

# The man in the attic

## On the Bond between a Daughter and her Father

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It was the attic. For all her life, which admittedly had not been long, Elyssa could recall despising getting near it. Even walking by its hatch felt like a harrowing experience. This, sadly, was unavoidable as it lay on the ceiling between the landing to the second floor and her new bedroom. So Elyssa learnt to scurry by, to never stray too long underneath it, lest her closeness encourage trouble. For her it was not the cold nor the darkness that she feared— that she could deal with. Put a coat on or grab a flashlight, it was straightforward, all attics suffered this fate, it was normal. No— it was the man that lived up there. He scared her.

So as she trudged up the stairs, her feet heavier than her weight, their thuds echoing deeply, she shivered. *"Honey can you get the Christmas lights from the attic please?"* her Mom's voice reverberated from the other side of the phone. A lump formed in her throat. Elyssa had protested, as any reasonable kid her age would have, but of course her Mom would not hear it— *"You know how I hate going up there 'Lyssa. Plus you know your father can't."* And so that had been the end of the story. It was grabbing the Christmas lights or no food and up to bed early. Elyssa may have pushed her convictions a tad bit fastidiously.

Picking up her death march she summited her ascension. A sound like a plastic bag being inflated and deflated came to her. The door at the top of the stairs was open. Her shoulders sagged, *Dad*. She carefully pushed open the door into her old bedroom carefully and peered in. A room filled with midnight blue light and deep shadows covered a bed with guardrails. Various sounds of gadgets whirled and beeped. On the bed a shape was ensconced in a thin white blanket. The sounds of laboured wheezing were coming from the shape. She crept up silently, getting as close as she dared, never touching him. Whenever she got too close she felt a queasiness settle in her stomach, a feeling that water was rushing through her fingers and she was meant to hold it all in. Mom had said that she could be loud if she wanted to, that he would not wake up, but Elyssa was sure that he would wake up soon. Her birthday was coming up. He never missed her birthday. This certainty seemed to fade the closer she got to him. It was easy to be far away and full of faith.

A biking accident it had been. Mom had been very hush hush about it, but Elyssa was sneaky. She had overheard her talking to Auntie Mae late one night. There had been lots of wine. Someone had driven over Dad in anger. Apparently the driver could not stand that Dad had been cycling on the road. This did not make sense. Who would hate Dad? He was so nice to people— to her.

Looking down at the shape in the bed she saw Dad. His face was a mass of new scars and still open cuts. To her left a pump pushed air, its tubing equipment worming its way between his lips and down his throat. The urge to do something touching tugged at her. A kiss? Hold his hand? Pat his hair? All of the ideas made her skin feel death-touched. Her jaw tightened under the pulling desires of her opposing feelings. *"Love you Dad,"* Elyssa whispered. Self-loathing bubbled up. She felt like a trickster, a fool— a coward. What kind of daughter did not comfort her Dad when he was injured? *An evil one*, she resented.

He would have gone up for her if she had asked. But this time Dad could not do it himself. This was something she could do for him. It was easier to face this fear than the

other. Elyssa took a steadying breath and left his room, leaving the door slightly ajar behind her so he did not feel alone in the complete dark.

Out in the hallway the floor felt cold and the walls distant. To her left the staircase she had just climbed up, on her right bare surfaces devoid of windows and doors. The hallway led to her parent's room and her temporary bedroom. Elyssa slowly brought her head up, like a mother about to see her dead son, to regard her burden. A square trapdoor. Her heartbeat quickened. It loomed over her. Its angles felt jagged— misshapen and hostile. It would consume her if she allowed it. But she had no choice. Looking back at the door to Dad's room she thought of him and she could not touch him. Loathing and resentment slithered around parasitically in her mind. But oh? What was that? They were made of dry wood! She threw them into the smouldering fire slumbering in the bowels of her psyche. *I— I can do this. I need to make Dad proud.*

She unclipped the trapdoor's handle from the wall and with a deep breath began to use it to lower open it. With a groan and what sounded like some ancient seal breaking, the trapdoor opened and like a devil and its tongue, a staircase stretched forth. Hot air rushed into the attic making a gasping noise. Her grip faltered on the handle but she kept going. Elyssa stared up at the mouth that was now affixed to the ceiling. With sinking nerves, she watched as the void's mass expanded with every twirl of the crank. It regarded her as its position over her became greater and greater. A desire to shut her eyes sprouted, but she resisted its growth, knowing it would not help her, that it would only leave her defenceless.

Like someone stretching their knees to crack them, the ladder extended to its full length and landed on the floor with a thud. Elyssa winced, looking back at Dad's room and listened. Through the silence, audible wheezing sounds reached her ears. With a start she realised she had not been looking at the trapdoor. Images of monsters with dead skin and sightless eyes danced in her head. She spun around and glared up at it expecting the worst. The void. Only it was there. Watching her— no not just it, him too. He was up there. Waiting. Raising her hand that held the torch, she flicked on a shaky beam of light. Immediately the darkness was dispelled, and she could see moats of dust sailing about against a backdrop of wood beams holding aloft the roof. *I gotta do this*, she repeated over and over in her mind. Taking a halting first step onto the staircase, she remembered the last time she had been in the attic. It was a year ago. She had left it screaming, avowing never again to set foot up there. He had been there. Waiting till she was utterly alone. Elyssa shivered.

As she crept up her legs became heavier and her joints stiff and difficult to move. The lump in her throat became more swollen and her flashlight less steady. Every planting of her feet was met with the creak of wood as if it too was heady to her fear. It understood her plight and it played a solemn tune to match her march. She reached the lip of the ceiling where it transitioned into the attic, and she paused. This was always a terrible part. The part where you poked your head above and into the attic, giving it over completely to the mercy of whatever was up there— to him. With her heart thumping she exposed her head to the attic's musty air.

Like putting your head underwater, the light below the lip was pushed down by the dark above as her head moved upwards. It left no room for it and smothered her sight completely. It pushed against her eyes and licked at her vision. Suddenly wood rattled and a gust of cold air brushed around her neck. Her breath caught. Somewhere in the darkness a noise had been made. A sound like the meek wailing of someone dying. Elyssa felt sick. It was him— greeting her.

*I'm not coming back here again.* Mom could do this herself next time. She brought her right foot, which now weighed like a boulder, to rest atop the final step. Elyssa realised that she was trembling from head to toe. She put a limp right hand down on the attic floor. The projection of colours caught her eye. A bracelet filled with a kaleidoscope of translucent beads glinted under her torch's light turning the skin around it multicoloured. In the centre was a silver charm. It had belonged to a teddy bear she had received when she was just a toddler. Unfortunately Teebee, its name, had suffered destruction at the hands of Uncle George's dog. The charm was the only thing that had survived and so Dad had attached it to a bracelet. *It's a good luck charm*, she remembered him saying when he had first presented her with it. *Now he'll always be with you forever— to keep you safe.* She touched the silver piece with her forefinger and thumb.

Clenching her teeth she pushed herself up into the realm of the attic. Her feet landed on a wooden board that screamed its protest at having to shoulder someone. According to her parents they had more important things to do than paying a boat load of money to outfit the attic into a proper livable space, and so it had remained barebones, its frame left unprotected and visible to anyone who ventured above. To Elyssa she could not understand. Just get someone to do it for you! And she had been right because one day, when her Mom had tried to grab something, she had placed her foot not on a structural beam but insulation and had shot through. Elyssa's Dad had thought it funny to tickle her Mom's foot a bit before helping her out. This had not gone over well.

So in place of firm flooring, wooden planks had been laid and arranged in pathways that perambulated about the attic like little rivers in an estuary. The gaps that formed between the pathways held clutter that rose up, some of their peaks rising high above her head. It was like walking in a forest of forgotten trash. Instead of trees were cardboard boxes stacked precariously, workout equipment long since discarded, and objects of no discernable use. Their presence suffocated the limited attic space and threatened the order imposed by the pathways.

Elyssa regarded the space around her. Mom had told her the Christmas lights were past a big mirror. If she could find the lights quickly and get out, she might avoid him seeing her. Elyssa let her flashlight stray and jump to different objects. Dark shapes melted away to reveal downhill skis, a pilaster bust of Simon their cat, a decrepit looking microscope, and more. A glint caught her eye. She stopped roving and brought the light to shine back on where it had been a second ago. A silver flash of reflective light caught her torch's beam and bounced it faintly onto the rafters. The mirror. Her light had caught the top of it, the only part visible above the boxes that blocked her sight. It was further into the back of the attic, away from the trapdoor. With awful realisation, it dawned on her that her quest would bring her deep into the attic.

A feeling overcame Elyssa and she swayed a bit. A stone ball had been tied to her ankle and its body cast into the sea, a cruel joke for someone twisted to laugh at. Her heading would bring her in the direction of where he had been last time. She was certain of it. The knowledge of their last encounter was imprinted deeply onto her mind. An old memory flashed in front of her mind's eye, and she shivered. That had not been a fun encounter. In an attempt to escape, she had fallen down the attic. To her surprise, she could still feel the soreness in her forearm from where the impact had broken it.

"Aggh!" a sudden jolt of pain pierced her lip. Elyssa tasted blood. Bringing a finger to her lip she felt a warm liquid, and with shock, realised that it was blood. Her lips began to quiver. Not for the first time today, she was happy Dad could not see her, she liked it when

he called her his brave knight. She did not feel so brave. She looked down at her bracelet and its charm. When Uncle George's dog had torn apart Teebee, Elyssa had rushed in, not bothering to wait for Dad, who had hesitated. She had taken hold of the bear's head and pulled with all her strength, eventually gaining control of what remained of Teebee, which had been a decapitated head and his pendent charm. Although as soon as she had realised what had happened to Teebee she had cried and cried and cried. Dad had called her his brave knight, calling her heroic for rushing in to help her teddy bear. A week later he had given her the bracelet. Needless to say, the whole affair had gotten her into knights and castles, a show called *Merlin* quickly became her favourite. Holding the bracelet, Elyssa was reminded of how strong she had been when Teebee had needed help. It had felt good to stand up to the dog. And now Mom and Dad needed her help. Uncertainty tempered her courage, but she did not let them down.

So she set the flashlight to shine in front of her, licked her lower-lip clean of blood, and pushed forwards. Each step she took produced a groan or creak, the boards whining at being disturbed. A rush of wind buffeted the roof causing the rafters to rattle and, somewhere, a wail escaped, its haunting noise barely heard above the wind. But this time Elyssa did not stop, she kept moving onwards and doing her best to ignore the thrumping of her heart.

To her left and right oddities and boxes soared above her head forming canyon walls. The boardwalk was curving to her left and she followed. As Elyssa pressed forwards, the passage became tighter and tighter, with the tops of the junk teetering dangerously over her. Elyssa was beginning to feel breathless and penned-in when ahead her torch illuminated a widening in the pathway. Seeing free open space, she shot forwards, squeezing and pushing. The walls were pressing towards each other, squishing her body to the point that Elyssa had to walk sideways to avoid continue moving. She stumbled to a halt. Something was holding her shirt, stopping her from trekking onwards.

Peering backwards she saw a lacquered wood stick poking out between gaps in the boxes, at its end was a metal spike that held onto her shirt. Elyssa let out a huff of frustration. She tugged at the walking stick. It did not budge. She tried pushing it back into the folds of junk. It would not move. Standing there, Elyssa realised there was only one way. *Sorry Mom*. She grabbed her shirt and yanked it as hard as she could. A great tearing sound rent the air and she was let go with such a force that she stumbled behind her and into the cardboard walls. For a moment all she heard was a strange rustling sound. Confused, she looked up to see boxes of all sizes wobbled and tipping over. As they fell their contents vomited forth from their loosely taped mouths, blotting out the rafters. Objects hard and soft pommelled her head and body causing bursts of pain to erupt all over her. She cried out and threw herself in the direction of where the opening had been.

All of a sudden the impacts ceased and she felt light air stinging her tender bruises. She landed with a clatter on a rickety board. Her knees lit up like beacons of pain as they scuffed the rough wood beneath them.

As she lay there, feeling the burning of her ribs which had cushioned her fall, she listened to the waterfall of boxes tumble behind her. Twisting around to watch, she saw photobooks, dishware, and eccentric objects shatter, clatter, and spew forth like lava towards her. Looking at the mess unfold, Elyssa knew that her parents would not care. Heck, she could say nothing and they'd be none the wiser. They had left all of these things up here and not once had she seen them take anything down from here save for the Christmas lights or Halloween decorations. The last time they had been up here was when Mom had put her

foot through the ceiling. That had been years ago. The problem, thought Elyssa, was that the sound was deafening. With frightening realisation, Elyssa knew that he must have heard it. He will be ready for her. Ready to drink in her fear and play on her anxieties. All hopes of slinking in and out dashed like the pottery in front of her. A nervous voice chided in her head. She shook her head. *N-no, I'm not leaving without them.* She would find a different way back after she had what she needed.

Elyssa turned around and got up to see a tightly compacted courtyard. Where she could imagine a ground of compacted dirt, disheveled wooden planks were. Instead of cobblestone buildings there were walls of storage containers. She felt somewhere and nowhere. At the far end resting on them was a very tall and narrow mirror. Its frame was surprisingly pretty to look at for something so stowed away. It was carved of a purplish red wood with ornate designs that swirled and flowed around the mirror like water droplets on flower petals. She stared at it for a few long moments— it was a small comfort that clashed with its surroundings. And then the wind shook the roof and a low whine sounded from off behind the mirror, pulling her out of her entrancement.

The solitude of the mirror evaporated, and the courtyard warped, feeling less like a comfort from the claustrophobic pathways and more akin to a cage. Her legs ached to leave this place, and she began to pace about the planks. Mom had said that the lights had been near the mirror, but where? She hopped and lunged across the wood planks, meandering impatiently as if she were a trained figure-skater waiting for a judge. There had to be an opening somewhere. But where?

As she looked about, an oddness settled upon her. It all seemed... different. She could not remember if she had seen this place last time. No, no, she was certain it had not looked liked this. There had been no courtyard. She could not remember the mirror either. How could it be different? Her parents never ventured up here. Yet it all was all wrong. Had she forgotten what it had looked like? The uneasiness festering in her mind grew.

*There!* An opening. It appeared as little more than crack in the wall. It led opposite the direction she had come, and it was on the other side of the mirror. It had to be this way. She walked over to it. The light cast from her torch illuminated a passageway that would only accommodate her if she walked sideways. Everywhere shadows clung to the walls like lichen. She could see only a little ways down as it turned quickly around a bend. Looking down at her feet, Elyssa saw no floorboards to walk on. She would have to lunge from beam to beam.

The beam groaned as she put a tentative step on it. She brought her other foot to rest on it and looked at the next one. A chasm lay between her and the next beam, not a wide one, but a dangerous one. It was to be a game of dexterity, one wrong footing and she was sure she would tumble through the floor and into the space below. She could even die. Her stomach lurched as she sucked all the air in and took a grand step.

It landed on solid wood. Had she closed her eyes? Elyssa could not remember seeing much of anything until she had felt the other side. Resting there a moment, she was reminded of a time when she had gone to a circus. She felt like a gymnast who had never trained.

With a swing she brought her other foot forwards and— it found airy space.

She lurched backwards as her other foot found no purchase, she had not pushed off hard enough to counteract the overextension of her legs. Frantically she grabbed onto whatever her hands could find purchase on. A cool polished feeling brushed her fingers and

she clasped it with all of her desperation. Using what little body strength she had, Elyssa pulled herself away from death and onto the wood beam.

She collapsed against the wall, dazed by the certainty that she had just narrowly avoided her demise. Keeping her hand on whatever she had grabbed to steady herself, she looked over at her saviour. It was a smartly polished desk of sturdy dark brown wood. Emboldened on its side was an “N” emblazoned by leaves with a crown cresting its head. It looked like it was painted in gold. Elyssa wondered why her parents would keep such a beautiful table hidden away when it was clearly far superior to the one they ate on.

She gave a last look at the span she had just traversed, and repositioned herself to continue forwards, her ripped shirt brushing up against the narrow alleyway of odds and ends. She looked at the next beam and this time did not make the same mistake. As she continued on, at times having to duck or climb where objects jutted out, blocking the path, she found herself losing all understanding of where the trapdoor was. The pathway snaked and turned at angles that felt impossible. It double-backed upon itself and turned in ways that should have caused it bisect its own pathway. But wherever she looked there was only forwards and backwards, not sideways.

In the dimmed light that was now being given by her torch, in a place where green mould had sprouted from boxes, and tiny rivulets of water cascaded down their sides, Elyssa wondered whether he had orchestrated all of this. Had her Mom really asked her to go grab the Christmas lights? She had asked her over the phone with its tone that made all voices sound like static. Maybe... maybe it had been him who had asked her? And she had folded—caved to his request! All the while not knowing that it was him who had asked. No, no, no, that would be impossible. The voice on the other side had sounded like Mom. As far as she was aware, he was not capable of mimicking people. Plus the man had never before exerted influence from anywhere outside of his attic.

She reached out a hand let it brush against the walls of her winding pathway. They came back damp and cold. Still, it almost felt like the path was being directed by the will of something. It turned and bent in ways too unnatural to be made by her parents. She touched the soggy mould, or was it moss? How did it come to be here? Had Mom and Dad both left these boxes up here this long?

A wet coldness suddenly splashed over her nose. She looked up to see a tiny rift in the roof, a modicum of pale outside light seeping in. The wind buffeted the roof and she watched as the outline of the opening shook— a whine and a word echoed on the wind.

She jumped around, eyes saucer wide. The word had come from behind her. Her eyes darted around the cramped crack she was slithering through. Elyssa’s skin crawled with prickly spiders at the thought of seeing something in the dark. She hunted with her light, peering as far back as she could. Every illumination of the flashlight pulled at her nerves like a winch. She could see nothing, nothing at all. The noise, it had been him. He was so close. Touching her charm, she turned around and pressed forwards, and prayed for courage in a whisper, “Dad I’m scared. I need you.” The word on the wind, the voice that had spoken— it had sounded an awful lot like, “Elyssa”.

The walls around her were beginning to mount, their tops soaring towards the rafters. Elyssa felt so small compared to everything, like a mouse in a dungeon. She turned a bend and— *An opening!* The tension in her shoulder muscles released a little. She approached quickly, the gap transforming into a rough but small clearing. As Elyssa met the opening, she shone her flashlight at it. No more were the ribs of the floor left bare, here planks of wood furnished much of the ground. The cliffs of boxes that ensconced the small

clearing, appeared weathered and full of mould. For a brief moment as her light scanned the wall, it illuminated colourful letters. She brought her torch back quickly.

Sitting in a wicker chair, was a plastic box with a streak of tape. Written on the tape in red and green lettering were the words, "*Christmas Decorations*". She let out a squeak of joy and rushed towards it. Excitement caught in her stomach and she grabbed the lid and yanked it off. Christmas tree lights and ornaments of all shapes and sizes glinted back at her. *The Christmas lights!! I found them Dad!* Pride swelled in her heart and she let a smile break upon her face. She could not believe they were here in front of her! All she had to do wa—

At that very moment the wind roared to life and a crack of thunder bellowed outside. In fright she jumped, her flashlight flying from her hand and landing off to the side. A low and reedy moan broke over the cacophony emanating from outside. Her stomach turned to poison and her knees went weak. She could not move. Her legs were rooted to the spot. He had caught her, led her here. She had been so stupid, so keen to make her parents proud that she had not checked the entire space. Unable to stop herself, Elyssa marionetted her upper-body slowly enough to face what she knew awaited her.

Illuminated in harsh shadows cast by her torch, was a brutal body made of grey pumice. Its skin was unruly, full of jagged edges and holes that looked like wounds inflicted by some insatiable disease. Two long legs held up a crude body that possessed no features. Its arms splayed out and up in two L-shapes, met their ends turning at thin and sharp fingers. A head too small for its body held a nose little more than a knob, and where two eyes should have been, were two holes, their abysses staring at Elyssa. Its mouth, with was little more than a crude maw, whined, its din rising to a shriek with the wind.

It screamed and howled at her, taunting her into fear with its cries of rage and agony. Not a single noise that escaped its mouth resembles any words she knew— yet she could feel its despair, its disdain for her. It hated her— or maybe this place and resented her for it. She cowered, shaking under the assaults of his noises, unable to compel her muscles into action.

*Dad!! Help! Save me!!* she thought desperately.

At that the wind picked up further and the sounds of the stone man turned into a shrill oscillating howl. The sound— it reminded Elyssa of a time when she had gotten lost in a field of wheat during a windstorm. The stalks had rushed back and forth, the foment of their noise rushing up and down, back and forth, oscillating as if they were ken to her presence, mocking her for being so stupid as to forget the way out. He, he was laughing at her. He found her hope in her father as worthy of scorn, deriding her pleas for help. She begged harder only to be met with greater mockery.

But what if the man was right? Dad was downstairs sleeping, he had not woken up since his accident. What if he never will? What if she would never be able to talk to her Dad again? Her skin crawled like it had when she had thought of touching him. This time it felt like it was trying to tear itself apart in waves that boiled and froze.

The high-pitched laughter of the man cooled to a purring sound, as if pleased by her discovery. She could feel the pleasure it took in her hopeless thoughts. His purr reverberated in her body and she could feel the word it made in her bones. "Alone."

With that her heart plummeted into a chasm. Elyssa began to cry, her despair consuming her soul. *That's why Mom never wanted to talk too much about Dad. She knew he was going to die!* Her throat felt sore and her eyes began to shimmer as she thought of growing up without him.

She let out a sob. *I don't wanna be alone!* And no longer able to keep in all of her doubt and worry that had quietly built up over the months, she cried out, "Don't leave me Dad! I— I need y-you!" And with that she fell into a depression that wracked her body in waves. Above her sobbing she could hear the wailing of the man, his noises like a cruel king elated in his triumph over the happiness of his subjects. As Elyssa sat there, huddled and tearful, time lost all meaning. All she knew were the hopeless thoughts that rushed through her mind like a torrent. They were numbing in their darkness, leaving only a deep ache that felt forever.

She could not lose him. He had always been there to help her, to make things better. These past few months had been the worst months of her life without him. What would she do if he was never going to be there? He was there to listen to her when she was angry or sorrowful. When she hurt herself, he always rushed to help her. He had always been there for her in the past. Without him she would not have something to remember Teebee by—

The thought struck her with the force of a hammer. *Teebee*. A memory came rushing back, its eminence taking hold of her mind's eye, smothering her awareness of the space around her.

Elyssa and her father were in their backyard where a tree as sturdy and tall as a mountain was unfurling its leaves above spring wildflowers. A warm breeze sailed about lazily, its heading unknown to even itself, though surely it believed it to be somewhere under the backdrop of blue that held firm in the sky.

"There, now he'll always be with you." Her Dad had tied the bracelet with Teebee's pendent around her wrist. She began to fidget with the silver.

"What's wrong honey?" he asked warmly. Elyssa mumbled, looking down at her feet, the words too heavy in her mind. "It's alright 'Lyssa, you can tell me." She looked up into his brown eyes. The warm expression on his face was enough to make the words just light enough to ask.

"Will you always be here Dad? To help me?" At that his eyes softened and his eyebrows gentle. "I'll be here for a loooong time 'Lyssa. Long enough to not worry about it." he cooed.

It was the words "long enough" that did not assuage her worry. Behind them was a finality, not an indefinite. They meant that at some point in time he would not be here for her. It left a taste in her mouth that was all-too unpleasant.

"Please Dad don' leave me!" she thrust her arms around his waist, hugging him as tight as she could. Tender bear arms wrapped around her.

"Honey you don't have to worry! You don't." His voice speckled with emotion. "You won't always need me. Someday you'll be as strong as me— stronger than me." His hands patted her back, and he brought her out of a hug to stare into her eyes, "Besides, I'll always be with you. A parent is always with their kid, even when they are not there." His eyes had a shine to them. He delicately poked her chest and then her head, "I'll be there and there. Forever and always." He gave her a kiss on her forehead.

"Y-you sure?" Elyssa's voice trembled.

"Yeaah! I'll be an old aged dinosaur before you have to worry." He screwed his face up in an attempt to mimic the look of a dinosaur. To her it looked more like an ogre she had seen in one of Dad's movies. He made a sound like that of an angry rooster, and proceeding to stomp about in circles, his arms like praying mantis claws. A giggle sprang out of her. He came back around, unscrewing his face, and ruffled her hair with a grin, "Plus, someday you may need to protect me or Mom. And if that should happen then I'm relying on you to be



our saviour.” Elyssa nodded her head vigorously. If that day came, then she would be the bravest knight! Just like King Arthur!

The dissolved with a slap, the attic’s tumult coming back into focus. Rushing wind, water dripping through the roof, the hardness of the wood under the soles of her feet, the roughness of the cardboard on her back, and the stone man screaming with manic glee exploded onto her frayed senses. It was like waking up from a comforting dream only to realise you were broke, your parents were dead, and your moral character was the stuff of villainy. For an overwhelming moment Elyssa was speechless and motionless, until the words of her father came back to her, “...someday you may need to protect me or Mom. And if that should happen then I am relying on you to be our saviour.”

*Saviour.*

Dad wanted her to save him. Help him. The point was not that he may die, it was that he is alive and that is relying on her to help him— and should he wak— no, when he wakes, Elyssa wanted him to know that she did not abandon him in his time of need. Maybe just as importantly, Elyssa wanted to happy knowing she did the right thing.

Suddenly she found strength in her legs and sharpness in her mind. Anger and righteousness swelled up in her conviction and it boiled away the fear and cowardice that had fomented in her stomach. Elyssa was strong. She was no longer going to let this stone man control her. And like a turntable finding a long and deep crack in its record, the pompous wailing of the man snapped to a howl. It was a noise so slick with emotion that it was animalistic in its sound. But through its caterwauling, was a hesitation, an uncertainty. Finding himself backed into a corner the man lashed out in a desperate attempt to strike his quarrel dead and put a swift end to her defiance.

Lighting boomed above and the house quaked violently. A great groan filled the attic and boxes unsettled by the storm toppled over and crashed down. The deafening clang of silver, ear-splitting shatter of crystal glasses, and thunderous cacophony of metal meeting metal rose out to meet Elyssa’s defiance. But steadfast did she remain. No more would she be swayed by the evil doings of him. He held no sway on her anymore. Elyssa had herself, and she was more than enough. More than him.

She put a foot in front of her as trinkets small and large, sharp and blunt, shoved and stabbed at her. The pain was great and their force knocked her about, yet she still put her other foot forward. Down went her feet, their placement sturdy and her heading unwavering. He was losing and he knew it. The wind picked up and his voice reached a shrill scream as fear sailed about like banshees in the air. Such was the loudness of his cry that Elyssa had to cover her ears— but she did not stop moving. Her feet began to pick-up speed as she began to close the gap between them. A rake came loose and fell in her blindspot, snagged her head and cutting deep wounds. The man’s voice howled at her in its reedy voice as if in taunting her for not stopping his blow on her.

Elyssa could feel blood welling up around the fresh cuts. Some of it flowed down between her left eye and nose. She tasted iron in her mouth. She felt the memories of all the times he had made her scared, of the moments when she had felt helpless, and most of all, of how he had made her lose faith in Dad— tricked her into believing his death was inevitable. She felt rage like nothing else erupt in her veins, a rage towards him who had done only wrong to her. The seething anger, uncontainable in its immensity burst forth from her in a scream that outshone the man and his wind— and unable to contain the energy rushing about her body, she ran at him with the speed of a devil.

The stone man's wild yelling turned a low and piercing wail of fear as she leapt into the air at him. Hard stone met soft flesh and the wind was knocked out of her lungs. For a moment Elyssa felt nothing but the fire in her chest, it stretched on for an age and then vanished as if it had not begun, being replaced by a feeling of weightlessness.

The man and her were falling. More precisely, they were falling over. Insulation rushed to encompass her vision.

They were going to miss the floorboards.

Elyssa's only thought as they crashed through the second-floor ceiling was that she hoped it would wake Dad up. A monolithic splintering of wood obliterated any other sound as light from below burst through. For a terrible second it was her speeding towards the floor, the stone man beneath her, and then a sickening splitting thud echoed and for the second time all the air in her lungs were dispelled as she was tossed aside by the impact.

Her vision swam with shadows and tiny iridescent stars as she lay on her back, unable to move and unable breath. Then with some shock she began to cough as oxygen was thrown into her lungs, turning them ablaze. The darkness in her sight slowly washed away as she lay there wobbling between coughing and gasping.

After a while, she found herself capable of more than just wheezing and frowned. *Is that a hole?!* A massive opening now gored the ceiling above her. Light from below streamed in and dispelled some of the shadow that had held sway over it since it had been entombed.

*Mom is going to kill me.* She let out a rasping laugh, spurned on more by relief and adrenaline than anything humorous. Elyssa was alive. She had stood up to him. *Him.* She looked over quickly at the stone man who now rested listlessly next to her, indented into the polished wood floor like a meteorite. His head had cracked off completely. It was nowhere to be seen. A smile broke across her face. An ear to ear, eye crinkling type of grin.

*He's gone.* And now she let out a hearty laugh, not one borne of nerves but of joy. She had protected Dad— and stood up for herself! Elyssa felt calming ecstasy wash over her as she lay there regarding the stone statue that had caused her so much consternation, reduced to nothing.

"What to do now?" she wondered aloud. The realisation hit her. The Christmas lights were still up in the attic. This time she could not help snickering mirthfully. After all this, she had left what she came for back up there. Well, that would not do she thought. She would have to go back and get them. To her surprise, the idea did not scare her. And why should it? What did Elyssa have to worry about? It was only the attic.

First Draft Word Count: 6828