblr with writing advice at

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[Wattpad/barbex](http://Wattpad/barbex).

**HK Lune** spins science fiction stories from her home in New Orleans, Louisiana. While she thinks inspiration can be found in any medium, the written word is her chosen craft. Of the several books and short stories she's written, "Clockpunk and the Vitalizer" is her first publication. When she isn't writing, you can usually find her reading, playing video games, or hoping her BA in English ends up being useful. You can find her on tumblr at [hklunethewriter.tumblr.com](http://hklunethewriter.tumblr.com), Twitter [@hklunethewriter](https://twitter.com/hklunethewriter), and [Goodreads as HK](#).

**C.D.P. Morkert** lives in the United States of America, with the air conditioning high enough that he can imagine being in the mountains of Colorado again. He lives with his thoughts, characters, and crowntail betta named Roswell. He enjoys long walks playing Pokemon Go and talking about Fullmetal Alchemist, Bone, or other comics that inspire his writings, drawings, and animation. He has a B.A. in Communication Arts, a M.B.A. in Television and Movie Production, and a put

off attitude whenever you mention student loans.

He can be found on tumblr at [swordofshin.tumblr.com](http://swordofshin.tumblr.com) and [cdpmorkert.tumblr.com](http://cdpmorkert.tumblr.com).

**A.S. Volk** ([thatwriternamedvolk.tumblr.com](http://thatwriternamedvolk.tumblr.com) on tumblr) is a self proclaimed “old nerd” who has had a love of science fiction, fantasy, role-playing video games, and comic books from the time she was a wee girl. She lives in rural bliss with her husband of ten years, her daughter-- a future “old nerd” in the making, and several fat, backyard-dwelling chickens. She has delusions of finishing a novel and actually getting random strangers to buy and even read her rubbish. She loves music, fluffy baby animals, and warm cups of tea while reading. Long walks on the beach are overrated (because sunburns).

**Megan Fuentes** is a twentysomething Floridian college student who has been described by her loved ones as “exceptional,” “neurotic,” “such a nerd,” and “a chocoholic.” She’s been published once each online and in an anthology, but is working diligently to grow those numbers. Her tumblr is [bymeganwithmeraki.tumblr.com](http://bymeganwithmeraki.tumblr.com).

**Anna Goss** has been writing since she could write. With dreams of being a full-time, published author she has racked up drafts of several novels in various stages of completion and a cluster of short stories. As a detour along the path to

being a published author, she has earned Bachelor's in Archaeology and a Master's in Museum Studies. She currently works behind the scenes in a museum, which advances her peculiar love of the old things, dead things, and just plain weird things that tend to accumulate in museums. In addition to working and writing, she enjoys reading, playing the occasional video game, and thinking about doing outdoorsy things. She lives in Wyoming.

She can be found online at her tumblr

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**Kat Lerner** lives, toils, and makes mischief between the woods and the sea of Northwest Washington. She currently works as an online writing teacher, coach, and editor, and has been published under various monikers in Rose Red Review, Apeiron Review, Wings of Renewal: A Solarpunk Dragon Anthology, and others. In her spare time, she enjoys politics, potatoes, and arguing with her dog.

Follow Kat on Tumblr at:

[morecolorfulmetaphors.tumblr.com](http://morecolorfulmetaphors.tumblr.com) or Twitter at:

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[neenorroar.tumblr.com](http://neenorroar.tumblr.com), her blog

[lornadavidsonwrites.wordpress.com](http://lornadavidsonwrites.wordpress.com) and at

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