

With the Roc's Divine Protection 3--Connie
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Clarice closed the diary with a fascinated face. Her friends, who were sitting on the stony ground in a circle around the bed looked stunned. Annabelle entered the room and said to the group of four, "hurry up or I'll leave you!"

Nana said, "how is this girl alive? The war between Yab and Haalan ended thousands of years ago."

Asha was in tears and she wiped them away. "This poor girl..."

Jonathan stood up and silently walked over to Annabelle. Clarice followed afterwards, and then Asha and Nana.

Clarice looked down at her feet silently as she walked and followed Annabelle. She felt a little desolate, knowing what she now knew. She was an old woman who had passed up most of her youth with no friends and no family. The Roc felt like her only friend much of the time. In many ways, she was a lot like Asha, who, indeed, had nothing in her life but her prowess with a blade.

Asha was married for many years previously. That man buried his way under her skin and she could never let him go. When he divorced her, Asha focused all her time on swordplay and defending the people of Dru from night beasts in her home town. Because that was all Asha had, she made it her lot in life to become the best swordwoman ever, but she was always being outdone by the others in the group. She got extremely angry when she would spar for fun with Jonathan, Nana, or Clarice and she would always lose. If she had no family or friends, she wanted to at least be the best at fighting, and she didn't even have that anymore when she met Clarice and the rest of the group.

For Clarice it was different though. She didn't really want or have a need to be the best swordswoman in the land; she wanted to have friends and a family, but she was a troubled youth who never got along well with others and began to repulse them until she had finally closed her heart to them entirely for much of her life. She instead chose to protect them with a sword; she could show people she wasn't heartless that way without having to talk to them or become friends with them.

There was a time very recently in which Clarice had had a change of heart. She had grown up and lived among humans for such a long time that she often forgot she was a troll. She gave up being a knight for the past five or so years to live among her troll kindred. They were

creatures who had chosen to live with nature; few of them worked and if they did, it wasn't for money. They chose, instead, to spend their days harvesting food, exchanging stories, sewing, and making practical things to make life easier. They lived in peace in a sort of backwards fashion. Clarice decided she loved it, and although she still didn't have many friends, she felt she wasn't being judged, and managed to open her heart again to other people.

Before that, all she had was the Roc, and she could never quite forget about him. She had no interest in his bird form--an animalistic form in which it often seemed like he had no intelligent thoughts, just basic instincts--she was interested in his human form. He formed intelligent thoughts in that form, and there were two long periods in the history books in which he had stayed human for years upon years before switching back.

Annabelle was present during one of them; judging by the journal Clarice had read, the Roc was in love with this girl, but she did not return his affections. Clarice was furiously jealous.

Jonathan asked Annabelle as they walked, "you knew the Roc, right?"

Annabelle's eyes darted back and forth. She didn't want to talk about this. "No, of course not..."

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. "I won't push you to tell us anything, but that's a blatant lie... We read your diary."

Annabelle was silent. "Please don't talk to me about this... I'm giving you what you want."

Asha chimed in, "we're not judging you, Annabelle. What happened--it wasn't your fault. The Roc just--"

"Stop it! Just stop it!" Annabelle begged.

"You know, none of this would have happened if it weren't for you..." Nana murmured cruelly.

Annabelle ran off then with tears in her eyes. Clarice chided Nana as she dashed after her, "Nana! Learn some manners!"

Clarice followed the younger troll who always seemed to just disappear around corners as she almost caught up to her. Clarice's friends were following quickly after her.

They seemed to have run after the young troll for an hour before, finally, they reached the top of the mountain and Clarice saw Annabelle disappear upwards through the mountain.

When Clarice arrived at the spot she disappeared from, the way upwards appeared to be sealed by a rock. Clarice was angry, more angry than her friends had ever seen her. Her fists shook with anger. This girl threw away the divine gifts offered by the Roc and rejected his affections. Clarice would have died to be in the Roc's eyes and heart--he was willing to give up everything for her, but she still rejected him--Clarice, at the very least, wanted to ask Annabelle why.

Clarice's friends caught up to her and Jonathan put a hand on Clarice's tense shoulder. "Calm down, Clarice. Anger will get you nowhere..."

Clarice took a deep breath. "Sorry, Jonathan..."

Clarice looked upwards at the rocky ceiling through which Annabelle had disappeared. She thought for a moment and decided to simply knock politely on it.

The rock grumbled and was shaking. Clarice stepped aside just as it fell to the ground. Clarice grinned. "Okay... Are you guys ready?"

Her friends looked at her with little smiles of their own.

Clarice stepped up on the fallen piece of rock that had fallen and enjoyed the wind that was filtering down from the open hole in the ceiling above. She hopped up and grabbed the upper ledge--her legs dangling down in the cave for a moment as she hauled herself up. She reached down into the mountain to help the rest of her friends up.

Once they were all up on the mountain, Clarice and her friends noticed that the night beasts had thankfully gone.

Clarice breathed a sigh of relief with her eyes closed.

Asha yelled, "Clarice look!"

Clarice turned around and saw a gigantic glass egg, bigger than a house, in front of her. It appeared to be empty, but Clarice noticed something inside of the egg.

She clapped a hand to her mouth in horror. Annabelle was inside of the egg. "What is going on?"

Her friends had no answer for her. All they could do was look at the girl in the glass egg and gawk.

Was the Roc never real at all? Was it just this troll girl the whole time?

Clarice refused to accept that. She knocked on the glass egg angrily. "Wake up!"

When Annabelle didn't wake up, she pounded her fists all the harder and still yelled, "wake up!"

She could hear her friends trying to quell her rage--trying to pull her off of the egg--but Clarice finally got fed up and unsheathed her blade. She plunged the blade as hard as she could into the glass egg.

At first, it looked like nothing was going to come of it--but then the egg began cracking slowly. A crunching sound filled their ears as the crack spread all around until the glass structure shattered into pieces like an eggshell.

The troll inside shifted into a gigantic, white bird that looked like a dove. A beautiful, ivory creature that shone even in the night. It collapsed out of the glass shell, still sleeping.

Clarice was still angry, but she sheathed her sword. She began to calm down slowly. The Roc was real.

She had tears in her eyes, as did Jonathan.

Jonathan approached the bird and touched its head joyously. "I found him, Miranda..."

Jonathan had an Elfen wife by the name of Miranda who worshipped the bird frequently and who had passed ten or so years ago. Since then, Jonathan had wanted to fulfill the promise he made to his wife of finding the bird for the both of them. He had done it, and regardless of what came after, he was overjoyed to have fulfilled the wishes of the one most dearest to him.

Clarice joined Jonathan and wondered if the bird was alive. She was sweating with fear that he wasn't. Asha and Nana were examining the bird curiously. They all couldn't help but bury their hands in the creature's extra soft feathers.

Suddenly, the Roc shook and one of his big red eyes opened, and then the other. He reared up and cawed ferociously. He focused on Clarice and snapped at her. Clarice held out a hand and said, "calm down! We're not here to hurt you!"

The beast seemed mad; he was not like the stories at all. He snapped at Clarice's hand and nipped it a little, drawing blood. He snapped at it one more time and Clarice held his face in her hands. The creature stopped for a moment, and Clarice cooed soothingly. "Would Annabelle like this type of behavior?"

The Roc cooed back at that and shuffled down into a sitting position. He closed his eyes. Clarice's friends looked deathly afraid. The top of the mountain was only just big enough for all

of them to stand on, and the Roc could push them all off easily. Clarice gently pet the creature's head and the blood that was on her hand smeared onto the Roc's head.

Nana was at her side, overcoming her initial fear. Her bird friend held out a clawed hand and grabbed Clarice's wrist. "You're hurt..."

Nana put her pack down and rummaged through it until she found a piece of cloth to wrap Clarice's hand in.

The group spent minutes with the Roc, who would not shift into a form that could hold a conversation. Clarice was still trying to soothe the creature with soft words, and the rest of the group were on the lookout for night beasts.

Hours past, and the group all cautiously leaned against the Roc, exhausted. After eating some dry biscuits from their packs, Clarice told her friends they could sleep if they wished. They did so.

Clarice stayed up with the Roc. She said to him, "I've waited to meet you for a long time. I scoured the world searching for any information I could on you. You've been my friend longer than anyone, even if you didn't know it. I want to speak with you. That is my greatest wish. I need you to be human for that... I promise, no one here will harm you."

The Roc made no motion of appearing to understand her. It was breathing harshly, however. Clarice noticed that, in comparison to the paintings she had seen of him, his feathers were dirtier and had lost some of their sheen. She wondered what had happened to him.

She sighed. "I'll stay as long as it takes."

Late into the everlasting night, the Roc finally gently shifted into a troll. It was Annabelle. Clarice's friends were asleep, but she was not. She had a sour look on her face as she looked at Annabelle. She didn't want to speak with Annabelle, she wanted to speak with the Roc's true human form--the ivory man.

Clarice said to his Annabelle form gently, "there you are... I have some things to ask you."

"I don't want to talk to you!" He said with tears in his eyes. "I won't talk to any of the creatures of Dru ever again!"

Clarice glowered angrily. "Look at the sky! It has been night for decades while you cower here and abandon the people who loved and worshipped you! You owe us an explanation and a talk!"

Clarice's friends woke up with all of her yelling. Jonathan wiped the sleep out of his eyes and smiled. He sat up and said to the Roc, "you're a troll again... I have so many things to ask you about... I've been cracking eggs on your altars for twenty years, and I finally get to meet you."

The Roc glanced over at Jonathan, but said nothing. He tried to dash off in his Annabelle form, but Nana grabbed his arm. "You're not running away! Tell us why you abandoned us and left us at the mercy of the Wicked Goddess and her night beasts! I lost a sibling to that horror!"

The Roc looked at Nana angrily. "You should have taken better care of your sibling. I am not here to babysit you people. You have always asked too much of me and depended on me far too much--and when I ask for something in return, you deny me! I am done being your tool to give affections to when you feel like and take them away at a moment's notice!"

Nana growled, shoved the Roc to the ground and pinned him there with one of her bird legs. "You will battle the Goddess for us, or else!"

Asha was aghast at how Nana was treating their god. She shoved Nana off of him and yelled, "what is wrong with you? You think he will help us if you threaten him?"

Jonathan was also disgusted by Nana's actions, but he tried to calm the situation down. "You two need to be good and kind, we must show the Roc..."

"Quiet Jonathan! You pretend to be good and kind but we know you've killed more individuals than both of us have combined in that war you fought in! You came here to throw yourself at the Roc's mercy and beg him to let you into the Warm and Good Place with your wife when you die!" Asha said contemptuously.

The Roc crossed his arms and clinked his eyes with a shake of his head and a frown on his face. "Disgusting."

Clarice watched her group break out into a fight with horror in her eyes. They were always such a good team. She thought when they met the Roc, it would bring them even closer together, not break them apart. She yelled above the din of fighting, "everyone settle down! We're here to convince the Roc to help!"

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Clarice took a deep breath and approached the Annabelle-Roc meaningfully. "What will it take to convince you to fight with us against the Wicked Goddess?"

The Roc breathed deeply with tears stinging his eyes and a dark expression on his face.
"Prove you're worthy!"

Clarice asked calmly, "how?"

"Show me the progress you have made without me! Show me that you are different than you were when I closed my heart!" The Roc challenged. "Do something kind for me that no one else can do!"

Clarice raised a blond eyebrow. "Like what?"

The Roc crossed his arms and thought. "Tell me a story about the peoples of Dru that makes them worth saving."

"You tell me!" Clarice retorted, confronting the Roc angrily. "You take the form of Annabelle, a girl you loved! Tell me why she's so special to you? What was it about her that made her worth immortalizing in your form and your heart forever!"

The Roc looked panicked. "Don't bring her up! How did you know about her?"

"We read Annabelle's diary--we just met you in her form hours ago!"

The Roc shook his head. "I don't remember that... I've been in the egg the entire time."

Nana yelled, "no you haven't! Stop being a coward and help us!"

The Roc covered his face in his hands and lost control of his Annabelle form. He shifted back into his gigantic bird form.

He cawed ferociously and snapped wildly at anything in sight. Clarice tried to quell him again, but this time, he flew off--almost losing balance as he went. He disappeared behind dark clouds in the distance.

Clarice clapped a hand to her mouth with tears in her eyes. She turned to Nana. "What is wrong with you! We have to get him to help us!"

Nana was shocked at Clarice's tears. She had never made her friend cry before. Clarice was their well-respected leader who they thought was made of iron. Nana never wanted to make her friend cry. "I'm sorry."

Clarice wiped her eyes. "It's okay... I was so excited to finally meet him and this is how he reacts. This isn't how I imagined him."

Jonathan put a hand on her shoulder. "He's in a bad spot right now. It's unfair to expect him to be perfect and kind all the time. We need to be kind and patient with him."

The Roc had flown off with madness enveloping his heart. War was in his eyes, the girl, Annabelle, was in his heart. Neither of which he could forget.

Clarice told her friends to go back to sleep. She stayed up, waiting for the Roc to come back. She told her friends that it would be better for her to try and calm the Roc by herself--so he wouldn't be so overwhelmed. She remembered he was very shy. She remembered he often needed to be treated kindly from what she had read about him.

Clarice was exhausted. But she made a fire and let her arms dangle off her knees while she waited for the Roc to come back--if he came back at all.

And, he did come back. He clumsily landed near Clarice, moaning softly. Once the Roc settled down, she asked him, "what happened to your trueform? The boy?"

The Roc was listening, but did not shift back into a form that could respond.

"Why don't you tell me about why you shut your heart? Tell me why the people of Dru have done you wrong? You said we only love you when you are giving us gifts; that love is conditional. It was never conditional for me. It has always been unconditional. I was in love with that ivory man. I still am. I can't take that love away--I never have been able to. I've been alone this whole time. I have rejected the affections of men because they could never compare to you. Is the ivory man your true heart? Is it the Roc? Or is it this Annabelle girl?"

The Roc slowly shifted into Annabelle again and he said to Clarice, "everyone thinks the ivory man is my trueform--that it belongs to me--it does not. I was just a bird before he came along. An intelligent bird, but a bird nonetheless. One who lived with a master who hatched me."

Long, long ago, when there were hardly any individuals inhabiting the Land of Dru, an old, bearded, obsidian wizard was exploring incredibly long grass of Yab. Somewhere deep in the grass, he found a humongous glass egg which contained a gigantic baby bird inside. The wizard looked upon it curiously. He had never seen such a thing in his life.

He took his walking stick and tapped the glass egg with it. He didn't want to hurt the creature, but he also wanted to meet it. It certainly seemed to be done forming.

He slammed his walking stick into the ground and thunder sprang forth and cracked the egg which shattered around the bird who flopped out and began hopping around.

The bird was about the size of the wizard, but with a much thicker width. Its ivory feathers shone and sparkled, and its big red eyes were captivating. The obsidian wizard calmed the hopping bird by putting his hands on the bird's cheeks. "There, there... My, you are special, aren't you?"

The bird twitched its head to the side, looking around wildly. The wizard smiled. "I shall keep you safe. You are more powerful than any creature in the entire world and people will hurt you to get that power. Come along with me, and I will be your father. You shall have all the love in the world. You shall be called Roc."

The wizard warped both he and the Roc to a large stone cave opening in the side of a stony mountain. A boy--perhaps six or seven--ran up to Roc who had just appeared in the cave and asked his father, "daddy, who's this?"

"This is your new brother, Roc. Be good to him while I'm gone, boy." The wizard said.

The boy looked at his new brother with wide eyes. The boy was ivory like the Roc was. "So your name is Roc? My name is Connie."

The Roc understood very little at this point. He listened to his new brother while hopping around the small cave space and looking around wildly at his surroundings.

Connie smiled. "You're all cramped up in here! Lets go outside."

Connie walked outside of the cave opening in the mountain and walked down the soft incline to the soft grass awaiting them below. Clouds were covering the blue sky, and it was threatening to rain. Connie was excited. "I love it when it rains! Come on!"

Soon, rain was coming down pretty hard. Connie and the Roc dashed out under the rainy sky and ran around in the puddles of rain that were forming.

Connie said to his brother, "hey! Let's play a game! I'll tag you, and then you tag me, okay?"

The Roc didn't know what he meant at first, but after a few repetitions of Connie showing him, he understood. They played together in the rain for what felt like hours.

Eventually, the obsidian wizard found them and shook his head with a disappointed expression. "Come now children. Let's get you washed up for dinner."

The wizard led his children to the opposite side of the mountain in which there was a circular indentation in the ground large enough for both the Roc and the boy to submerge themselves. The wizard slowly dumped a vat of hot water into the indentation until it was filled.

The wizard read a book as Connie scrubbed the Roc's feathers clean with a brush. The Roc playfully splashed his new brother with warm water and Connie giggled and splashed him back.

Eventually, they accidentally splashed the obsidian wizard with hot water. The wizard shook with anger, but said nothing.

Connie hung his head. "Sorry, daddy."

"You shall receive your punishment after this, Connie."

They grew up together. Connie was the Roc's best and only friend. There was no one he loved more in the world.

Connie learned everything from his father--how to cook, clean, read, and how to solve mathematical problems. Connie then passed that information to the Roc when the obsidian wizard wasn't looking. Above all else, the obsidian wizard never wanted the Roc to learn things that made him smarter. He gave the Roc plenty of love and affection, but never would he teach him anything.

If Connie got caught doing anything bad, he would be severely punished for it. The Roc would never be punished. Connie often had bruises on his arms or legs or would often have a black eye if he were caught teaching the Roc something. If his chores and homework were not done by the time the obsidian wizard came home, he would pay the price threefold. One such incident happened when Connie was fourteen.

"Does this floor look clean to you?" He asked Connie threateningly.

"I'm sorry, I lost track of the time while playing with Roc and..."

"You spilled sauce all over the ground here!" The wizard grabbed Connie's arm and slapped his face.

Connie didn't cry. He looked down at his feet with two blinks and a frown and then began cleaning up the mess. The Roc attempted to help him by using his tail feathers to sweep and picking up the noodles left on the cave floor with his beak but Connie said to him with a smile, "you'll get me into more trouble."

The Roc frowned and nestled down, feeling overwhelming sadness for his brother.

Everyday, the obsidian wizard would disappear for hours at a time. The Roc and his brother had no idea what he might be doing. When he had gone that day, the adolescent Roc found his big brother sitting in the grass and nestled down next to him.

Connie was crying bitterly. "He likes you a lot more than me..."

The Roc wrapped his brother in a wing and Connie embraced the big bird's neck. "I don't know where I'd be without you... Do you want to run away with me?"