

# INDIEBITES

9: CASTLES & CURSES

FANTASY STORIES WITH TEETH



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## Letter from the Editor

Welcome to this quarter's issue! This time, we're all about castles and curses – in these pages you'll find sleeping princesses and hard-working witches, dramatic vampires and righteous adventurers, and all the curses (and blessings!) that lurk around a royal residence.

In fact, this quarter's themes seem to have sparked a huge variety of interpretations, and so you may notice that this is our longest issue yet, with ten fantastic stories for you to enjoy. While some of our authors take inspiration from classic fairy tales or literature, others have opted for a more modern setting – you'll find *Sleeping Beauty* and the *Lady of Shalott* rubbing shoulders with tabletop RPG characters and vampires surviving after the fall of civilisation. Some stories are fluffy, and some darker, but I hope you enjoy each and every one!

Your editors have, as usual, been very busy even when we haven't been putting together this extra-long issue! I'm still working on my *Spring and Autumn District Witch* stories, but I've also started plotting out my first full-length rom-com, which I'm hoping to start writing over the summer holidays – I don't want to say too much at this stage, but if you've enjoyed my lighter stories like *Unfinished Business* (from our *Ghosts and Guilds* issue), then this one should be right

up your street! Josie continues to work on *Winta's Day*, the next book in the Seekers series, as well as her own Spring and Autumn short stories for the *Once Upon A...* anthologies.

On the reading side of things, I've been really enjoying Casey L Blair's Tea Princess Chronicles – the first book is *A Coup of Tea*, and it's a really wonderful, cosy-feeling coming-of-age tale about a princess who leaves her royal life behind to become a master of magical tea. I've also just finished up *Nectar for the God* by Patrick Samphire, the second book in his Mennik Thorn series, which is a quirky mystery set in an Ancient Greece-inspired fantasy city – it feels like a classic urban fantasy, but it's wholly second-world, and full of a great balance of humour and adventure. Josie's favourite indie read this quarter was *The Bachelor's Valet* by Arden Powell (who also has a story in this issue!), which is a wonderful fantasy romance. She thought the characters were great – particularly the deeply endearing main character – and the dialogue was fizzy and fun. If you're looking for a light, escapist m/m romance, it's just the thing!

So that's what we've been up to – and we'd love to hear what indie fantasy you've been loving over on our social channels!

Now, let's get cursed. There's plenty here to sink your teeth into.

*Adie Hart*

## *Anthology Editor*

Our next issue is *Tricksters and Treasure*, and submissions are open now. Submissions are also now open for our August issue, *Elves & Etiquette*. If you're an indie author or illustrator who'd like to contribute to one of our upcoming issues, then check out our submissions page [here](#). We'd love to have you on board.

A note on language: We are a UK publication, but we accept work from authors all over the world. We retain each author's version of English as written, so pieces from US authors appear in US English, and pieces from UK authors appear in British English etc.

## Meet Author Talli L. Morgan



Talli L. Morgan lives in upstate New York and works as a librarian. They received their Bachelor's Degree in English from Allegheny College, where they spent two years as an editor for the student-run literary magazine. When they're not writing, Talli enjoys drawing, photography, and painstakingly reorganizing

their bookshelves. They firmly believe that buying books and reading them are two entirely separate hobbies, and they are certainly better at one of those things over the other.

The Oracle Stone (2021) was their first published book, but rest assured they have written many others.

**Welcome to Indie Bites! This issue we're talking about castles and curses, so why don't we start by talking about the central curse in *The Oracle Stone*?**

Hi Indie Bites! I'm very excited to be featured in this issue. Who doesn't love castles and curses and cursed castles in their fantasy stories? I often find myself featuring curses of some sort in many of my books; I think they're fascinating to explore. One of the main characters of my book *The Oracle Stone* suffers a curse that, on the surface, doesn't seem so bad, but which is actually rather agonizing. Jekku is burdened with the ability to see across time; he essentially has all the knowledge in the universe crammed into his head, allowing him glimpses of the past and future whenever he touches an object or looks another person in the eyes. He ended up in this predicament after sort of asking for it; thirsty for knowledge, he begged a notoriously tricky sorcerer to give him the ability to find any answer he sought, and... well, in a way, that's what he got, but to a terrible extreme.

**Surprise! You've become a royal in a fantasy kingdom overnight – what's your castle like?**

The dramatic side of me says something gothic and spooky, but let's be real, I enjoy sunlight and warmth too much to find myself in a dark, secluded castle. So I'm going to say my castle is somewhere tropical, with lots of open courtyards, palm trees, ponds, and gardens. I'm thinking Greek-like architecture: columns and domes and whatnot. And there's got to be a giant library, of course! With secret doors and hidden passageways, obviously. Can you tell I've thought about this before?

**How did you get into self-publishing? What's your favourite thing about it?**

I chose the self-publishing route after several years of slogging through the query trenches with little luck. I never saw self-publishing as a backup plan or a last resort or anything like that; rather, it was another option that I was aware of yet had never considered. A series of query rejections had worn down my confidence in my writing, and I was almost ready to give up on *The Oracle Stone* entirely until I decided to do some research and pursue self-pub. *The Oracle Stone* was the obvious choice for my debut; it's a book that has been special to me for a long time, and I had a feeling that even if it didn't find a place in traditional publishing, it might be a good fit for indie.



And that is actually my favorite aspect of this circle of publishing; indie books don't need to follow a recipe of what the industry deems marketable. There isn't as much pressure to write and produce books that follow a certain trend. That freedom to write what you want without cramming it into a certain structure or series of tropes makes *such* a difference, and makes for many, many unique books.

### **What does your typical self-publishing process look like?**

My publishing timeline typically doesn't start until I have an almost-finished version of the book. I can't choose a publication date or organize my pre-publication tasks until I know for sure when the book will be finished, so I won't even announce it until it's ready or almost ready for my beta readers. Once the manuscript is with my betas, I work on marketing materials, cover design, and setting everything up in KDP. Then I make any last-minute revisions with feedback from betas, and then mostly it's just promo promo promo right through release day!

I would say this process takes me about 5 months total, not counting the time it takes to actually write the book. But it varies with every book, depending on its length and the extent of the edits I need to make. I do indeed do everything myself, from editing and formatting the manuscript to designing the covers and creating my own promo materials.

**If you had to put a minor curse on a nemesis, what would you pick to really annoy them?**

Something really evil, like “your coffee will never be the right temperature,” or “there’s always a tiny pebble in your shoe.”

**Have you read any good indie fantasy lately?**

As a matter of fact, I have! I recently finished *City of Strife* by Claudie Arseneault, which I LOVED. It’s an epic and intricate political fantasy with an excellent cast, and it had me so enthralled that I read almost the entire book in one sitting. I have also recently enjoyed *The Man and the Crow* by Rebecca Crunden – a short yet exciting little slice of magic – and *Dirt-Stained Hands, Thorn-Pierced Skin* by Tabitha O’Connell – a queer fantasy-romance retelling of Beauty and the Beast.

**What’s in store for your readers next?**

My next release is the first book in a new epic fantasy trilogy, coming out May 2! *Truthseeker* follows the origin story of a side character from *The Oracle Stone* who is known as a legendary hero. But before they got roped into saving the world, Saevel Balnorin merely wanted to solve the mystery surrounding their brother’s death and ensure the monsters that killed him were gone for good.

This series leans more YA than my other books,

with the main character being a teenager, but I think it'll appeal to anyone who enjoys magic-filled adventure with an element of mystery and intrigue. It is in the same universe as my other Windermere books, but can be read on its own! I've had a lot of fun writing this one, and I'm very excited to share it.

**We're definitely looking forward to it! Thanks for joining us!**

# Short Fiction

# A Curse Is on Her If She Stay

Lila Gwynn

There were three things that the witch in the tower knew for certain: she could not leave; she could not look out the window; and she could not permit anyone to see her face.

A giant mirror occupied one of the four walls she called her home. Through it, the witch cheated on the conditions of her curse as she watched people travel up the river to the high-stretching castle in the distance. She kept her fingers busy at her loom, weaving the images from the mirror in poor imitation, and she told herself she was happy.

She especially loved to weave in late summer, when the sun would turn the river water golden and raucous knights would pass by singing their songs. She sang with them when she could, remembering ballads from her youth before her old village had stuck her in the tower. With a mind of their own, her fingers wove threads to dot the trees in the distance with ruby-ripe apples she imagined there, capturing

the passing knights with gleaming armor, the grass lush and fragrant, the castle and its surrounding city glistening silver. In barren months, she could gaze upon the tapestries she'd woven in summer and dream of better times and smell, faintly, the breeze that would come through the window with its scent of flowers.

It was a late summer afternoon when, humming to herself, the witch heard a sound coming not from outside but from within – footsteps.

Hurriedly, the witch left her loom and donned her veil. It was not often she got visitors; several years had passed since the last. The magic of the curse was supposed to keep out those who meant her harm or those who would tempt her to break it. Under the veil, the world was even more obscured, just shapes and colors through thin, gray fabric. She stood at attention and waited for her visitor to come so she could send them off screaming.

After all, everyone was scared of the witch in the tower.

The knock at her door was gentler than she'd expected. "Go away," called the witch, "or I will hex you."

The person on the other side of the door gasped. The witch awaited the usual response – the quick pitter-patter of feet as her undesired visitor fled – and it did not come.

Curious, the witch approached the door. There was

no peephole for her to see out, because she was not supposed to see out at all. She held her ear to the wood and waited for the unwelcome guest to leave.

“You haven’t hexed me yet,” the person said. Their voice was young and bright, like the peal of a bell. It struck something deep in the witch’s heart.

She unlatched the door, and a goddess walked in.

The woman’s beauty hit the witch like a physical force, and she was suddenly glad for the veil that kept them apart. Her guest was dressed in an elegant emerald dress. Hair the color of chestnuts was braided above her head like a crown, and she had rounded cheeks that dimpled when she smiled.

No one had smiled at the witch in a very long time.

“So there *is* a witch up here,” said the princess – for the witch was now sure she was a princess, with her fine dress and her beauty. “They said that you were just a legend.”

The witch did not know what to say to this.

“Is the inability to speak a condition of your curse?” asked the princess.

“You can’t be here,” the witch sputtered. “You must leave.”

The princess did not go. Instead, she stepped farther into the room which contained the witch’s entire life and gawked. “Such vibrant colors in here,” she said.

Embarrassment overwhelmed the witch, making her warm under her veil. She did not tidy the room

because she was its sole inhabitant. “It is just a tower,” she said stiffly. “Everything is gray.”

“Is it?” the princess asked, pointing to one of the witch’s summer tapestries with awe. “You’ve made it beautiful.”

The witch put herself in the princess’s delicate shoes and saw how the room looked to her – the tapestries coating every spare inch of wall, rich swathes of fabric draped over every surface, the things that occupied the witch’s time scattered everywhere. Her spinning wheel, her loom. The princess spun about the room and stopped at the mirror.

“Oh,” said the princess. “This is how you see out.”

“Pardon me,” the witch said, flustered. “I would never enter *your* home and make uncalled-for observations.”

The action came across entitled, like a princess’s would be. Apologetically, the princess bowed her head. “You’re right, of course. How rude of me. My name is Anima. Please, if you will, witch, what is yours?”

The witch did not answer. She would not offer her name to a stranger, for she knew the power of names. “I can’t say,” she said instead, since the princess seemed unfamiliar with the true conditions of her curse.

Anima’s disappointment was apparent in her expression. “Do you get sick of being stuck here all day?”



“Would you?” the witch countered irritably. She could not help but feel like she was letting this stranger down, and it bothered her.

“Yes.” Anima approached the summer tapestry on the wall, tapping a finger to her chin. “Yes, I would. But it is very interesting in here.”

“Now that you’ve fulfilled your curiosity, perhaps you should leave.”

Anima ducked down and plucked an object from the witch’s table. She held it up to a ray of sun coming in through the windows. When light hit the object, rainbows cascaded over the walls. Anima’s brow furrowed. “What’s this?”

“Don’t touch that!” the witch snapped. She marched up to Anima and stole it back. “This is a diamond entrusted to me by a very noble knight. I have to return it when he comes to visit me again.”

Anima’s expression cleared and she laughed. The witch hated her – her entitlement and her touching of things that didn’t belong to her and her interference with the witch’s routine. “Knights visit you all the way up here?”

With reverence, the witch situated the diamond back on its velvet display cushion – the finest thing in her possession. “Just one,” she said.

“Which one?”

“It does not matter.”

When Anima turned this time, the witch caught a flash of skin through the shoulder of her dress. A tear.

Her nimble fingers itched to fix it. “What happened to your dress?” she asked in spite of herself.

Anima reached for the hole in her dress. “Goodness,” she said. “I must have got caught on something when I climbed the tower.”

The witch huffed. “I will mend it, and then you must leave.”

“If you insist,” Anima said, grinning impishly.

As the witch located her mending needles, an idea gave her pause. She did not know what would happen if she violated the curse, but she wouldn’t need to if she passed it on to someone else.

She turned back to Anima with a change in demeanor. Clearly, Anima was not as scared of her as she should have been. She was unsuspecting – dangerously curious.

The perfect victim to pass the curse to.

Thoughtfully, the witch threaded her needle with emerald thread. She required something of Anima’s with which to tie the curse. Anima waited patiently as the witch mended the tear. And while the witch mended, she schemed.

“Is that better?” she asked Anima.

Anima ran her fingers along the new seam. When her hand stilled, the witch stabbed the needle into Anima’s finger.

Anima jerked away, causing the witch to slip. The sewing needle pricked the skin of her own arm as Anima jumped to her feet.

The witch bit her lip. The needle did not hurt, not really. When she looked up at Anima, she saw the other woman holding out her forefinger, a bead of glistening red blood welling at its tip.

And before the witch could figure out how to get the blood from her, Anima stuck out her pink tongue and wicked the blood away.

The witch stood frozen for a moment, replaying the flash of pink between Anima's plump lips, her wet tongue tracing over the tip of her finger. Heat flared in the witch's stomach. She looked away.

"Thank you for fixing it," Anima said. "Don't mind the needle. It happens."

The witch rubbed away the blood that welled on her own skin, identical to Anima's, and shuddered.

If she could not get the girl's blood, she needed something else. "I have a proposition for you."

"Oh?" Anima said. She stood from the bed and stretched.

"I will tell you my name," said the witch, "if you bring me some things with you the next time you come."

It was a gamble; no one had ever visited the witch twice. But she wanted enough time to earn this princess's trust.

"Really?" Anima asked. "You'll tell me your name?"

"Yes," the witch said confidently.

Anima's brow lifted in challenge. "And I suppose

whatever you ask me to bring you will be impossible to find, won't it?"

How the witch wished to stab her again with a needle. "It would be a waste of my time and yours if I sent you out for things you couldn't bring me."

"You seem like a woman who doesn't waste her time," Anima said with a sparkle in her eye.

"I need more wool for my weaving." She did not expect Anima to question this or ask how she got the wool she had now; the girl did not seem very bright, bothering witches in their towers. "And a lock of your hair."

That was the one, she thought, most people were wary of giving a witch.

Anima considered this. "Nothing else?"

"No," said the witch. "Nothing else."

"It should be three things. Are you sure there is nothing else?"

The witch was stumped by this. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Magic always works in threes. Or it does in fairy tales."

"I know more about magic than a fairy tale," the witch said, indignant. And when she saw the expression on Anima's face – the satisfaction – she knew she had fallen into a trap of her guest's devices. She had given Anima the reaction she wanted.

The witch did not like this, either.

"Very well." Anima meandered back over to the

table and toward the window. As always, the witch was tempted to look out, too – but she had been resisting the impulse for nine years, and she could resist it some more. “I will be back with wool and a lock of my hair.”

The witch licked her lips. “Couldn’t you provide the hair now?”

“No, no,” Anima said. “If I am bringing you spell ingredients, they should all be together, shouldn’t they?”

A game; Anima wanted the witch to divulge her intentions. Unfortunately for Anima, the witch was allowed to reveal little of herself and wished to show even less.

But she was not used to talking to people, and she let her desperation slip. “When will you be back?”

“When I can,” Anima said, knowing that the witch would wait for her.

“Go, then, and get what I asked.”

With her hand against the doorway, Anima paused. “I know you didn’t do it.”

A sour taste crept into the witch’s mouth. “Do what?”

“You didn’t hurt anyone in that village. Or, not intentionally.”

“Of course I didn’t,” the witch said bitterly. “It was an accident.”

Anima looked down as she nodded. “I thought so.” Without saying goodbye, she began to descend the

stairs.

The witch stood there for a time without closing the door. Long enough for her strange guest to make her way down the winding stairs the witch had only climbed once. And then she rushed to her mirror and found an angle where she could see the river that wound up to the castle. She waited for a glimpse of chestnut curls and emerald. A horse, maybe, if the girl had taken one all the way here just to see her.

The woman did not appear in the mirror. Instead, the witch made out workers in the barley fields, the reapers and their wives.

Defeated, the witch sat at her table. She reached for the familiar contours of the diamond, her most precious possession, and her fingers encountered air, and then velvet.

The diamond was missing. The empty velvet cushion seemed to mock her. And though it was not really important, the witch felt like part of herself had been stolen.

And then she remembered that the king and queen in the castle had no daughter.

Anima's visit haunted the witch for months.

The images in the witch's mirror grew pale with the changing of the seasons. There were no lush trees to weave, and fewer knights. Green thread – her favorite color – piled up in taunting spools, unused. A chill came in through the window, seeping into the

witch's bones and making her feel all kinds of unpleasant things. She could not help but check the mirror, and then check it again, for a woman with chestnut hair and a jewel-green dress. The unlikeliness only made her hope for it more.

The witch imagined how she would confront Anima if she did return, false conversations filling her mind. She imagined touching the soft skin of Anima's cherub-like face. Getting the diamond back. Gaining her trust. Most of all, she imagined how Anima would react to her once she had passed on her curse like a mantle for Anima to bear. Would she finally regard the witch with the fear and hatred that the witch had once seen on the faces of her own family?

On the day when the witch first used her white thread for snow, she truly admitted to herself that she'd never see Anima again. That, somehow, the woman knew about the diamond and had come to collect it from the tower. The diamond was all she'd wanted, and now that she'd taken it, she had no reason to come back.

No one ever came back.

She allowed herself to forget about the not-princess, at least for a while. And because the witch had nearly forgotten her, she was not prepared when Anima returned.

The witch had been singing to herself as she wove and did not hear the footsteps coming up the stairs. Or maybe she did hear them, but dismissed them as her

hopeful imagination. It did diverge from reality sometimes.

The knock, she did recognize. She hurried to don her veil once more, nerves and hope and dread twisting her heart into knots. Every rehearsed conversation vanished from her memory.

“Witch?” the visitor called in Anima’s voice. “Are you there?”

“Of course I am here,” answered the witch. “Where else would I be?”

Anima stepped through the door. The witch had never locked it when Anima left last time. Anima appeared exactly as the witch remembered her – the chestnut hair, braided up over her head, and the same emerald dress. In one hand, Anima held a parcel, and in the other, a bundle of cloth.

Before, the witch should have known that Anima was not truly royalty. The dress was more threadbare than she thought, worn down far past what would be acceptable for a princess. It was frayed at the hem. She had seen the biggest tear and mended it, but the dress was riddled with repairs now that she looked for them.

The witch had only *wanted* her to be a princess.

“You stole my diamond,” the witch accused as Anima held out the parcel.

“Yes,” said Anima. “I am not who you think I am.”

“Who are you, then?”



“A common thief.” The admission did not seem to bother her. “I thought you would have something valuable up here, and I was right.”

“Where is the diamond?”

“I sold it, of course.” Anima jiggled the parcel. “Aren’t you going to take the gifts you requested?”

“You had no right to do that,” the witch said, shaking with anger. “I have to return the diamond to its owner, and now I cannot.”

“He has left you up here for nine years,” Anima said. “Do you really think he is coming back?”

“You came back,” the witch said quietly, and then wished she hadn’t.

Anima’s dark eyebrows rose in surprise. Hastily, the witch took the parcel from her and opened it. It was light, and the witch was not surprised to see the pale fuzziness of wool within. Anima had probably stolen it from some poor shepherd’s flock. It was not as fine as the dyed wool that the curse’s magic refilled every time her supplies ran low.

“And the hair?” asked the witch.

Anima removed a pin from her coiffure. Loose, wavy hair unfurled around her shoulders and over her breasts. She brushed it out with her fingers and lifted a lock in the witch’s direction. “Take as much as you like.”

The witch located her shears. Anima waited patiently while the witch advanced upon her. As she passed her hair to the witch, their fingers brushed

against each other. The witch jolted; Anima's fingers were coarse, scarred. Less soft, even, than the witch's own loom-weary hands. She could not imagine what kind of thievery led to those scars. By contrast, the hair was as silky as it looked. It seemed a shame to cut it.

The witch lingered, debating how much hair she would need. When she'd chosen a spot and started to squeeze the shears, she happened to look up and see Anima's clear, wide eyes focused on her own. Anima's watchful gaze almost felt like it could penetrate the fabric of the witch's veil and see right through to the truth of her.

The witch swallowed. A *snip* noise echoed through the room, louder than the witch's heartbeat, and Anima's hair came loose into the witch's hand.

"I brought a third thing for you," Anima said.

"I did not ask for three things." The witch stashed the hair and the wool at the foot of her spinning wheel. She was eager to get started on the spinning.

"But magic always comes in threes."

"I don't suppose it's my diamond?" the witch asked hopefully.

"Even better," Anima said. "I thought I would give you a kiss."

Unbidden, an image of Anima's plump lips filled the witch's head, parting not to lick a needle prick but the witch herself.

The witch quickly shook this image off. "I cannot

lift my veil.”

“I know. I was only joking,” Anima said with a laugh. “Here.”

The piece of fabric Anima had been holding fell away. In her hand, a white lily beckoned to the witch.

Cautiously, the witch approached it. Anima eased the stem into her hand. The lily was velvety soft and fragrant. Its yellow stamen poked out from the white petals, striking almost to the point of vulgarity. The witch had the sense that she was seeing something she shouldn’t in this flower from the outside world. It was... intimate.

“Where did you get this? It’s the wrong season for lilies,” she said.

“There is a patch of lilies at the bottom of your tower. I assumed they were magical, like you. Didn’t you know?”

The witch glanced at the mirror. There was no way for her to view anything at the base of the tower. Discomfort crawled over her, that she should know the inside of her tower so well and nothing of its outside.

“Is this supposed to be me?” Anima’s voice came from the other side of the room. She examined a newer tapestry on the wall – one from this autumn, shortly after her first visit. In it, three sisters danced along the river.

“Why would it be you?” asked the witch, stunned. She had not seen Anima in the mirror; she had no

reason to weave her. But when she looked around, Anima's visage pervaded the room. The witch had woven her round, bright face onto knights and peasants, farmers and nobility. Each of the three sisters wore Anima's soft features.

Her grip on the lily tightened; her fingernail pierced its stem. A jarring, cold wetness spread from the bent stem to the underside of her nail.

It was then that the curse's magic chose to deliver the witch's evening meal.

Two steaming plates of game pie and roasted potatoes appeared on the witch's single table. The curse knew she had a guest. The tallow candle on the table flickered to life. Her goblet – for there was only one – filled with wine.

With wide eyes, Anima took in this new development. "You have invisible servants?" she asked, and the witch was too embarrassed to correct her.

Embarrassed that someone who believed in invisible servants had tricked her, stolen what was important to her.

It did not matter, she assured herself as she took her seat at the table. She would have her revenge soon enough. "Are you hungry?" asked the witch.

"Yes," Anima said, and sat across from her. "I'm not trapped here forever if I eat the fairy food, am I?"

The witch did not laugh at the joke. A crooked smile that Anima could not see crept over her face.

Silently, the witch set down the bruised lily and folded her hands over her plate. The smell of the food wafted upward, tempting her, but she could not remove the veil. Instead, she was forced to watch Anima eat. Her unruly guest lacked manners, the witch quickly determined. She ate with her fingers even though the magic had provided them with utensils. Juice from the meat dripped down Anima's chin, and her questing tongue lapped it up. The witch tore her gaze from Anima's mouth again and again, and when Anima tipped back the goblet of wine with both hands in big gulps, the witch watched intently the column of her throat bobbing, the irregularly scarred fingertips tightening over the curve of the goblet.

By the end, the witch was very warm and very hungry.

"The best fairy food I've ever had," Anima said. She pushed the plate away from herself and it vanished as quickly as it appeared. "And what great service you've got here."

"What did you do with the money from the diamond?" the witch demanded.

Anima stiffened. "You've been such a gracious host," she said, "but I should be on my way."

"Anima," said the witch, and Anima's head lifted at her name on the witch's tongue. "Where is the diamond?"

"I needed to sell it," Anima said, almost pleading.

“I’m saving up to get away.”

Who would want to leave the grandest city in the world? “What do you need to get away from?”

In Anima’s expression, the witch understood that it was not a *what* that Anima wished to get away from, but a *who*.

“My husband.” Anima fiddled with her scarred hands. “My soon-to-be husband,” she corrected. “He’s – I’m supposed to be grateful that he noticed me. Because I’m common. But I don’t want him. The only way to escape the arrangement is to accrue some wealth of my own.”

The witch hardly paid attention to this excuse. Some sob story, maybe true and maybe not. What it really meant was that she was not getting her diamond back, and that the knight had no reason to visit her.

“They say he’s a monster.” Anima’s voice lowered to a whisper. The candle flame flickered higher. The witch had not noticed the sky getting dark.

“Who says?”

Anima hesitated. “The witch.”

That caught the witch’s attention. She’d assumed Anima was senseless about magic. “What did this witch say, exactly?”

The orange in the candle reflected off of Anima’s wide, watery eyes. “She said that the person I am meant for is a monster who will hurt me. A serpent, I believe, is the word she used. A snake who will slither into my heart and destroy me.”

The witch stood suddenly. The table rocked; the candle nearly guttered out; the lily rolled over, revealing once more its yellow stamen.

"Perhaps you should be on your way," she said carefully.

"I hope you can forgive me for the diamond," Anima said. "I do feel awful about it. And, well, I like visiting you."

There was no honest way to respond. The witch did not forgive Anima for stealing from her, and she was conflicted about the visits.

And yet, when Anima crossed the threshold of the door, the witch's traitorous voice called out, "Wait!"

Anima stopped and turned back. The witch grappled with several things and came up short, her mouth opening and closing several times and settling on closed.

"Yes, witch? Are you ready to tell me your name?"

"It's cold out," said the witch. "Colder still with the sun down. Do you have a cloak?"

Once more, Anima's gaze bored through the veil as though she could really see the witch. "No," she said.

The witch did not know what possessed her to offer her own. All she knew was that one minute, the cloak she kept by the window for chilly nights was on the wall, and the next, it had been draped over Anima's shoulders by her own hands.

"Better than a name," the witch said, her voice

trembling.

“Maybe to you,” Anima said playfully. She adjusted the cloak over her shoulders. “I fulfilled my end of the bargain.”

“I’ll tell you the next time you visit.”

“But—”

“Magic comes in threes. On your third visit, I will tell you,” the witch insisted.

“Oh, you clever devil.” The corners of Anima’s lips twitched in amusement. “Alright, then. Next time I come here, I will know your name.”

She headed down the stairs. When her head was the only visible part of her, the witch impulsively called, “And thank you for the lily.”

The witch received one last smile in exchange.

When Anima was gone, the witch checked the mirror, just to be sure, and Anima never crossed her view of the road along the river to the city and its impressive castle. She had suspected as much, but she did not have time to wonder why.

Then, the witch cut an entire lock of her own hair at the base of her skull. She fed hair – hers and the strange thief’s – into the spinning wheel with the mundane wool from the outside world. The witch spun, and she spun, and she spun, and when she had an entire spool of thread, she sat down to weave.

Flowers sprang up on the tapestries, even though real flowers were too far from the witch’s tower to make



out clearly. On either side of the river, the witch dotted red and white lilies. The lily that had been gifted to her never wilted. The magic of the curse, the witch supposed. It called to her from the velvet cushion on her table, reminding her of what the future promised.

Now, every day had purpose. No longer did the witch cry in frustration at her futile efforts to make the little room as beautiful as the outdoors. It was all coming together – wonderful, colorful tapestries lining the walls, giving her good memories to think on. She organized her spools in bright rows and swathed fabrics attractively over her bed. When she looked through the mirror, she imagined lives for the merchants who passed by. She guessed their wares and the places they would go in the city. Always, she watched for a young woman in an emerald dress on her way to see the witch for the last time.

She could hardly sleep for her excitement.

Soon, she would walk among the merchants and the farmers. She would smell the fresh grass and touch the velvety petals of the flower patch at the base of the tower. She would go to the city and run her hands over the rough stone of the castle, and she would make herself a home there.

After all, her own home had been destroyed nine years ago. She had nowhere to go back to, nothing to look back on. All she could think of was the future. The outside. The things she could do when the full

force of her was unleashed upon the world once more. And in the meantime, she wove the mirror's images into her tapestries with brief glimpses of what was to come. All she had to do was wait for Anima to come back – and she was sure, this time, that Anima would return, with the simple woman's notions of the power of three.

And then, one night, in the middle of a very good dream, the witch woke to searing pain.

She jolted from sleep. Her hand flew to her cheek. The pain made her wince. Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the dark room. Someone was there, leaning over her.

A single flame illuminated the walls of the tower, making the familiar space look foreign and strange. She registered the chin of a cherub-like face too late. Her stomach roiled. The veil was across the room.

The witch looked up into Anima's eyes with no barrier separating them from each other. Anima's gaze locked on the witch and didn't let her go. Her pretty mouth parted in surprise.

"I'm so sorry," Anima whispered. "I didn't mean—"

"What have you done?" gasped the witch. Another drop of tallow landed on the witch's sheets. Her hand closed around Anima's wrist. "You can't see me! What have you *done*?"

"I need your help. You didn't answer the door."

The urge to cover herself up was strong. Instead,

the witch tightened her grip on Anima's wrist. This was the first time anyone had seen her in nine years. What had Anima been thinking? Had she intentionally come when the witch would be sleeping so she could sneak up on her and see her without the veil?

What would the curse do to her?

What did Anima think of her now?

"Tomorrow morning, I'm supposed to go to the city to be wed," Anima continued in a rush. "I can't do it. I'm – I'm terrified. Please hide me."

The witch thought Anima did a marvelous job of hiding on her own. "Why would someone want to marry a thief?"

Anima tried to pull her hand away, but the witch only drew her closer. Resigned, Anima settled on the bed. "I'm not a common thief. I'm a seamstress's apprentice." With her free hand, she rubbed her temple. Even in the dim light, the witch could make out the scarring on her fingers, like that of someone poked repeatedly with a needle. "A nobleman came by the shop and saw me. He contacted my father the next day. Will you help me?"

That narrative did not seem plausible, either, at first. The witch looked her over, trying to ascertain the truth, but she needn't have. It was not hard to imagine what anyone would see in Anima. But she might have ruined everything. The curse should have taken effect, but the witch did not feel any different. She did not know what had changed.

“Why me?” the witch asked finally.

“I’d rather stay with you up here than be out there with him,” said Anima. The things she did not say hung heavily between them.

“I am a murderer,” the witch said. “I cannot be trusted.”

“An accident,” Anima said, like she wanted to believe it. “You didn’t know what you were doing.”

“What has become of Astolat?” The name of her old village fitted oddly around her teeth. She was not used to saying it.

“It doesn’t exist,” said Anima. “Not anymore.”

Of course it wouldn’t. The damage the witch had done to the village was irreversible. That was why she was stuck in the tower.

She wouldn’t be for long.

A man’s voice echoed from outside. He was singing. The chords of his song thrummed in tune with the witch’s heartbeat. “My knight,” she said, and released Anima to see him in the mirror.

He was magnificent. Even from a distance, even in the dark. His voice was that of an angel’s, beautiful and resonant, and he held a torch high that made his armor gleam as though he’d been set ablaze.

And he was heading right for the witch’s tower, but she did not have the diamond to give him.

She turned rueful eyes on Anima, but Anima stood there like a rabbit caught by a hunter in the woods. Her hand, still holding the candle that had burned the

witch, trembled, sending uneven shadows across the room.

“It’s him,” said Anima hoarsely. “My husband. He’s coming to collect me for the wedding. Oh, please. Please help me.”

The witch stared at Anima, hard. Anima could not take this from her, too. Not after what she’d done.

There were three things the witch knew for certain. She could not leave her tower, but she planned to. She could not look out the window, but she did through her mirror. She could not show her face, but Anima had already stolen a glimpse of it.

“I will help you,” the witch said. She went to her table, to the folded-up fabric woven of hair and wool, and brought it to Anima on the bed. “You have to hide under this.”

There was a fourth thing she knew for certain, but she rarely allowed herself to think it – what had happened in Astolat was no accident.

The witch threw the fabric over Anima’s head.

Stumbling backward, the witch clutched the edge of her table as the weight of the curse’s magic left her. A giddy laugh bubbled up her throat and escaped, harmonious with the knight’s song outside.

The knight. She could see him.

She tripped over her dress getting to the window. Her fingers curled over the stone of the windowsill. He was even more splendid in person, one with his horse, one with the world. She drank in the rolling

hills in every direction, every angle, and the castle's silhouette against the pre-dawn light in the distance. Joyful gulps of fresh air filled her lungs and she breathed them out with wonder. She felt lighter than ever.

The witch could *leave*. She could leave, and nothing bad would happen.

Bare-footed, she skipped to the open doorway.

"Witch," Anima called.

The witch hesitated. Anima had wrapped her shoulders with the fabric. A trail of smoke drifted upward from the dark candle, but in the pinkish orange of the rising sunlight, the witch made out tracks of tears down Anima's face.

"I'm leaving," the witch said. "I had to escape. I'm sorry."

Anima sniffed. "I wanted to know if there was a way to switch places with you. I'd have done it gladly."

"You can't be serious. Do you know how long I've been stuck here, only able to see the world through the mirror? How lonely you'll be?" The witch was suddenly enraged, and her rage brought her back into the room. "Why would you say such a thing? Do you want me to feel guilty?"

"Do you?" Anima asked quietly.

"No," the witch said, but it wasn't true.

The knight's voice came through even louder, even more melodious. As if drawn by a siren, the witch's

attention turned back to the doorway.

“It doesn’t have to be lonely. We can have each other,” said Anima. “Go if you must, but I’d love if you stay.”

The witch took in the open, pleading expression on Anima’s face, and thought of how many times she had remembered her and wished for her to return. So the witch could rid herself of the curse, she’d thought, but now she questioned the curse itself, its parameters that she had never quite understood, the consequences she had not been told – and she had a revelation as clear as the knight’s song.

The witch had been wrong about the curse. It was not others who could not see her but the opposite – the moment the witch laid eyes on Anima, the curse had been activated.

Falling in love was its own curse, one that would keep her here.

Now, the knight’s voice resounded in the room, echoing as if he were within its four walls. Anima began to shake, holding her arms over her chest with both hands. “Get rid of him,” she begged.

Before the witch’s mind caught up with her body, she had heaved the mirror, nearly as big as herself, off of the wall. She brought it to the window and looked down – directly down – at her knight, right at the foot of the tower with its patch of everlasting lilies.

With all of her strength, she threw down the mirror.

The song ceased abruptly. There was a shuffling of fabric at her side: Anima, wearing the bespelled tapestry like a cloak. The two shared the space by the window, and the witch allowed herself to look down again.

The knight's helmet had come off. His neck was bent at an unnatural angle, and his horse had run off back in the direction of the city. Giant shards of mirror jutted like monoliths from the fertile earth. Blood pooled around the knight, feeding the hungry patch of lilies.

"He has a lovely face," the witch couldn't help but say. Anima's fingers interwove with hers, and they stood there for a moment, just looking at him.

"Can I know your name now, witch?" Anima asked, her voice steady. "It's my third visit."

Of course Anima would still want to know. Curiosity had brought her here in the first place. In the end, the witch was relieved to say it, to share this piece of herself: "My name is Elaine."

"Thank you, Elaine."

Elaine continued to stand at the window when Anima crossed the room.

"You'll stay?" Anima asked.

Elaine turned to her. The emerald dress Anima wore had patched itself, looking new as the day Anima had repaired it and not given it back. A seamstress's apprentice, Elaine thought to herself with humor. All this for a seamstress's apprentice with the



face of a goddess.

“Yes,” said Elaine. “I’ll stay.”

Anima sat at the loom and began to weave.

*Lila Gwynn is a lesbian author of sapphic fantasy fiction. She is the author of the Olympia the Bounty Hunter urban fantasy trilogy as well as The Orc and Her Bride, the first book in a series of fantasy romances. Her books can be found [here](#).*

# Trouble Brewing

Adie Hart

“Well, it’s definitely cursed.”

There was no other explanation, really. Teapots were usually one of the more sedentary items to be found in a castle kitchen; this one, by contrast, was zooming around overhead, alternating raspberries and rude words at the volume and speed of a particularly sugared-up – and gutter-mouthed – six-year-old.

I watched the teapot sweep a clattering shelf-full of glasses to the floor. Only a quick cushioning spell, courtesy of yours truly, stopped them shattering.

“I *know* it’s cursed,” groaned Countess Greyland, wringing her narrow hands nervously. “That’s why I called a District Witch in, Miss Cooper. The question is” – she ducked as the teapot swooped towards her head – “what are you going to do about it?”

“Please don’t worry, Your Grace,” I said. “All I need to do is ascertain which particular type of curse the teapot is under, and then I can apply the appropriate counter-curse.”

“There are different *kinds*?” she huffed. “Can’t you just...” She wagged her fingers at me patronisingly. “Witch it? I have two hundred guests arriving in a few

hours!”

“*One* hour, madam,” piped up the cook, who was the only member of the kitchen staff who hadn’t fled under the teapot’s storm of chaos. She squeaked and ducked under a table as it oriented on her voice and made a swipe for her.

“I’m afraid there’s a little more to it than that, Your Grace,” I said, trying my hardest to keep a professional smile on my face despite the countess’s petulance. “I’ll need to examine its behaviour, and ask you and your staff some questions, and after that I’ll need to try a few different spells to see how it responds.”

“But we don’t have time for that! The ball—”

The teapot alighted on the stove and began to bubble ominously, so I grabbed both the cook and the countess by the elbows and dragged them out of the kitchen. I heard a muffled string of insults from the teapot as I slammed and locked the door, leaning heavily on it for a moment.

When I turned back round, the countess was puffing up in preparation for a tirade. I’d probably offended her by touching her aristocratic elbow. Oh, how I wished Percy was here. My unofficial partner was the one who was good at noble-wrangling – I just did the magic bit.

But here Percy was *not*, having been summoned by his royal mother to some function or other a few days ago. It had been bound to happen eventually; as a

prince, he couldn't just abandon all his responsibilities to play District Witch with me forever. I probably shouldn't have missed him as much as I did, since I was perfectly well qualified to take on cases alone – and we'd only been travelling together for a couple of months anyway, though we'd fallen into an easy pattern of days and nights spent together. I wasn't one of these women who couldn't bear to be apart from her paramour. I was a witch, and a good one. I could just squash all that missing down until later.

I shook my head, trying to clear the thought of Percy sweeping in and mollifying the countess with a perfectly-pitched smile. Perhaps even the application of a devastatingly adorable dimple...

I shook my head harder, since it obviously hadn't worked the first time, and addressed the countess before she could really get going. "You have three options, really. Firstly, you can postpone the ball until the curse is dealt with."

"Impossible!" she spluttered. "The Duke of Morviston is coming. Do you have any idea what a coup that is? He *never* accepts invitations. I can't possibly cancel."

"Well, then I can simply work down here alone while the ball goes ahead." I didn't relish the idea of trying to nullify a curse knowing half the local aristocracy were in the firing range, but I'd just have to be careful.

"But the catering, Miss Cooper!" exploded the

cook. “Unless you can magic up canapes and niblets for two hundred?”

I grimaced. Magic food never tastes quite right, and it leaves you hungrier than before. Many a District Witch has tried to minimise her travel supplies by magicking up a meal or two, but it’s just not worth the effort. “Sadly not.”

“Then Mrs Evans is right, we’ll need the kitchen to be safe,” the countess said, crossing her arms.

“Then I suppose it’s option three,” I said. “Subdue the teapot – assuming it’s not integral to your catering plans, Mrs Evans? – and isolate it until I can examine it tomorrow. Have you got a small lockable box?”

With some effort, and not a total absence of bad language from all parties, Mrs Evans and I managed to wrestle the furious teapot into the chest the countess had provided. It took both of us to hold the lid down against its attempts to break free, so rather than remove a hand to turn the key, I muttered a cantrip to secure the lock. With the teapot trapped, its whistles were somewhat muted, though it decided to augment the cacophony with intermittent thumps as it tried to force its way through the solid wood. We stashed the chest at the back of the under-scellery, piled a mountain of tablecloths on top to muffle the noise, and locked the scullery door for good measure.

“Do you think it’ll hold?” panted the cook.

“It should be fine for a few hours at least. If it gets

too bothersome, just give me a shout and I'll come and deal with it again."

"Oh, I couldn't be bothering you, miss..."

"Nonsense," I said firmly. "That's exactly what I'm here for. And please, call me Elsie. I think wrestling an angry teapot together makes us friends, doesn't it?" I liked this wiry, no-nonsense woman – certainly more than I liked the pinch-faced countess – and it never hurts to spend time with the people who really make a household tick, even if that household is a castle.

"It earns you some lemon biscuits, for sure," she smiled, obviously hearing my stomach growl. Magic is always hungry work.

As she bustled about, setting several delicious-looking biscuits on a plate and pouring me a much-needed cup of tea (from an uncursed teapot, thankfully), the countess poked her head around the kitchen door. "Is it safe?"

"Yes." I waved her in. "I'm just catching my breath and then I'll get out of your hair so you can enjoy the ball. I'll stop at the inn in Rydale Green and return in the morning. Not too early, of course."

"My dear Miss Cooper," exclaimed the countess, her face lighting up now that the imminent danger was past and she could get back to party planning. She was rather beautiful, when she wasn't hovering like a nervous heron. "You'll do no such thing! Why, you must stay here tonight, and of course, you'll be an

honoured guest at the festivities.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly,” I said. I’d rather lost my taste for fancy house parties after the events of last winter, when I’d been imprisoned in a castle with a passel of princesses by a rather overzealous fairy godmother. The princesses had all been very nice, in the end, but I couldn’t help but keep an eye on the door whenever I was offered an invitation. Besides, I was looking forward to a nice quiet night in the inn with a slap-up dinner and a novel I’d stolen from Percy before he left. “You’ll have so much to do without—”

“Not at all, not at all! My pleasure. It’s always nice to have a witch around to lend a bit of charm to a crowd.” She bit her lip. “Though of course, if you would be so kind as to avoid telling everyone about our little problem...”

“I’m very discreet, Your Grace. But I’m afraid I simply can’t stay. I don’t have anything suitable to wear.” I gestured down to my uniform, which now bore a number of tea stains, begging her not to ask if I could magic it clean. I could, obviously, but my book was calling me.

“Nonsense. We’re about the same height. I’ll have Sally look something out for you. Now, come along.”

And that, it seemed, was that. I threw a helpless look at the chuckling Mrs Evans as the countess led me away. Evidently it was perfectly acceptable for *her* to drag *me* about by the elbow.

The ball wasn't horrible, actually. The staff had acquitted themselves wonderfully with the décor, all silver vines and softly twinkling candles in every corner, and, seeing the mountains of profiteroles and sweets, no one would ever have known that Mrs Evans had only just regained control of her kitchen from a cursed bit of crockery less than an hour before. Perhaps she had a little magic in her, too.

Earl and Countess Greyland were holding court at the edge of the room, and the countess raised her glass to me as I entered. Her gesture smoothed my path through the ballroom as guests nodded at me, pretending to recognise me even as they wondered who I was, and it wasn't long before I was safely ensconced in an alcove with a champagne flute and a plate of profiteroles, watching the dancers twirl.

I didn't stick out as much as I'd feared. The countess's maid had provided me with an extremely stylish gown in the latest Varenian fashion, all low bodice and swooping sleeves, claiming her ladyship had never worn it on account of the colour clashing with her complexion. If I was being honest, I could see why. It was a particularly vehement shade of yellow that I wasn't sure would work on anyone – except perhaps a fairy of the summer court. When Sally had deemed me finished, my hair upswept and borrowed gems draped around my neck, I took the liberty of muttering a spell to darken the dress a few



shades, from its eye-popping yellow to a softer, gently luminescent old gold.

Look, I'm not a vain woman, but I wasn't going to walk into a ball full of strangers looking like a pat of butter.

I was more or less lost in my own thoughts, wondering whether enough time had passed that I could slip away and dig into my novel, when a golden-haired gentleman stepped up beside me and cleared his throat.

"My lady Witch," he said, after an elegant bow, "please allow me to introduce myself. Edwin Colwell, Viscount Alderley."

"Elsie Cooper," I said obligingly. "District Witch, though you apparently know that already."

"Our formidable hostess pointed you out to me. She informs me you need a partner for the next dance."

"Me?" I said. "I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you, Lord Colwell." I have plenty of skills, but dancing is decidedly *not* among them. Try as they might, my friends had never been able to teach me to keep my balance while dancing; Harriet once declared me wobblier than her embroidery, which was saying something.

"Tell me the truth, is it the jacket?" asked my new companion faux-seriously. "I *told* my valet nobody would want to dance with me if I wore pink velvet."

I couldn't help but laugh at his hangdog

expression, so out of place on his handsome face. “Your jacket is fine. Lovely, in fact. It’s me – I don’t dance.”

“Ah. A pity. Is that a District Witch rule?”

Oh, how easy it would be to say yes... But he seemed good-natured, so I matched his wry tone and gave him the truth. “Sadly not. No, it’s my own fault entirely. I’m just terrible at it.”

“I can’t imagine you’re terrible at anything,” he smiled. Something about the perfect evenness of it sent a pang of longing for Percy’s lopsided grin running through me. Before I knew it, the loneliness and the champagne had me placing my hand into the viscount’s and letting him lead me to the dancefloor. Why shouldn’t I at least try to have fun tonight?

I did take one precaution, though: I whispered the words of a step-safe spell, one I usually used for walking on icy ground. It might not have the power to make me elegant, but it would hopefully stop me from falling over and making a spectacle of myself.

The music swelled into a waltz as we took our places among the other dancers. The viscount’s hand was warm against my back, and he grinned reassuringly as he dragged me into motion. If I just stayed focused, it wasn’t so difficult to follow his lead. We made it almost halfway across the room without tripping before I trusted myself to look up from my feet.

Lord Colwell smiled softly when our eyes met.

“See? You’re not so terrible after all.”

“Sh,” I hissed. “I’m trying to count.” The spell was working admirably at making sure my feet came down steadily, but I still had to check they were in the right place at the right time. I wasn’t sure the viscount would be impressed if his toes suddenly discovered that under my fashionable skirt lurked my standard-issue DW boots. Thank goodness the countess’s feet were tiny, and she hadn’t been able to press me into borrowing her wildly impractical shoes.

“My apologies,” he chuckled. “I’ll let you get on with it.” And with that, he pulled me into a closer hold and spun us around to make our way up the other side of the room.

Our next steps brought us close to the edge of the dancefloor, and we slowed down to avoid brushing a group of observers with the swirling skirt of my dress. A hand appeared on the viscount’s shoulder, and he drew us to a smooth stop as a familiar voice asked, “May I cut in, Colwell?”

“Percy?!” I cried, then flinched and adjusted my volume as the crowd whipped their heads towards me. “Percy, what are you doing here?”

Percy grinned and gave me a sheepish wave. “I could ask you the same question. This doesn’t seem like your kind of evening.”

“I’m on a case, you fool!” I said, laughing. “Aren’t you supposed to be doing some prince thing?”

“Yeah.” He fluffed his unruly hair in a perfect

imitation of a spoiled royal. “Quite a lot of prince things involve going to parties.”

Lord Colwell coughed awkwardly, stepping out of the hold we’d frozen into. “I see you two have a lot to catch up on, so I’ll bow out. Miss Cooper, thank you for a very enjoyable dance.”

“Oh, no, thank you,” I said. “You were very kind to put up with me.”

He kissed my hand, and disappeared into the crowd. I hoped his next partner was a bit less distracted.

“Poor man,” said Percy, as he put one hand at my waist, manoeuvring us back into the swirl of dancers. “How many times did you step on his toes?”

“Not once, actually,” I said as indignantly as I could muster. “I’m trying a new spell. But I *will* still step on yours if you’re going to be rude.”

“Oh, the Piper cantrip? I spotted it in my research about that rat case and I’ve been wondering if it could work, a sort of follow-my-lead kind of thing.”

“No, a step-safe— wait, Percy, you’re a genius.” I whispered the Piper spell at my boots and immediately felt my feet snap into time with Percy’s steps. “The two together might just be enough to pull me through this. Provided I have a partner who knows how to lead, which rules you out.” Percy, we’d learned early on, was as left-footed as I was.

“Good job my “prince thing” involved six hours of intensive waltz lessons, then.” He wrinkled his nose.

“Mother didn’t want me to embarrass myself at my first real ball.”

It was true, he did seem more co-ordinated than usual. I almost felt as though the two of us were competent, floating down the length of the ballroom in perfect time. I took a deep breath and let myself stop counting, focusing instead on the feel of Percy’s shoulder under my hand and how wonderful it felt to have him back. I’d known I was missing him, but I hadn’t been prepared for how *right* it was to be back in his arms.

“You’re thinking hard,” Percy said.

“I missed you.”

He laughed. “I’ve only been gone three days – no, don’t give me that look, I missed you too. The whole prince thing is pretty boring without you calling me an idiot at the time.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not the same without you getting ink all over my stuff and interfering in my cases.”

“Interferi– whoa,” he said, pulling us out of the way of another couple I’d been about to crash into. “Okay, maybe we do need to focus on the dancing a little bit.”

After two more dances, just for the fun of actually being able to enjoy them, I dragged Percy off the dancefloor and made a beeline for a quieter part of the room to see if he had any thoughts on my case.

“What I can’t figure out,” I said, “is why anyone

would cast a curse on a teapot. I mean, it just seems so strange. What damage is a cursed teapot going to do?”

“Do you think it’s an intentional or unintentional curse?”

“I’ve no idea. The thing can talk, which implies there was a decent amount of power behind it, but I suppose it could be a hangover from a disgruntled employee who really hated making tea, or something.”

“What if it’s something to do with the previous owner?” said Percy.

“How so?” I knew the earl and countess had only moved in a few weeks ago – this was their castlewarming, of sorts – but I hadn’t been given any information about the previous inhabitants.

Percy shook his head. “The District really need to start giving you more background on your cases. The earl bought this place from Prince Bertrand.” He looked at me expectantly, then sighed when I looked back blankly. “Beastly Bertrand? Cursed to live as a giant lion-man until his true love came along and said hey, I think your fangs are kind of sexy? Unfortunately for her he’s not nearly so handsome now he’s been turned back. Anyway, I’m pretty sure the curse applied to the whole castle.”

“I suppose that would make sense if we had a lion-teapot, but it’s not beastly at all. It’s just... rude. And violent.” I rubbed my arm where the teapot had landed a surprisingly hefty blow for a piece of

crockery.

“No, the rest of the curse was more like—” Whatever Percy had been about to tell me was cut off by an almighty *crash* that sounded like several dozen suits of armour had been dropped down a very tall flight of stairs.

Screams and yelps echoed throughout the room as guests found their glasses and plates rising up out of their hands to float menacingly overhead. In through the large double doors flew a phalanx of plates, which circled the ceiling like a ceramic cloudbank; forks clattered up from tables to glitter in the candlelight; the enormous punchbowl wobbled its way into the air, leaving ominous red splashes in its wake. The dancers scattered as a storm of crockery started to spin around the floor, and from the centre of it rose one particular teapot, cackling.

“Get everyone out – or under cover,” I instructed Percy, and, trusting him to get on with it, I threw my hands over my head and made my way towards Mrs Evans, who had burst in after the invasion and was now panting heavily and attempting to apologise to the countess.

“I couldn’t hold it,” she said between gasping breaths. “It just burst out of the scullery all at once and told everything else to follow it. Said it wasn’t going to tolerate being used no more. Even my best ladle’s at it.” She gestured overhead, where a battered silver ladle danced with a gilt serving dish.

“Unionised kitchenware,” groaned the countess.  
“What a disaster.”

“It’s much more intelligent than I thought,” I said,  
“which rules out a lot of curse types. I’m going to see  
what it wants.”

“Be careful, dear,” said Mrs Evans.

“Just fix it,” said the countess.

I wasn’t sure I would be able to do either of those  
things, but that was how the job worked some days. I  
took a deep breath and strode to the middle of the  
ballroom.

“Hey, teapot,” I called, hoping I sounded  
authoritative. “Stop terrorising these people and talk  
to me.”

“Teapot?!” screeched the teapot in a burst of  
steam. “I might be inclined to do some talkin’ if  
people didn’t keep referrin’ to me as bloody teapot!”

“I’m sorry,” I said. It never hurts to be polite, even  
when you’re having a conversation with a piece of  
crockery. “How would you prefer to be addressed?”

The teapot simmered down slightly. “You can call  
me Annie, as that’s my name good and proper.”

Ah. Perhaps this wasn’t the kind of curse I’d been  
thinking of, then. “All right, Annie. Why don’t you  
come down here and maybe I can help with  
whatever’s bothering you?”

The teapot – Annie – floated down until she was  
level with my eyeline. She peered at me, which was  
disconcerting, given she had no face. “You a witch,



then? You ain't got no hat."

"Well, I was at a party until your friends arrived. But I am a witch, yes." I sent up a little shower of golden sparks from one hand – nothing threatening, just a little display of magic that often helps the wary believe me.

"Very pretty," scoffed Annie. "'Spect you was havin' a wonderful time dancin' and drinkin' and all that? Must be nice. Havin' a body."

"Annie, I'm beginning to suspect you might not always have been a teapot," I said.

Percy stepped up beside me and slid his hand into mine. "Elsie," he said quietly, "that's what I was trying to tell you. Bertrand's servants, they were cursed too, only not into beasts – into the objects they worked with. Presumably so he couldn't maul them."

"Oh, that's a clever boy," said the teapot. "Go on, you wanta guess the rest?"

"How about you tell us?" I said. "If I know more about how you ended up like this, I might be able to do something about it."

Annie came very, very close to my face, and I had to steel my nerves not to flinch away from her heat. I had the impression she was sizing me up, so I forced a smile onto my face.

"Fine," she said sullenly. "Stand down, everyone. I've found me a witch." There was a sudden rain of crockery and silverware, as everything went inert. "Oh, don't worry yourself, witchy, they ain't cursed

too. I just got 'em to come along and give you all a bit of fun."

That was a relief, actually. It would likely take all my strength to deal with one teapot's worth of curse, let alone every other piece of kitchenware in the room. "Well then, Annie. Please, will you tell me everything?"

Annie sighed, steam flowing out of her spout miserably. "It's like this. I 'ired on 'ere when Prince Bertie was a boy. I was the perfect tea maid that 'ole time, makin' their tea and sweepin' up their biscuit crumbs and keepin' track of everyone's likes and dislikes, and then the young master gets 'imself cursed and us along with 'im and for twelve years, I've been a soddin' teapot, makin' their tea still even though I'd got no hands or nothin'."

"That sounds hard," I said, but Annie was in full swing and barely seemed to hear me.

"And then that girl comes along, and she goes fallin' in love with the young master despite 'is face and 'is temper and 'is fur and all. She comes in, gives 'im a true love's smooch, and bam! Everyone's back to 'emselves, all the forks and lamps and whatnot gettin' to be people again and go back to their lives or what was left of 'em. And I *missed it!*"

"How?" asked Percy. "Usually when a multifarious curse is broken, it affects all the recipients equally."

"Yeah, well, I don't know what a multi-falutin'

curse is but that bloody gardener's boy took me out to the gatehouse for 'is tea break, didn't he, and when the magic all went off, it must've missed me." Annie sounded furious. I hoped the gardener's boy had found a new job already, because I didn't like his chances if she ever got her handle on him.

"The radial impact must have been too short," said Percy. "*Fascinating.*" I could feel his fingers twitching to make notes, and squeezed his hand. His ever-present excitement for the workings of magic was adorable.

"So what happened then?" I asked Annie. "Have you tried to break the curse yourself?"

"Well, the young master and 'is new bride moved out sharpish, didn't want to be livin' in this ruined old place anymore, and I'm still sittin' in the gatehouse but I drag myself in and the place is empty, and then in moves this earl and his wife and I'm thinkin', okay, maybe I just gotta be in the house when there's another smooch. Only *these* two ain't exactly lovebirds. Maybe they was once, I don't know, but they certainly ain't now. Not a soddin' peck since they day they moved in."

I glanced over at the earl and countess, who were both studying the floor intently, then looked at Percy. "Would that work? If we can find a way to recreate the circumstances of the curse-breaking?"

"It's worth a try," he said with a shrug. "I can't see why it wouldn't, if the magic is tied to a true love's

kiss.”

“Then all we need to do is find two people who are in love, and we should be able to break the spell!” I thought back over all the guests I’d seen tonight. Surely some of them must be in relationships? Though it would be difficult to differentiate between flirtation and true love... We might be here for a while testing different couples, which would certainly be awkward.

“Is anyone in here in love?” I called to the room. The people who had taken cover under the furniture poked their heads out and looked rather baffled. “Anyone? Some of you must be in love with each other, no?” No one replied; a few people shook their heads. I turned back to Annie. “Do you think it needs to be requited for it to work, or will a one-sided infatuation do?”

“Elsie,” said Percy.

“No, you’re probably right,” I said, waving a hand at him and starting to pace. “It should really be requited, or it’s not true love. Okay, so. Let’s go and round up the guests who got out of here. I’ll take this floor, and you can look upstairs.”

“Elsie,” said Percy again.

I whirled on the countess. “Wait, do you have a guest list? That should give us an idea of what couples there are!”

“Elsie,” said Percy, with a little laugh this time, and he caught my hand and pulled me closer and

swept me into a kiss so swiftly I barely had time to close my eyes. I knew I should probably be horrified to be kissed so publicly – and while on duty, at that! – but I took a moment to enjoy myself first. It had been a long three days, and the kiss tasted of relief and comfort and an inevitable sense of *rightness*. Magic fizzed through my veins at his touch.

I pulled away when somebody whooped, but Percy reached up to cup my face gently, holding me still.

“I love you,” he said softly.

“Yes, Percy, I love you too, but we have to get *on*,” I said, trying to disentangle myself from him, as much as I didn’t want to. “We have a curse to break.”

A burst of laughter ran around the room, and I finally looked away from Percy’s soft smirk and softer eyes to see everyone emerging from their hiding places. Heat filled my cheeks. What a shocking lack of propriety – a District Witch caught canoodling in front of a whole ballroom of strangers!

And then I noticed her, where the teapot had been. A small, plump woman in her middle-thirties, completely nude, being draped in a punch-stained tablecloth by a blushing Mrs Evans.

“I think we’re probably good on curse breakin’ for now,” said the woman.

“Oh,” I said, trying to catch up. “Annie?”

“The very same. Thanks to you and your young man.”

“Wait, *we* did that?” I turned to Percy, pointing

between us. “Me and you?”

Annie laughed. “Just how good *was* that kiss?”

“I think it was my favourite one yet,” said Percy, with that lopsided grin I loved. “Now, if no one else needs us, I think we need to go and write up our case notes.”

“Yes, we’ll have to, um, discuss our methods.” I blurted. “Do some research.” I tugged Percy towards the door, desperate to escape the knowing smiles.

Once we were in the corridor and the door had closed on the laughter behind us, Percy pulled me close again. “You know, I do love research,” he said.

“I love you too.” I said. “Now shut up.”

The kiss that followed might not have been certifiably curse-breaking, but it was certainly magical enough for me.

*Adie Hart is a lover of stories and the words behind them. With a background in the history and literature of the Ancient World, and an abiding love of classic fairy tales, she writes everything from fun fantasy adventures to dark mythological retellings. If you want to find out how Elsie and Percy first met at the hands of his pea-obsessed fairy godmother, check out A Pea Ever After in the Once Upon A Winter anthology, and if you want to know what happens next for them, visit Adie’s website to download the free sequel novelette, [Wedding Wings](#).*

# Sir Fionnobar the Black and the Beastled Knight

Arden Powell

The problem with rogue castles, Marten mused, was their size. Sir Fionnobar might as well be charging up to fight a mountain. Even the average dragon was smaller than the average castle these days, and dragons were difficult enough.

“Are you sure this castle is your father?” Marten asked the girl who stood beside him, watching the spectacle.

“Yes, sir,” she replied morosely, just as she had done every previous time he had asked.

She was young, years away from adulthood, yet her expression carried the weight of a lifetime. Her wheat-blond hair was long but tangled, and her clothes were torn in places and unbecoming a girl of her alleged status. She looked like she’d been through a war.

They stood side by side on the crest of a little hill outside the town of Luddonton, watching the castle and the Black Knight try to beat each other into the ground. The castle would have been the uncontested winner were it not for Fionn's feat of immortality. Marten had seen him walk away from injuries that would have incapacitated a lesser man; he had sewn on severed limbs as if dismemberment were a mere flesh wound.

However, Marten had never seen Fionn crushed under several thousand tonnes of solid stone, and he suspected that being reduced to a bloody paste would prove a challenge for even Fionn's considerable healing abilities. If the castle, for example, were to sit down on top of the knight like a very large and enthusiastic lapdog, Marten had no idea how he would entice the castle to move its bulk off Fionn again. And, as Marten was neither a warrior nor a cursebreaker – he was barely an adventurer at all, despite his recent activities suggesting otherwise – that would prove the end of their quest. Fionn would be left flattened in a temporary grave until someone better equipped to deal with a rogue castle came along and returned the girl's father to a more human shape. Or turned him into rubble.

Down the hill and across the meadow, Fionn, in his suit of eponymous matte black armour, was beating against the great drawbridge with his sword hilt. The drawbridge remained firmly closed.



“I don’t suppose we might find the witch who cursed your father,” Marten said. “Sir Fionnobar might have more luck encouraging her to resolve the matter than he’s having here.”

“I’ve already begged her to break the curse,” said the girl, not taking her gaze from the fight below. “She says she will not budge until my father has learned his lesson. Though I’m sure she would be happy to turn your friend into a castle, as well.”

Marten didn’t know how a curse might interact with Fionn’s healing abilities, and he suspected he did not want to find out. He was a man of science, and curses made him itchy. He would prefer to steer clear of them altogether, but Fionn’s profession as a sword-for-hire drew him to curses like a fly to honey. If things continued as they had been, Marten would be forced to pick up some manner of defensive magic just to get by, despite his distaste for and mistrust of the stuff. One day he was going to put this adventuring business behind him and set up a physician’s practice in a quiet village where he might be left to pursue his studies in between treating whatever minor maladies affected his flock. Such had been his life, not so long ago. It was hardly Fionn’s fault, the fate that had befallen Marten’s village, but still, Marten thought Fionn could have expressed a greater degree of sympathy for the way his life had been so violently upended.

It was useless to dwell on such things. Marten’s

village was gone, as was his practice, and with them, his contentment and peace of mind. What he had instead was Fionn's volatile company, too many curses for his liking, and this young girl who had chased her becastled father halfway across the continent.

"You said the witch cursed your father when he refused her shelter from a storm. Is it not possible that he could break the curse by lowering his drawbridge and allowing someone inside?"

Marten had only a rudimentary understanding of curses, but he thought they often operated on such logic, inasmuch as they operated on any logic at all.

"I suppose," said the girl miserably, "but I don't think he has the mental wherewithal at this point to consider the option. He didn't recognise me the last time I approached him, nor has he responded to his name in months. It seems all he wants to do is go rampaging around the countryside, and I don't know how to help him. Eventually, one of these towns is going to try to destroy him in order to save their farmland or livestock or whatever it is he's trampling, and I can't say they'll be wrong to do it. He's such a menace like this. Worse than those awful pigs we used to keep."

"I'm sorry." Privately, Marten agreed that the wellbeing of the townspeople should come before her father's, and that destroying the rogue castle was likely the safest, if not the kindest, option. "But," he

added, “we’re not giving up on Sir Fionnobar yet.”

Below them, the castle lurched, rocking violently back and forth to dislodge the knight as he climbed its front beside the drawbridge, finding finger- and toeholds in the stones in order to drag himself to the lowest window ledge. Every time the castle tried to shake him free, Fionn lost his footing and flapped against the wall like a stiff black banner, clinging on by his gauntleted fingertips. His armour made a horrible clanking sound every time he struck the stone. Marten winced, folding his arms tightly against his chest to keep his ribs from hurting in sympathy.

Still, Fionn did not fall. Despite the castle’s furious bucking, he climbed ever upward, until he succeeded in lodging himself inside the window frame. A stained glass portrait of what Marten imagined must be the girl’s father peered over the Black Knight’s helm, moustachioed and worried-looking.

“This is the closest anyone has ever got to him,” the girl said nervously. “Do you think he will find my father inside one of the rooms?”

Marten hoped not. If Fionn came across anyone inside that castle, his first instinct would be to meet them with his sword swinging. If they were lucky, he might question them after they were skewered. If they were unlucky, he would hack them into bits before stopping to wonder who they were or why they were there.

Marten elected not to say any of that aloud.

Fionn broke the stained glass with a well-aimed bash of his elbow and disappeared inside. Beside Marten, the girl flinched as if she'd been struck instead of the glass, and started forward like she meant to go to the castle.

Holding herself back through some strength of will, she asked desperately, "Do you know what Sir Fionnobhar means to do now that he's inside? Could he lower the drawbridge and let us in?"

"I'm not sure that's safe," Marten hedged.

"My father would never hurt me! Even with his mind as lost as it is—"

"I'm more concerned about us getting caught in the crossfire," said Marten. On cue, a terrible crash sounded from the castle's depths, and the walls trembled. "Whatever's going on in there, we're best to stay out of reach until the dust settles."

The castle stumbled, one of its stone-block legs going out from under it. There was a heavy groan of rock grinding against rock, and a sheet of dust and silt shuddered out from the mortar and into the grass.

The last of the girl's restraint shuddered out with it, and she bolted down the hill, her skirts gathered in both hands as she ran, sending clumps of grass and dirt up from her heels with every step. Marten only hesitated a second before cursing and chasing after her.

As unmanageably large as the castle had appeared from a distance, it was nothing compared to its

magnitude close-up. It was a handsome design from the Third Age, built from rough-hewn stone blocks each the size of a carriage. It lacked the monstrous gargoyles of the Fourth Age or the ornate, swirling décor of the Fifth, and Marten was grateful on both counts, as such things would be too easy for the castle to weaponise. The windows were tall and narrow and filled with coloured glass, and the whole thing was crowned with four rounded towers of sensible height, one at each corner. Carved into a stone slab above the drawbridge was a stag rampant, presumably the family's crest, though Marten didn't recognise it. Perhaps Fionn did. The centre of the castle rose in a great steeple that jutted into the sky like the horned head of a fearsome beast. Its legs were short and thick, as was necessary to support such an enormous weight, and had presumably been pulled up from the castle's foundation. It was all too easy to imagine falling into their path, but at least such a death would be quick, like an ant getting crushed under the hoof of a rampaging bull.

Though the girl was clearly frightened, she darted up to the castle's front as quickly and nimbly as a field mouse. Reluctant to see her crushed to a pulp, Marten followed, intending to drag her out of harm's way. But as he caught hold of her hood, the castle pitched forward and with a rush of scraping chains, the heavy wooden drawbridge slammed into the ground to reveal the castle's entrance, wide enough

for five knights to ride in abreast. From within echoed the din of a violent altercation, crashes of metal on stone, and Fionn's voice shouting challenges to what Marten hoped was the castle itself rather than some live opponent. Not that Marten believed a rogue castle would be easier to best than a mortal foe, but he hoped to encounter as few moving pieces in the situation as possible.

The girl clambered onto the drawbridge on her hands and knees and began the steep climb to the castle's interior. Though Marten could think of little he wanted less than to enter that castle, neither did he want a child's death on his conscience. A lifetime ago, he had sworn to help people when and where he could. He considered that oath dead and buried along with his village, but apparently there was some scrap of it still clinging to life. Enough of a scrap to compel him to action.

He scrambled after her, the old wood soft under his fingernails as he clawed his way up. The castle juddered under him, trying to throw him off or still trying to dislodge Fionn, wherever he was; the difference hardly mattered. The effect was that of clinging to a raft in a choppy sea, and Marten was nauseous by the time he reached the top and threw himself inside to land on the cold stone floor. It tipped under him and he slid the length of the entrance hall into the castle proper, where he finally found his balance and got to his knees to look around.

For some reason, he had expected the castle to be empty, like a mausoleum. Instead, it looked as if it had been inhabited for generations.

If that were the case, its people would be most distraught about the state of things. Between the castle's lurching gait and the destructive force that was the Black Knight, the furnishings had been rendered a disaster. Chairs and tables were splintered; paintings hung crooked with their canvases slashed; trinkets, trunks, tapestries, and rugs lay heaped in corners where they had fallen or been shoved. The effect was not dissimilar to that of a dwelling ravaged by earthquakes.

A few feet away, the girl stood up by the wall, looking fiercely determined even as she held back tears.

"We need to get out of here," Marten called to her, trying to pick his way across the floor to catch her and carry her back down the drawbridge.

But she withdrew, looking at him with wet, shining eyes like he was a complete stranger.

"I can't leave him like this," she snapped, her arms outstretched to keep her balance as the floor bucked wildly under their feet. "This is all my fault!"

A heavy chandelier broke free of the ceiling and crashed down between them, curls of wrought iron and spindly tapered candles clanging against the stone. Marten flinched back, his ears ringing.

"The witch—" he began.

The girl shook her head furiously. "There was no witch! I did this, and I don't know how to fix it, but I have to try!"

From somewhere higher up, Fionn shouted for Marten. "Did you get in? I could use some help up here!"

Fionn's voice bounced off the walls, seeming to come from every direction at once. The disorientation did nothing to help Marten's seasickness. What help Fionn expected him to offer, Marten had no idea, and climbing higher only seemed like an opportunity to gain a greater height from which to fall. However, the girl had no such compunctions, and grimly set off, leading Marten to a spiral staircase of solid stone with thick walls on all sides.

"He's in the bell tower," she informed Marten as they tackled the stairs. "That's the only place where one's voice can echo in such a way."

"How do you know? You said no one has been able to get close to your father since he was cursed."

"It's true," she said shortly. "The castle predates the curse."

"Explain," Marten advised, exhaustion making his tone flat.

The girl's next step landed harder and heavier than her normal footfalls. "After my mother died, he said he wanted us to move away. Our home reminded him too much of her. But I was born here, I grew up here; I didn't want to leave it behind. So, I refused. He



asked me if I loved this castle more than I loved him.” She was quiet for a few more steps. “I said yes. And then...”

“You lost your home and your father,” Marten finished.

The girl's back was rigid with anger and shame. Even her hair looked miserable.

“Maybe there's something in the tower that can remind him who he is, or put him back the way he's supposed to be,” Marten offered, though he lacked conviction. It seemed a deceptively simple solution, and if curses were so easy to break, everyone would be doing it.

Stepping into the bell tower was like entering a warrior's arena. It was octagonal, with an open window on every side, and a great bronze bell hanging from the middle of the steeped roof. By rights, Fionn should have been defeated already, but Fionn never lost because he never stayed down. Even with the dents and scuffs on his armour suggesting that he'd taken on the entire contents of the castle and had at least one wall collapsed on top of him, he was still standing with his sword in hand. It was hopelessly dull from beating it against the stones, but that hardly mattered unless he found a more human opponent to fight. Even then, Marten had seen the damage Fionn could deal with a dull blade. It made for an uglier death and a slower one, but a death all the same. As far as the Black Knight was concerned,

anything could be a weapon in the right hands.

“Why did you bring the girl?” Fionn demanded, his stance wide as he struggled to keep his balance with the tower floor rolling under him, the tiles rippling like chattering teeth.

“She’s the one who cursed him.”

“If we kill her, will that break it?”

“We’re not doing that.” Marten put himself bodily between Fionn and the girl, who glared at the knight with deep distrust, clinging to the nearest window ledge with both hands.

“Luddonton told me to get rid of the castle. I can either blow it up or break the curse, and since you won’t let me carry explosives, and I haven’t found anything that looks like it can undo it, killing the witch seems like the best bet.” Fionn pointed his sword at the girl, and by extension, at Marten. “We already know she’s got no one to miss her.”

“There’s her father,” Marten pointed out through gritted teeth. “If the curse does break and the first thing he sees is her body—”

Fionn waved those concerns aside. “I’ll kill him too, no problem. We’re not far from Luddonton’s potter’s field. We can throw both bodies in there on our way to collect our payment.”

It would be terribly easy. Marten only had to agree and look the other way as Fionn did the deed.

He had to be better than that.

“We’re not killing the girl. Find some other way.”

“Like what? Unless you had some genius idea while I was getting my ass kicked—”

The castle shook like a wet dog, hurling Marten towards the girl and the window. Instead of holding her ground to break his fall, the girl crouched low, and when Marten stumbled into her, the momentum pitched him over the ledge and out the window. It happened with perfect clarity: the cold stone under his hands as he scrabbled for purchase, the rush of blue sky above and meadow grass below, the flood of copper in his mouth as he bit his tongue. He clung to the ledge by his fingertips, hanging against the outer wall not unlike Fionn had done earlier.

Inside the tower, Fionn rushed for the girl, his intention evident. He was fast, but she was small and quick like a sparrow, and she slipped past him to lunge for the heavy rope attached to the bell. Fionn grabbed her around the waist from behind – Marten hoped, sickly, that he would break her neck rather than run her through – but when he hauled her back, she refused to let go of the rope.

The bell rang out in a tremendously deep, bronze sound, and a family of blackbirds exploded out from inside in a rush of feathers and hoarse screams.

The castle shivered and froze in place. Still hanging, Marten held his breath, his mouth full of blood as his aching fingers slowly slipped.

And then, abruptly, the castle was no more.

Marten, Fionn, and the girl fell to the meadow in a

heap as the stone disappeared from under them. Fionn was the first to recover though he had surely broken bones from landing in his armour, clanking and cursing as he rose stiffly to his feet.

As Marten reoriented himself, he found a fourth party had joined them: an older gentleman whose knightly tunic bore the same heraldic stag Marten had seen above the castle door. He was tall and thin as a rake with tufts of wheat-coloured hair like the girl's, though his was tinted redder, and an enormous moustache to match.

"Alessia?" the man said, his voice confused but full of tremulous hope.

The girl quivered, her hands balled in fists by her sides. "Papa," she said thickly. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to—"

"Oh no, my sweet child, *I'm* sorry—"

Marten looked away as they rushed into each other's arms.

Clearing his throat, Fionn shoved his sword into the sheath on his back. "Glad ringing his bell worked. Let's not mention the other plan," he said under his breath.

"I say, are you *the* Black Knight, Sir Fionnobhar, or a more generic black knight?" asked the knight who had been a castle, now that the most tearful part of the father-daughter reunion was over.

"*The* Black Knight," Fionn replied, bowing shallowly at the waist.

“He tried to kill me,” Alessia declared.

Marten winced.

The former castle tutted and drew his daughter close. “I can’t say I’m surprised. What on earth possessed you to go to *him* for help instead of seeking a cursebreaker or a more reputable knight?”

“I didn’t go to him,” she said mulishly. “Our paths crossed in Luddonton as we each pursued you separately.”

“I was hired by the Luddonton Home Owners’ Association,” Fionn supplied. “The landed gentry decided you were an eyesore lowering their property values and wanted you gone.”

“Well. Thank you for your efforts, I suppose. Sir Renigald Greenhart, at your service. I must say, it’s a real relief to be out of there. A family of blackbirds had taken up residence in the bell tower, and it was blasted unsettling, feeling them rustling around like that. I’m grateful your attack on my castle allowed Alessia inside to ring the bell and free me, if nothing else.”

Fionn shrugged. “Luddonton won’t care how you got wrangled back into a human form as long as there’s no more rogue castle disrupting the scenery. I think it all worked out just fine.”

Alessia curled her lip. “Disappointed you didn’t get to kill us?”

“What are you going to do about it, Miss Witch? You know, there’s no shortage of towns that would

pay me a nice pocketful of coins to bring them a dead witch, even a little one—”

“We should go,” Marten said loudly, laying a hand on Fionn’s forearm, like that would diffuse the situation. “Sir Renigald, it was good to meet you. Alessia... I hope our paths don’t cross again. Fionn?”

“Right. That bounty won’t collect itself.”

Fionn turned back to Luddonton and father and daughter turned in the opposite direction, each party following the wide, muddy trenches gouged by the castle.

“We’ll find you an apprenticeship,” Marten heard Sir Renigald say to the girl, “where you can learn to control these curses.”

“How can we afford an apprenticeship with all our earthly possessions gone?”

The Black Knight whistled tinnily through his helm, his step jaunty as he strolled back to Luddonton to announce his success – omitting the details of how, exactly, the rogue castle had been subdued – and collect his pay. Shaking his head, Marten matched his stride to Fionn’s, following him as he had done ever since the knight had turned his village into a mass grave. He had survived another of the Black Knight’s mercenary quests, but perhaps the next one would be his last, one way or another.

The girl would land on her feet; witches generally did, given half the chance. Marten was less convinced of his own fate.

*Arden Powell is a queer Canadian SFF and romance author who enjoys writing horror and fluff in equal measure, with several novels and novellas out and a handful of short stories published with magazines and small presses. Obsidian Island is a fast-paced action/adventure fantasy novel with an all-queer cast, giant insects, and sentient trees. When a group of sailors is shipwrecked on an unmapped island, what looks like paradise quickly turns into a nightmare as the island infiltrates their dreams, trying to eat them and harvest their souls. Check it out [here](#).*

# A King and a Pawn

Tabitha O'Connell

The night had been a blur of disbelief and flight and exhaustion, culminating in a numbness that still held Rav in its grip. But as he followed Ael down the hallway of the unfamiliar manor house, two more of his guards walking behind, he squared his shoulders and composed his face into a mask befitting a crown prince – or, technically now, a king. Later he could lie on his bed and let his mind go blank.

Ael led him to a pair of double doors that stood open, revealing a wood-paneled dining room with a large diamond-paned window bathing the space in sunlight. Seated at the table facing them was their host – Torric Perrot, Baron of Highchester. Rav somehow remembered being told the name last night as he was rushed away from the castle in the wake of his parents' poisoning. He had apparently only escaped the same fate because he'd skipped dinner, lying that he was ill in order to avoid the typical cold silence.

"Ah, good morning, Your Majesty." Torric rose and bowed.

"Good... morning," Rav managed, instantly wrong-footed by the unfamiliar title. Ael pulled out a



chair for him, and he sank into it, resisting the urge to drop his head to the table.

"I'm glad to find you well," Torric continued gravely, resuming his seat. He was pale and clean-shaven, impeccably dressed in sapphire blue, clothes finer than Rav would have expected of a petty noble. "I can only imagine what you've been through. You have my deepest condolences." His eyes dropped respectfully.

"Thank you. Your generous hospitality is much appreciated."

"And I am happy to offer any resources you might find useful for uncovering this dreadful plot and apprehending those responsible."

"Thank you," Rav repeated. "I will confer with my people and let you know if we require anything."

A side door opened to admit several servants carrying platters. Rav prepared for the stomach-turning smell of roasted flesh – but it didn't come. The lids were removed to reveal a porridge laden with nuts and fruit, biscuits and jam, and a dish of tossed egg and vegetables. His eyes roved from the food to Torric. "How did you—"

Torric grinned, his formal demeanor dropping away. "I have my ways," he answered with a quirk of one eyebrow. Coming from any other person, under any other circumstances, Rav would have sworn it was flirtatious.

"Well, thank you," he answered, mask still firmly

in place. “It is much appreciated.”

“Of course,” Torric answered, still looking at him, and Rav was relieved when a servant leaned over and blocked his eye line.

Three days later, Rav sat at the desk in his quarters with Ael opposite. She’d already sketched an account of Lord Highchester’s background – one of his ancestors had won favor during the Winter Rebellion, earning the estate and title as a reward. It meant little enough, but allowed them to live comfortably. Torric, sibling-less, had been left in charge after his parents had retired to an even smaller and more out-of-the-way parcel of land in the Hemoran Isles.

“He likes men,” Ael reported now in her non-nonsense voice, answering Rav’s latest query. “He’s actually rather notorious for his frequent dalliances – noblemen’s sons, kitchen boys... At least he’s not a snob.”

“So he *is* flirting with me.” Rav’s face warmed as he said the words; he kept his eyes on the wall beyond Ael.

Ael smirked. “Well, I don’t think that was ever in doubt.”

Rav sighed and folded his arms tight to his chest. “But *why*?”

“From what I’ve heard, most likely because he finds it fun.”

“Well, maybe he should consider that the

ostensibly-grieving crown prince isn't an appropriate target for his *fun*," Rav muttered, rising from his seat to pace the room.

"I can have a word with him about it if you'd like." Ael shifted to continue facing him, leaning an arm on the back of her chair. "Honestly, though, I thought perhaps it might be a welcome distraction."

"Ael, you've known me almost all my life. Since when do I seem the kind of person who..." Rav waved a hand in the air.

"But that's exactly it. You never let yourself have fun. I think it's long overdue."

Rav sighed. "I don't know..."

Ael gave a half shrug. "It's up to you. Whatever feels right."

Torric manifested in Rav's mind, with his inviting demeanor and easy charm. It was enticing, but at the same time it rang false, and Rav had grown rather tired of being approached with a guise of flattery masking ulterior motives. But what wasn't a lie was Torric's graceful eyebrows, his pleasantly round face under a sweep of blond-brown hair, the slight cleft in his chin...

Remembering Ael was still in the room, he banished the image from his mind. "I... suppose I have yet to figure that out."

"Ah, there you are."

At Torric's voice, Rav looked up from his table in

the house's library. "Yes. Good afternoon. Did you need something?"

Torric approached and hopped up to perch on the edge of the table, one small space where books and papers hadn't taken over. "I wouldn't exactly put it that way. I thought *you* might need something – a break."

"Oh." Rav's eyes surveyed the sprawl before him. "Well, I'm rather preoccupied at the moment..." Property law wasn't exactly mesmerizing, but he'd felt panicked when he recalled how little attention he'd paid in those lessons. And he had to do something with his time.

"Exactly why a break would be good for you. You've been at it for hours." Torric blinked wide, innocent eyes at him.

Now that he was aware of his body again, Rav noted the cramps in his legs and the stiffness in his neck. His head felt stuffed to the brim with statutes and regulations. And really, why not spend some time in Torric's company? It couldn't do any harm. "All right." He relented, rising and stretching his arms. "A walk, perhaps?"

"My thought exactly. Come, I'll show you the gardens." Torric jumped down again and swept out a hand, while his other rested lightly on Rav's back. Rav was relieved that his legs managed to propel him forward. No one touched him casually like that – not his parents, not the servants, not even Ael. He didn't

know if he should be affronted or grateful.

“This way.” Torric led him down the corridor, turning frequently to make some remark or other. Two of Rav’s guards followed at a respectful distance.

“Here we are,” Torric declared, stopping before an arched door, and one of the guards hurried forward to open it for them. As he stepped out, Rav wasn’t immediately struck by sunlight and breezes as he’d expected; rather, a long arbor extended out from the door, forming a tunnel over a blue-tiled path. Green light filtered through the enclosing leaves.

“Garden design is one of my hobbies,” Torric explained, stopping next to Rav, who had paused in admiration. “This was inspired by Clarke’s writings on blurring interior and exterior spaces.” A hand alighted on the back of Rav’s shoulder for an instant, exerting gentle pressure. “Come on, let’s show you the rest.”

At the end of the arbor tunnel, the tile faded into a reddish gravel, a potted tree marking the exit on either side, providing one last moment of shelter before they emerged into the open. Neat pathways stretched ahead and to either side, with plots laid out all around, some full of flowers, some a mixture of shrubs and trees, some containing fountains; none were alike. “I’m glad you’re here when it’s all in bloom,” Torric remarked with satisfaction. “It’s nice all year, but this is the peak.”

“It’s beautiful,” Rav said, completely genuine, a

note of wonder in his voice, surprising himself with his lack of guardedness. If he'd been thinking, he would have exercised polite restraint. *It is lovely, Lord Highchester. You have done a fine job.*

"My thanks." Torric flashed him a grin. "Let me show you around."

Leaving the guards behind, they meandered up and down the paths, Torric chattering about everything they passed – what had inspired this or that layout, the origin of certain plants. He was different like this, in his element, focused on something he cared about. His laughing gray eyes sought Rav's often. His height, a few inches shorter than Rav's, suddenly struck Rav as endearing.

"And now for my favorite spot," Torric announced as they reached one of the back corners, where an ivy-covered wall delineated the garden's end. A row of triangular pine trees had screened it from sight until it was right in front of them – a large pool with stones lining its bank, water bubbling up from its center and trickling away in a slender stream they had passed earlier. "A spring! We happened upon it when I was making some additions, and of course I had to incorporate it. You know, there's a legend around here about springs..." His eyes flicked from the water to Rav. "Supposedly, if you bathe at one under the light of a full moon, you'll be blessed with eternal beauty. But you have to be completely naked." He gave Rav a sly look. "Out in the moonlight, for

anyone to see.”

Warmth coursed through Rav’s face. “Good thing you have a private one, then,” he managed, staring steadfastly at the burbling water.

“Right. Although I haven’t yet gotten around to trying it.”

An image graced Rav’s mind: Torric standing here with countless other men, feeding them these same lines, waiting for one of the desired responses. *You of all people don’t need it though, my lord. Or Perhaps we could try it... together.*

He stepped away from Torric and found his feet carrying him briskly back the way they’d come. “That’s very humble of you, choosing to forego such a chance.”

“Wait.” Gravel crunched behind Rav until Torric had jogged to his side. “I’ve made you uncomfortable. My apologies.”

Rav slowed, but maintained a steady pace. “I... am... simply not accustomed to being spoken to in such a familiar manner.”

Torric glanced at him with another wicked smile. “I bet you could use some more familiarity in your life. I wonder if you’ve ever had any... familiarity.” He raised his eyebrows significantly.

Every muscle in Rav’s body was taut with tension. He didn’t know if he wanted to bark to his guards to get this impudent man away from him, or to grab Torric’s face and kiss him. This was all a game to

Torric, he reminded himself, an effort to add another conquest to his roster – a *royal* conquest. He couldn't let himself fall for it.

On the other hand... he had never had anyone interested in *familiarity* with him before. He'd never had a chance, although perhaps he could have, if he'd been like Torric, constantly in pursuit, careless about mismatched power dynamics, and not minding a lack of privacy. All of which Rav couldn't fathom. Now, though, he was the pursued, by someone to whom it seemed their power imbalance didn't matter, and this was the most privacy he'd ever had in his life. Maybe... he really didn't have much to lose.

Except his dignity, he reminded himself as they neared the house again, having continued in silence. To acquiesce to becoming a petty noble's plaything, to humiliate himself in that way... Even if this were the only chance he ever got, he would rather stay unfamiliar forever than resort to that.

Rav's options for passing the time included proceeding with his remedial studies, discussing intelligence reports with Ael, and lying on the couch in his room dreading the future – so when Torric continued to offer him respite in various forms, he continued to accept. Simply spending time with the man didn't demean him in any way.

One day Torric suggested a ride, because “We can't have you losing that physique due to a lack of



exercise” – and he eyed Rav up and down in a way that made him simultaneously want to disappear and run to a mirror to study himself. But Ael vetoed the idea since it would require leaving the estate’s grounds, which led to Torric offering sparring as an alternative. Which Rav accepted, because he was actually quite good, and he welcomed the opportunity to impress Torric for once.

Blunted swords in hand, they faced each other in the stable yard, with Ael, another guard, and one of Torric’s servants as spectators. Torric flashed a challenging grin. “All right, let’s see what you’ve got.”

With his fingers wrapped around the familiar weapon, his legs firm in the familiar stance, Rav felt grounded for the first time since his arrival at Highchester. He met Torric’s eyes, calm and unflustered, and then he swung. His feint had Torric countering desperately, eyebrows rising, and Rav let himself grin and become lost in the motions.

Before long his hair was damp on his forehead, his breath coming and going in pants. He had driven Torric to the yard’s wall, and now Torric braced a foot up against it, trying to get leverage to push back, but his tunic was stained dark under the arms, and his face was red and glistening. Rav leaned into his blade, pressing Torric’s closer and closer to his face until he finally let it drop aside, sending Rav’s thudding into the wall next to his head.

“I yield,” Torric gasped, and Rav stepped back, lowering his sword to rest on the ground, squaring his shoulders despite his own weariness. He hoped his expression didn’t look quite as smug as he felt.

“By the gods,” Torric muttered, swiping one sleeve over his face. “You should’ve warned me.”

“And lose the advantage of surprise?” Now Rav let a smirk take over his face.

Torric’s mouth curved in an exhausted half-smile. “Fair strategy. Well-played, my liege.”

“You can call me Rav,” Rav blurted, and then instantly glanced around to see if anyone else had heard. But Ael and the other two were on the far side of the yard chatting – obviously about him and Torric, from their looks and gestures, but not because of his uncontrolled mouth.

Torric’s smile grew. “Certainly, if you wish... Rav. Not Ravinaren, then?”

Rav couldn’t help a slight cringe. “That’s my father. Was my father. Not me.”

Torric’s expression had fallen into solemnity. He started to speak, but Rav interjected, “It’s fine. I can talk about him.” He traced a line in the dust with his sword and went on, with a slight shrug, “He was the king much more than he ever was my father. The same was true for my mother. And I never expected differently – they had a kingdom to rule, after all.”

Torric finally pushed himself away from the support of the wall and stepped closer to Rav. “Were

you lonely?”

Rav’s eyes dropped from Torric back to the ground. “I think... I was lonely without knowing I was lonely. I didn’t know it could be any different – I thought it was normal to barely see one’s parents, and to have one’s siblings scattered about with various relatives and other noble families. And when I was made aware that wasn’t the case for everyone, I just... tried not to think about it too much.” He shrugged, attempting to undercut the bleakness of the words. Why was he blathering all of this to a stranger? Because the stranger had flirted with him? Because the stranger wasn’t treating him like the king-designate, but like a fellow human being? Because the stranger offered a chance to not be lonely, at least for a little while?

“That’s rather tragic,” Torric replied softly, and he lifted a hand to brush his thumb across Rav’s cheek. Rav held perfectly still. When Torric’s hand dropped again, he cast another quick glance over his shoulder. The two servants were still talking to each other, but Ael’s eyes were on him.

“You had some dirt,” Torric offered smoothly, his gaze following Rav’s. “I suppose we both ought to go get cleaned up.”

His eyes returned to Rav, and for a moment they just looked at each other, and although they were both sweaty and grimy and, frankly, smelly as well, Rav would have kissed him in an instant had they been

alone. Yes, he was an awkward dolt, but he was also a decent swordsman who had managed to impress and interest this handsome petty noble. Maybe he didn't have to be a naif getting seduced by a smoother, more experienced man – maybe the seduction could be mutual.

“Fallen under his spell, have you?” Ael sat on Rav's couch while he waited for hot water to be delivered to the tub in the adjoining room. Rav stood in the middle of the floor, not wanting to sully any of the furniture, his shirt already a crumpled heap beside him. Ael had seen more of him than this before; princes weren't allowed to be prudes, no matter how much they might want to. Besides having servants help him dress and undress, he'd fallen from a horse on a hunt once as a boy – a hunt he'd vehemently protested going on in the first place – and had gotten gouged in the leg by a rock, which had resulted in his pants being stripped off right there so the wound could be bandaged. It had been the most humiliating event of his life. At least after that he'd been allowed to forego all future hunts. He still had the scar; maybe that would impress Torric as well...

“I wouldn't exactly put it that way.”

“How would you put it?” Ael propped her elbows on her knees and rested her chin on her clasped hands.

“I... would... say...” He spun and walked to the door, then back to his former spot. “That I'm enjoying

his company.”

“You can admit it.” A smile danced on Ael’s mouth. “You don’t have to be embarrassed.”

“Maybe I’m not *embarrassed* so much as abjectly humiliated that I’m ready to throw myself at the first man who shows interest in me.”

“Oh. You’re farther gone than I thought.”

Rav sighed and sat cross-legged on the floor, the only place suitable for him right now. “Do you see any reason for me not to have a fling? I have no experience to speak of, but I’m not a fool. I know he’s using me... But maybe I can use him back.” He shot Ael a guilty look. “Is that terrible? Am I terrible?”

“No more terrible than he is.” Ael shrugged. “If you think this will be good for you, then by all means—” She swept an open hand through the air. “My only concern is that he may have *ambitions*.”

“Oh.” Rav bit his lip. “I hadn’t thought of that. I just thought, well...” Warmth flooded his face.

“That he wanted to get your lithe body into his bed?” Ael asked with a wicked smile, and Rav’s blush increased. “I’m sure that’s a significant part of it,” she went on. “No need for your vanity to be offended. But it’s a sense I’ve started to get – the fine clothes, the frequent conquests... He likes power, but there’s little enough for him here. If he could worm his way into your good graces, though...”

“Well, thank you for bringing that to my attention. I admit it hadn’t occurred to me before, but I will

certainly keep it in mind. ‘Sorry, Lord Highchester, but this body is all the reward you’re going to get.’” As soon as the words were out, he dropped his face into his hands and groaned, “Oh, gods, why did I say that?”, just as the water-bearing servants came in.

“Well, after that exhausting afternoon, how would you fancy an evening entertainment?” Torric asked Rav at dinner. His hair was back to its usual shiny softness, and he wore a pristine white tunic copiously embroidered with designs in blue thread – apparently already dressed for the occasion. “There’s a traveling musician passing through, and I’ve heard she’s quite good. I’ve secured her for a private concert tonight, so if you wish to join me... Ael says it’s safe, she’ll have no idea who you are.”

Rav didn’t want to know how much Torric had paid for this extravagance, or whether his visit had been the sole reason for it. With a forced smile, he answered, “Certainly, why not?”

Seated on a couch next to Torric in a small sitting room, with the elaborately-dressed woman perched on a chair opposite plucking a lute and singing about her lost lover’s eyes and lips and hips, Rav recalled the monotonous meetings he’d had to sit in on with his father every week. He’d often wished he were anywhere else, but right now, to be suddenly transported to one of those meetings would have been a gift. He could have sworn the woman had winked at

him when she sang about the luscious lips that she would never again kiss. And Torric was sitting close, too close; Rav was aware of his every twitch, every breath. He was going to need to change his clothes again with the way he was sweating.

Finally, the performer rose and dipped a low curtsy, and Rav and Torric applauded profusely, and then she was gone and Rav sat back with a sigh.

“So, what did you think?” Torric turned to face him, stretching an arm over the back of the couch.

“She... was... very talented.”

“Did you see how she looked at you? I was starting to get jealous.”

Rav’s eyes fixed on Torric’s. Torric gazed back; was he trying to look sultry, or was it just the dim lighting? Several servants and guards had sat in on the concert, in the back of the room, but Rav had been vaguely aware of them leaving when the singer had. Were he and Torric actually... alone?

“Well.” Rav’s voice cracked, but he cleared his throat and tried again. “Well. You needn’t be, you know.”

Torric’s mouth twisted into a grin. “I’m glad to hear it,” he said softly, and then he leaned forward, and, heart pounding, Rav leaned in too, slowly, until his lips brushed Torric’s. One of Torric’s hands cupped the back of his head and drew him closer. As Torric’s mouth gently explored his, Rav’s hands moved to Torric’s waist. He had expected the whole

thing to be rather desperate, even rough, but this was much, much nicer.

“Lie down?” Torric murmured, and Rav obliged, resting his head on a pillow and taking a moment to catch his breath before Torric settled on top of him and swept it away again. Torric’s fingers wove into his hair as he kissed Rav’s collarbone. He slid Rav’s tunic off his shoulder, making him shiver pleasantly.

But the rational part of his brain rang a warning bell. He had to maintain some control over the situation – even if Torric wasn’t ultimately in pursuit of status and power, it was quite possible that he would shrug Rav off like a worn coat once he’d gotten what he wanted. And by the gods, that was not going to happen. So when one of Torric’s hands started fumbling at the cord cinched at Rav’s waist, Rav grasped his wrist and held it still.

“Wait,” he whispered, and Torric lifted his head to look at him. “This is all new to me... as I’m sure you’re well aware.” He put on a shy smile. “Can we... take it slowly?”

“Yes, of course. Certainly.” Torric slipped his hand free and smoothed Rav’s hair back from his forehead. “Whatever you need. And may I just say... that was quite good for a first kiss.”

Those words immediately rendered Rav an awkward boy again; being pinned immobile beneath Torric didn’t help. He squirmed, and Torric let him slide free to rise to his feet. Torric still lounged,



looking up at him, and Rav thought about kneeling to kiss him again, but exhaustion was setting in and really, all he wanted now was some time alone to process it all.

“Thank you for a lovely evening,” he said, with a formal incline of his head, and Torric scrambled up to sit properly, a hint of worry in his expression. But when Rav let a slight smile drift onto his face, and quirked an eyebrow significantly, Torric cracked a grin.

“The pleasure was all mine.” He stood, and Rav had the distinct impression that he was about to go for a final kiss, but Rav stepped away before he could.

“Until tomorrow, Lord Highchester.”

Torric nodded back at him. “Pleasant dreams, my liege.”

The next day Rav made his guards stay behind while he and Torric strolled in the garden and kissed under the sheltering branches of a weeping willow. The day after, Torric found him in the library and bade him come see a certain book; Rav wasn’t sure if he really meant it or not until they arrived at the second-level balcony and Torric pulled him into an out-of-sight corner. The day after that, Torric idly announced at dinner, “There’s a full moon tonight, you know,” and offered Rav a raised eyebrow.

“Is there.” Keeping his face in check got easier the more time Rav spent with Torric, but he couldn’t hold

back the heat that crept into his cheeks.

“Perhaps an evening walk is in order.” A sly grin teased Torric’s mouth.

“Or, perhaps an evening watching it from the comfort of the house would be preferable?” Rav nonchalantly speared a piece of asparagus.

“Of course – that will do just as well.”

Darkness was falling when a knock sounded against the door of Rav’s room, right after Ael had slid her queen across the chessboard laid out on the desk and announced, “Check.”

“Yes?” Rav called, and the door cracked open to reveal a servant.

“If you’re ready, Your Majesty, Lord Highchester bids me direct you to him.”

“Shall we call it a draw?” Rav asked, scrambling up, a little more quickly than was proper.

Ael eyed the ranks of captured pieces, which clearly favored her. “I’m not sure that’s entirely fair, but go on, it wouldn’t do to keep Lord Highchester waiting.” She winked at him, and he hurried away.

As he climbed the indicated staircase in the flickering torchlight, his heart was already speeding up in anticipation. Torric was waiting for him atop the house’s tower, sitting on a blanket with a tray of bread, cheese, fruit, and wine beside him. The smile he turned on Rav was dazzling. “Welcome. Please, have a seat.” He patted the blanket next to him, and Rav was happy to obey, stretching out his legs

alongside Torric's. "Look there." Torric pointed at the horizon, and indeed, a sliver of the moon had crept into view, huge and yellow as a round of cheese.

"You have excellent timing," Rav commented, relaxing into the moment. A breeze ruffled their hair, countering the heat of the tower's sun-warmed stones. "I hope you're not disappointed to be here instead of in the gardens."

Torric lifted the wine bottle and poured them each a glass. "Not at all. I really don't think either of us needs to worry about our beauty quite yet, do you?"

Rav took the offered glass. "You certainly don't." He let his gaze meander over Torric's lounging form, and when his eyes returned to Torric's face he was rewarded with the sight of quickened breath through parted lips.

"Why thank you, my liege." Torric tapped his glass to Rav's, and, throats wetted with wine, they both looked back at the moon.

"So," Rav asked, putting on a light tone, "how many other men have you brought up here and charmed with a miniature picnic?"

"None, actually," Torric answered, giving him a quick glance that Rav couldn't read. But surely he was lying – unless every previous man had taken him up on the nude bathing offer.

"What about women? Any of those?" Rav reached across Torric to grab a sprig of grapes and popped one into his mouth.

“Not lately. I assume we’re talking generally at this point, not just moonlight picnicking? Women aren’t *bad*, they’re just... not my preference.” Torric took another sip of wine, then turned his gaze on Rav. “What about yourself? Any particular inclinations?”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?” A hollow laugh escaped Rav’s throat. “I’ll have to marry whoever’s politically expedient. Sooner rather than later, now that I’m...” He didn’t bother to finish.

“Oh, it won’t be so bad.” Torric gave his shoulder a gentle shake. “Marry for politics, take on a paramour for everything else.”

Of course that was an option, but the social navigation it would require made Rav’s head ache. Explaining to his spouse, finding a paramour, having the whole court know about it all...

He was about to say as much to Torric, but then Ael’s words echoed in his head – *ambitions*. Was there a reason Torric had brought up the idea of a royal paramour? Rav’s eyes slid to the side to study him surreptitiously. He’d gone back to innocently watching the rising moon – too innocently?

“Imagine the gossip, though, the rumors...”

“But there needn’t be any of that. Just because your parents were strait-laced doesn’t mean everyone will be shocked when you’re not. You’re the king. You can do what you want.”

“Hmm.” Rav lifted his cup to his lips again, not at all sure that was true. “Do you think there’s gossip

about us, here?"

"If I catch anyone talking about you inappropriately, I'll have their tongue," Torric replied placidly. "But really, what could they be saying that would bother you? I'm your host and loyal subject, happy to provide anything you need." His tongue flicked over his lips as he turned to face Rav. "Anything you desire."

The moon, in full view now, shone back at Rav from his eyes. "Anything, Lord Highchester?" Rav bent his head close to Torric's. "Anything at all?" His voice dropped to a whisper as his lips grazed across the light stubble on Torric's cheek.

"Anything and everything," Torric whispered back, his breath soft on Rav's ear.

Before he could overthink it, Rav swung his leg over Torric's to sit in his lap, pressing him against the tower wall as their mouths met. Every kiss was a fresh thrill. When Torric eased him down onto his back, one of his lowering hands hit something; there was a clink of glass against stone, chased by the strong smell of wine. Torric met Rav's eyes and laughed, and Rav laughed too and reached for the knot of his tunic cord. Torric's hands followed, shifting Rav's fumbling fingers aside and undoing it himself before sliding under the hem and over Rav's chest, sending Rav's skin tingling.

With the tunic cast aside, Torric's mouth trailed from Rav's shoulder all the way down to his navel.

Rav's body ached for *more* – but when Torric's fingers went to the buttons of his trousers, he grabbed the back of Torric's neck to pull him close and whisper, "Not yet."

"Your Highness." Oddly enough, the only time Ael used Rav's title in private was when she was excited – and it was nice to hear the old one, even if it was incorrect. "We've caught the plotter." Rav's door shut behind her and she dropped an unfolded letter onto the desk in front of him.

"Oh?" Rav had been nodding off – a consequence of remaining at the tower with Torric last night until the moon was high overhead – but now he was fully alert.

"It was your uncle – your mother's brother." Ael's voice turned regretful. "He wanted your brother on the throne, planning to rule through him. As far as we can tell, your brother knew nothing of the plan."

Rav believed that; his brother had always been sensitive, too kind and trusting for his own good. Too much, perhaps, like him. He sighed as he imagined the devastation the boy would be going through – first learning of his parents' murder, then finding out that his own uncle was the culprit. Perhaps Rav would have him come back and live with him, at least for a time.

"This means I'm safe to return, then?"

"Yes. I figure we'll leave first thing in the

morning?”

Rav nodded automatically. Ael went on about collaborators and imprisonments and the fate of his uncle’s estate, but his thoughts were on another, yet-unresolved matter. Finally, he interrupted with, “Do Torric or his people know?”

“No, I brought the news straight to you.”

“Good. Don’t tell them yet, all right?”

Ael’s eyebrows rose. “Does this have something to do with your dalliance with our young petty lord?”

“Maybe.” Rav shrugged one shoulder, eyes sliding to the side.

“Hmm. Are you planning something?”

“No,” Rav returned firmly. “I just want to tell him myself.”

“All right... But for the time being, might we return to business?”

“Yes – of course. Business. Um, can you... repeat the last thing you were saying?”

Rav had been lying propped up on one arm in his bed, bare-chested, for five minutes and was starting to feel ridiculous. A feeling he tried to quash, because it wouldn’t do for Torric to walk in and find him looking sheepish. He closed his eyes for a moment, reminding himself that he was practically a king, a king whose assassination had been averted and who would soon be returning victorious to take his place on the throne. Never mind that his own uncle had had

his parents killed and tried to do the same to him, that his younger brother was probably forever traumatized, and that he didn't feel at all ready to rule a kingdom. For now, he was going to leave all that aside and have one last carefree night.

The latch clicked, and Rav composed his expression as the door swung open. Torric stepped in, stopping when his eyes found Rav. A slow smile spread across his face as he pushed the door shut. "Well. This is a pleasant surprise."

"Welcome, Lord Highchester." Maintaining eye contact, Rav flipped the covers back from the empty side of the bed, and Torric moved toward him, already pulling off his tunic.

"To what do I owe this honor?" he asked, sinking onto the edge of the mattress to remove his shoes.

Rav's eyes traced the curve of his spine. How many other lovers had seen him like this, when he would be Rav's first? Rav didn't know anymore which of them had the advantage here, or if he even wanted to keep thinking of the situation in those terms. He'd planned to wait and tell Torric the news afterward – to show that he could be calculating too, that Torric had only ever been a means to an end for him. That he wasn't someone who could be exploited. But what did it matter at this point? They were here now, and tomorrow he would be gone. Nothing was going to change that.

"I've appreciated your hospitality," he said,



because apparently he took refuge in stiff formality even while lying in bed half-unclothed. “But tomorrow I’ll be taking my leave. My would-be assassin has been captured, so I have no reason to hide any longer.”

“Oh.” Torric turned to face him, folding his knees up on the bed, unpracticed surprise on his face. “Well. That’s good news. Although, I have to admit, I will be sorry to see you go...” His gaze roved over Rav’s chest, and he stretched out alongside him, lifting a hand to trace Rav’s collarbone.

Rav almost wanted to ask, *Do you really mean that? Or are you just waiting for promises of favors, perhaps an invitation to return with me as my paramour?* At the same time, though, he didn’t really want to know.

“Come here.” He wrapped an arm around Torric and pulled him close, close enough to see the fine hairs on his skin, to smell his clove perfume. Close enough for Torric’s mouth to meet his.

Torric’s body was warm against Rav’s back, his hand soft on Rav’s chest, his breath a whisper against Rav’s neck. Rav felt loose and light, as if he could close his eyes and float away. But the knowledge that it was all over now kept him shackled to the ground. Finally he shifted, pulling away from Torric so that he could roll over and face him. Pink had bloomed in Torric’s cheeks, his lips were bright and swollen, and his hair

was a disordered mess of tufts sticking out at all angles. Rav wanted to reach out and comb some of it back into place, making a teasing comment, but it was too late. He'd already started rebuilding the barrier that kept him isolated from everyone else.

Torric, blissfully oblivious, gave him a lazy smile. "I trust that was satisfactory, my liege."

"Indeed," Rav mumbled, curling his legs up and settling his head deeper into the pillow. He needed Torric to go, but couldn't bring himself to be so rude as to outright dismiss him.

Torric shifted onto his back and lay quiet for a bit, and Rav took the opportunity to study him. Wondering what he would do tomorrow, and all the days after that. How long until he bedded someone new? How long until he forgot about Rav?

*Come back with me.* Words he couldn't even conceive of saying, because if Torric agreed, Rav would never know if he could trust him – if he had agreed for Rav, or for the status it would gain him. And if Torric declined the offer, well. Rav would never be able to bear that rejection. Better to keep the whole thing as it was, a pleasant, unblemished memory.

His hand rose unbidden to rest on Torric's cheek, gentle pressure turning Torric's face toward him. Rav kissed him, one last time. How had it already become such a natural, comfortable thing to do?

"I should sleep," he murmured as he drew away,

and it came out much less firm than he'd meant.

"I could stay," Torric whispered back, fingers wrapping around the hand that still lay against his jaw, gently sliding it down to his mouth to kiss Rav's fingertips.

Rav ached to give in. To allow himself the comfort of having Torric beside him until dawn, even if all they did was sleep. But that was why he couldn't. Having that once would make all the ensuing nights without it that much harder to endure.

"I wish you could," he answered, and he meant it more than Torric would ever know. "But I need to be well-rested for the journey, and for... everything after."

"Right. I understand." Torric loosed his hand, and that loss of contact felt like the most painful ending of all. He slid from the bed and put his clothes back on while Rav watched and bit his tongue. He wanted to say, *I'll be going early tomorrow, so we should say goodbye now*. But what more of a goodbye did he have to give?

"Goodnight then, my liege," Torric said, his tunic hanging loose at the waist, his hair still in disarray. "My thanks for a very pleasant evening."

His sly smile made Rav's chest ache. "The pleasure was all mine," he said seriously, and Torric grinned.

"Pleasant dreams, Your Majesty." He gave a mock bow, and then he was gone.

“All right, spill.” Ael’s horse sauntered up beside Rav’s, jarring him from his reverie. “You’ve been quiet all morning, and I want to know what happened with that petty noble of ours.”

Rav had hoped she’d take his silence as a hint not to ask. “Nothing,” he answered shortly.

Ael’s eyes narrowed, because of course all that answer did was elicit her concern. “What did he do?”

“Nothing, really, it’s not like that.” It would have been easier if it was, if Torric had offended him in some way. But as Rav had expected, they’d left before Torric was awake. The sight of him slipping from Rav’s room last night had been replaying in his mind ever since he’d woken up.

He heaved a sigh, giving in to Ael’s continued piercing gaze. “I miss him, all right?” he blurted, shoulders hunching. “I know it was just a fling and that it didn’t mean anything to him, and it wasn’t supposed to mean anything to me either. But I still miss him. And it makes me feel absolutely pathetic.”

Ael cocked her head at him. “I don’t think that’s pathetic. It’s just... human.”

“I’d rather not be human right now,” Rav returned miserably. “Ael – I’m not ready to go back and be king.”

“I think,” she said softly, after a moment, “that you’re as ready as you can be.”

Somehow, that offered little comfort. He couldn’t

even bring himself to nod. They rode on in silence, each beat of his horse's hooves widening the distance between him and Torric.

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# The Red Lady

Josie Jaffrey

There's a castle in the mountains of Transylvania, and in that castle lives a vampire.

It's a cliché, sure, but then a lot of true things are. Opposites do attract. What goes around does indeed come around. And this vampire really is as old as the hills that surround his castle. The towers used to stand higher, visible from all around, but the land on which the vampire's home was built has become depressed over time. Much like the vampire himself, in fact.

"Stan!" he yells as he sweeps along the candlelit, stone-built, cobweb-strewn corridors, his bare feet slapping on the floor as his velvet smoking jacket billows in his wake. "Stanislav! Where are my cigarettes? If I don't light up within the next sixty seconds I'm going to expire from nicotine deprivation, and then you'll be sorry. Stan! Where are you, you bloody reprobate?"

The vampire rolls into a room that resembles a mediaeval torture chamber crossed with a midden, but is generally referred to as the kitchen. No one is brave enough to eat in there, but Stan likes to grow tomatoes on the windowsill above the grime-rimmed sink, if

you can give the basin under the water pump such a grandiose name. Stan thinks that the damp is good for the plants. The vampire thinks it's a miracle that anything can grow at all in the meagre light that seeps through the mould- and dust-covered glass. Not that he plans to do anything about it. He's a *vampire*. What's the point in being supernatural if you still have to do chores?

"Stan! Didn't you hear me calling?"

The human doesn't look up from his tomatoes, which he is pollinating carefully with a small paintbrush. There are plenty of flies in the kitchen, but no bee is stupid enough to enter its noxious environment, so it's up to Stan. He doesn't mind; it's restful work. Usually.

"Hello?" the vampire persists. "I said, didn't you hear me calling?"

"Half the mountain heard you calling, Dorian." Stan remains intent on his tomatoes.

"Then where are my bloody cigarettes?"

"You smoked them."

"What? All of them?"

"All of them."

"Well, get some more."

Finally, Stan puts down his paintbrush. "I did warn you to ration them, remember? They were the last."

"Just get me some more, would you?" Dorian says this as a throwaway remark, as though it were as simple as popping outside and picking a handful of

grass.

“No, Dorian, they were the *last*,” Stan repeats. “I told you about the battle in the city. The humans rebelled. There won’t be any more cigarettes. Didn’t you listen? Dorian, I’m sorry, but all the other vampires were turned human or killed. One way or another, they’re gone.”

Dorian’s mouth drops open.

“My god, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I *did* tell you.”

“But this is awful,” Dorian says, pacing the kitchen as he pulls at his messy, dark hair. “This is a disaster. It’s a fucking *tragedy*.”

“I’m sorry.” Stan slows Dorian’s frantic steps with a hand on his shoulder. “I know you had friends there. They might have got out. A lot of people did, they’re saying. Did you want me to ask around, check out some names?”

“What? Oh, I’m sure they’re all fine,” Dorian waves a hand dismissively. “But no more *cigarettes*? What am I going to do?” Dorian flings himself dramatically onto a mouldering dining chair.

With a sigh, Stan returns to his tomatoes.

And so life within the castle walls continues unchanged, day after day, while the world outside reshapes itself. The last city on Earth has a new king, young and kind and nothing like the wicked vampire empress he replaced. The forests fill with travellers, keen to explore the country now that they are finally



free from the confines of their servitude. Dorian sulks inside the castle and meets not a single one of them.

Until.

*Knock knock knock.*

The first two raps are loud and imperious, the third quieter and more hesitant, as though the knocker has remembered at the last minute that they have no right to demand entry.

“Get that, would you?” Dorian says.

It’s a wild, dark night and the rain is coming down in sheets. Perfectly ominous weather that Dorian might normally find stirring, but he’s wearing his best suede loafers and it seems a shame to risk sullyng them.

“You get it. I’m tired.” Stan looks pointedly at the small bandage wrapped around his elbow. He’s harvested half a pint of blood this morning, as he does every month, and distilled it into one of the bottles that they keep cool in the ice house. It’s just enough to keep Dorian ticking over. Stan used to do this as a gift to his lover, but that time has long passed. Now he does it as a favour that he can hold over his housemate – always useful when said housemate has supernatural powers – but also because it’s hard not to feel sorry for Dorian. Hundreds of years old, with knowledge and strength and a decent intellect, and the vampire spends all his time languishing in his decrepitude because he’s too scared of the contamination to go

outside.

Pathetic, really.

"It'll only be one of your idiot friends," Dorian says.

*Knock knock.*

The knock remains quiet, but insistent.

"If it were one of my friends," says Stan, "then they would have let themselves in by now."

It's true; they're always wandering in and out. Sometimes Dorian feels like the castle doesn't even belong to him anymore, but he can hardly complain. Where else is he going to find a human with uncontaminated blood? Now that all the others have left the city, contaminating their own blood in an act of rebellion that Dorian considers irretrievably stupid, Stan is more valuable than ever. Plus, much though he hates to admit it, Dorian would be even lonelier and sadder without his companion. He's the only friend Dorian has.

With no small amount of dramatic production, Dorian gets to his feet and drags himself to the front door. It's more of a gate, really, made from fifteen-foot-high panels of ancient wood, studded with black iron. Dorian expects that the person waiting on the other side will want something from him: shelter, or food, or perhaps even company. What he doesn't expect is a petite, brown-skinned, black-haired woman with eyes of such a rich, deep brown that they seem to invite him in. It takes several long seconds

before he realises he's been staring.

"Hello," she says.

"Hello." He's still staring. He can feel himself doing it, falling into those beguiling eyes, but he can't seem to stop himself.

"Hello? I need some help." The woman gestures pointedly at her rain-soaked body, which distracts Dorian for yet more long seconds, longer than it should take him to notice that she has a mosaic of deep scratches on her bare arms and blood streaked down her tunic.

He's a vampire, for fuck's sake. He should have smelled it on her the moment he opened the door.

It's a bad sign.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" she demands.

Not trusting his tongue when his eyes are already being so treacherous, Dorian simply stands aside and ushers her in.

Laila is having a Bad Day. If she's being honest then the whole decade has been something of a trial, but this last month has really ramped up the stakes – pun intended – and this day in particular can fuck right off and then fuck off some more. She's been wandering in the woods ever since the city self-destructed, trying to put some much-needed distance between herself and the rest of the fleeing populace. That mission has so far taken her through a river, up several trees, into a wolf cave and past charnel piles heaped with gore so

stomach-wrenching that it was a bit much even for her. Now that she's finally found a refuge that isn't populated by ferocious wildlife, mouldering corpses or former citizens who'd happily see her dead, she really could do without the building being inhabited by a long-haired layabout with the affectation of a romantic poet. She would also be happier if said layabout would tie his robe, which is currently hanging open to display a lightly-muscled stomach that she finds irritatingly distracting.

But, as they say, beggars can't be choosers. Desperate times, et cetera. And much though she hates to admit it, even to herself, Laila is desperate.

"Do you have a bathroom I can use?" she says as she squelches her way inside. She could do with some dry clothes, but her first priority is washing and binding her wounds, which she can feel seeping still. The sensation is foreign and distressing, her life slipping out through her skin drop by drop, bringing back echoes of memory that haven't haunted her for more years than she can count. They're creeping at the back of her mind now though, clawing their way forward into her consciousness. If she can't get herself cleaned up soon then she's going to start remembering the things she decided to forget.

The dilettante gestures at a door a little way along the corridor, but by this time Laila has had time to take in her surroundings and is having second thoughts. If the state of the corridor is anything to go

by, then tending her wounds in the bathroom is liable to end in gangrene; the stone floor is sticky with dirt, the ceiling is sticky with cobwebs and there's green slime growing on the walls. It's only her desperation that forces her to push open the creaking, flaking door to reveal a room that could, at best, be described as rustic, which is to say that it looks and smells like a pigsty.

Laila shudders.

"Dorian?" someone calls from within the bowels of the castle. "Who is it?"

Dorian must be the name of the layabout, Laila supposes, but he doesn't reply. He's still looking at Laila with a disconcertingly intense expression on his face.

"Dorian?" Footsteps follow the voice, and a friendly-looking man comes into view. Unlike his surroundings, he is well-kept and neat, with tidy clothes and a trimmed beard. "Who's your soggy guest?" he asks with a welcoming smile.

When Dorian just says, "Um...", Laila introduces herself. Sort of.

"I'm... Francesca."

"Stan. Let me get you a towel. And you're hurt," he says with concern. "My god, Dorian, I hope you weren't expecting her to use *this* dank place to dress those cuts?"

Dorian blushes. He *blushes*. "It's been a while since I cleaned up."

Stan gives Dorian an odd look before turning back to Laila. "Follow me, Francesca. I clean my rooms regularly, I promise."

With a last look back at Dorian, she follows Stan through neglected corridors to the back of the castle, where a brightly-polished door leads into a parlour that's not only clean and in perfect repair, but also sumptuously decorated. The style is almost as grand as that which Laila has, until lately, taken for granted.

"Just through here," Stan says, ushering her towards a doorway from which a sparkling washstand gleams invitingly. "Let's get you patched up." He picks up a jug of clean water and reaches for her arm.

As a general rule, Laila doesn't like to be touched. She likes to be admired from a distance, and while it's true that she's been the centre of more than one orgy in her time, somehow that's less intimate than this. But she is so desperate to stop the feeling of her blood leaking from her body that she offers up her arms without resistance. Stan is efficient and brisk as he cleans and bandages her cuts, which should be enough to chase the memories away, but still they come.

Other hands once tended her wounds. Another voice once soothed her, and offered her a choice: this pain, this blood leaving her body and taking her life with it, or the opportunity to take it back and make herself whole.

Her blood or theirs. Savage or be savaged. Kill or be killed. Transform herself and never look back, or

end up like her mother did, broken in her arms.

When Stan leaves Laila to rest in his spare bed, she loses herself in the past. She has taken blood, so much blood. She has bathed herself in it. She has painted her skin with the pain of others like armour, but now it's gone, along with her immortality. Now she has nothing but the blood in her veins and the memories in her head, spilling out uncontrollably as she tries, in vain, to keep them inside.

And so the girl who was once a warrior, once a vampire, once an evil empress, curls up into a ball and cries herself to sleep.

"She's resting," Stan says as he emerges from his rooms. Dorian has been hovering in the corridor outside, pacing in a futile attempt to spend his nerves.

"She's beautiful, Stan."

"She is."

"And so graceful. So fierce. It's in her eyes, don't you think?"

"Er..."

"I think I love her."

This is no surprise to Stan. Dorian was like this with him once, too: giddy and impulsive and, frankly, stupid. He'll get over it soon enough, Stan thinks. Half of the emotion is probably for show anyway.

"Dorian, don't be an idiot. You know nothing about her. In fact, as far as I can tell, you haven't yet exchanged two words with her."

“We don’t need words. My soul recognises hers.” Dorian closes his eyes and clutches his chest. “They chime in exquisite symphony—”

Now Stan’s sure he’s playing it up. He slaps Dorian around the head, then leads him away into the kitchen so his friend’s excitable ramblings won’t disturb “Francesca”.

“Snap out of it, will you?” Stan says. “She is our guest, and we’re going to make her comfortable for as long as she needs to recover from her injuries. And, just to be perfectly clear, possible ways to make her comfortable do not include reciting poetry, walking around half naked or gawping at her like a newly-landed fish.”

“Comfortable.” Dorian thinks for a moment, then a new resolve comes over him. “Eureka! You’re right. You’re absolutely right.” And then he’s gone, sweeping away along the corridor with his finger raised in the air, dramatic as ever.

There’s nothing Stan can do but ride it out. He sighs and goes to check on his tomatoes.

When Laila wakes up the next morning, unused to sleeping so long, she steps out of Stan’s rooms and immediately questions her recollection of the castle’s layout. This is the corridor through which she entered yesterday, or at least she thought it was, but now it’s unrecognisable. Where before there was mould and filth, now the stone sparkles so much it’s slippery



under her sock-clad feet. It even smells clean, and there isn't a spider in sight.

"Do you like it?" Dorian asks. He's standing so close that it makes Laila jump. "Sorry," he says. "About startling you. And about yesterday. The place needed a bit of tidying up, I know. But now that it's in a better state, maybe I can give you the tour?"

With newfound grace, he guides her through the dining hall, the ballroom, the sitting room, the games room, on and on, every single one primped and polished and luxuriously presented. Dorian's different today, too. He's not just fully dressed, but smartly dressed. While Laila's making do with oversized clothes lent to her by Stan, Dorian is resplendent in a tailored suit and paisley ascot that matches the lining of his jacket. She can't imagine where he got it. No one makes material like that anymore.

The castle and its owner have been completely transformed, as though elves have been hard at work overnight, or a curse has been lifted.

"How long was I asleep?" Laila asks incredulously.

"Oh," Dorian says bashfully, "not long. I work quickly."

*Very quickly indeed*, Laila thinks, and then she realises what's been staring her in the face. Or, rather, who.

"You're a vampire," she says.

His face falls. "Oh. I thought you hadn't

recognised me.”

If Laila were the type of person who laughed, she'd be laughing now.

“You cleaned and renovated the entire castle while I was asleep, and you didn't think I'd suspect you were anything other than human?” she says.

Dorian takes a moment to compose himself, clearing his throat. “Yes, well, it sounds stupid now you say it out loud.”

“It does, doesn't it?”

“Ouch.” Dorian clutches his heart with both hands and swoons dramatically against the pool table in the games room. “You wound me.”

Laila rolls her eyes. “You're an idiot.”

“That's exactly what Stan keeps telling me. Wait...” He straightens up and looks Laila in the eyes, searching for something. “You mean you really don't know who I am?”

“Should I?”

“I suppose not,” Dorian says uncertainly, then he smiles.

Laila searches his face, trying to match it to the features of the vampires she once knew, but she finds nothing familiar. There's something, though. Something about the way he speaks—

“And you're not afraid of me?” he asks, interrupting her train of thought.

“Why would I be afraid?”

“Well...” He shrugs. “You're a human, fleeing

from a city where you've been under the control of vampires your entire life."

Laila composes her face, trying to give the impression that his assumption is correct.

"Aren't you scared," he continues, "to find yourself in a sanctuary sullied by a sanguineous spectre of serious, erm..." He pauses, obviously looking for an alliterative noun. "Savagery?"

"No," says Laila.

"Oh."

"Got a little carried away there, didn't you?"

"A bit." Dorian gives her a sheepish look. "Would you like something to eat? I thought we could have pancakes."

"Are you cooking them?" she asks suspiciously.

"No, Stan is. He says I can't be trusted with fire. But I did grind the flour."

"Then, yes. I suppose."

If Laila plays nice then it will keep Dorian happy, and she has a feeling that he might prove useful. An idea is starting to form.

Once, she was the ruler of the last city on Earth, a vampire empress with power over the life and death of every human and vampire under her control. Once, she was untouchable, then a careless sip of contaminated blood took her immortality and all of her power with it. Now her own blood is contaminated, creeping through her veins like slow poison. But there is one way she might reclaim what

she has lost. The new ruler of the city that was once hers is not just a vampire, but a vampire with a bloodline of such potency that it would overcome all the contamination in the world. If she can just get hold of some of it, then maybe...

Ridiculous though he is, Dorian is the key.

It is no accident that of all the people she could have run into out here in the forest, she just happened to land herself at his doorstep. To combat a vampire king, she needs a vampire pawn. All that power, there for her to direct, and in the guise of a soft fool who is so pathetic he would lick her feet if she asked him to. She might not have her own strength at the moment, but she can borrow his until she has no further use of it. It will be a simple matter to dispose of him afterwards.

Laila's stomach grumbles. How demeaning. She will refine her plans later, but right now she intends to eat. After days spent running through the forest, living on nothing but her nerves, she is utterly ravenous.

The next couple of days are tense ones for Dorian. He's holding himself back, trying not to startle the beautiful butterfly who has fluttered unwittingly into his net. He longs to serenade her, to work late into the night writing sonnets that praise the bright darkness of her eyes, but he used up his entire blood store to give himself the energy to clean the castle at supernatural speed, and now he is exhausted. Until Stan harvests

more – and who knows when that will be – Dorian will need to eat and sleep just as much as the object of his desire.

How poetic, he thinks, to be brought into such joyful equilibrium, rendered human by his love. The terrible agony of it, to be so humbled by tender emotion! His shirts, like his verses, become frillier by the day.

Fortunately for Dorian, “Francesca” doesn’t read his odes. She has her own rooms now, at the top of the tallest tower, as befits his princess. He’s furnished them with the best fabrics and the twinkliest trinkets he could conjure up, but there are consequences to letting your home run to ruin for decades and one of them is that almost everything has rotted or mouldered in the meantime. Her quarters are barer than he would like, so he pushes his lyrics under the door every few hours in the hopes that his words might decorate the gaps between the furniture. Unbeknownst to him, she uses them to keep her fire warm.

Stan, however, knows exactly how she’s fuelling her fire, because he built it for her this morning. To his mind, burning is too good for the scraps of embarrassment that Dorian calls poetry. It’s best for all concerned that Stan keeps Dorian away from their guest until she’s recovered from her ordeal out in the wilds and is feeling more robust. She’ll have to be to cope with Dorian in a wooing mood.

“When do you think my butterfly will emerge from her cocoon?” Dorian asks as Stan returns to the kitchen with their guest’s empty breakfast tray.

“When she’s ready.”

“Yes, but when will that be?”

“You need to calm down,” Stan says. “We have no idea what she’s been through out there. She needs time to rest and recover. What she does *not* need is a lovesick vampire mooning at her over the breakfast table.”

“I am *not* mooning,” Dorian says, offended. “I am simply trying to express my adoration in a manner suited to its depth and sincerity.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake. Do you hear yourself?”

Dorian drapes himself artistically over one the armchairs beside the kitchen fireplace. “I hear only the beating of my heart,” he says, “and it pounds *Fran-cesca... Fran-cesca...*”

“Well, it’s the only thing that’s going to be—”

Thankfully, their conversation is interrupted by another knock at the castle door.

Being human is utterly tedious. Laila hates every moment of it. Everything takes forever, she feels stupid with lethargy and her whole body is a mass of aches and pains. She’s just trying to pinch some semblance of colour into her bloodless cheeks when she hears the commotion at the gate.

It was inevitable that someone would come along

sooner or later. This castle may have stayed secretly in its sunken little hole while the city was little more than a prison to its inhabitants, but now that people are travelling freely in the mountains, Laila knew it would only be a matter of time before others stumbled across her hideaway. She sees the tail end of the group from her bedroom window, a couple of young women she doesn't recognise but who bear the unmistakable scars of bloodletting at their wrists and necks. They must have been donors back in the city, which means that although she may not recognise them, they will certainly recognise her.

"We have more visitors!" Stan calls up the staircase.

Laila can't let them see her. They'll blow her cover, and then she'll have no chance to manipulate Dorian into doing what she wants. What she needs. And she does need it, she craves it, the strength of immortal blood running through her veins, making her invincible once more. She needs it so badly that her mouth goes dry every time she thinks of it, her vision strobos with dark spots and her fingers start to tingle. She is so mortal, so fragile now that she almost can't bear to step outside her room. It isn't hard for her to pretend she's too timid to meet the newcomers.

Dorian comes to find her a few hours later. For the first time, she steps away from the open door and lets him inside.

"They've gone," he says. "Stan's showing them

the way to the lake.”

“Oh.” Pointedly, she takes Dorian’s latest attempt at poetry from the mantelpiece and throws it into her already-roaring fire. She’s hoping to distract him with this petty cruelty, perhaps even to provoke some grand declarations that she can start turning towards her own ends, but for once Dorian does not seem to have romance on his mind.

“Stan thought you’d want to see them,” Dorian says. “He thought that, since you’d shared the experience of being human captives in the city, you might have a lot to talk to them about. He was a bit surprised when you stayed up here.”

Laila doesn’t like his tone. He’s speaking slowly, with a glint in his eye that hints at knowledge beyond his words. It doesn’t bode well. Laila tries not to react to it, and fails.

“It’s all right,” he says. “I know your secret.”

“What are you talking about?” Laila’s tone is blasé, but her mind is racing. How could he have worked it out so quickly? She thought she’d kept herself out of sight, but maybe the visiting humans saw her at her tower window as they approached? Or perhaps Dorian knew she was the Empress right from the beginning and has simply been playing along with her ruse. She’s reluctant to give him so much credit as an actor – going by his poetry, his artistic skills are sadly limited – but she has to concede that it is possible that the ridiculous vampire isn’t quite as



ridiculous as he appears.

“Don’t worry,” he says, “I won’t tell Stan. But you haven’t always been human, have you? Before the city was emancipated, you were like me.” He smiles, as though he is revelling in their commonality. “You were a vampire.”

She doesn’t answer right away. He knows a little of the truth, clearly, but how did he come by that knowledge and how much will she have to admit to keep him happy? In the end, she just nods slightly; better to let him do the talking so she can work out exactly how much he has learned.

“I knew it!” he grins. “I knew there must be a reason you weren’t afraid of me.”

Ridiculous vampire. As though anyone, human or vampire, would be afraid of this fop.

“You don’t have to hide away from them, though,” he continues. “We’ve all done some awful things to feed our appetites, but no one has any reason to be concerned about repercussions.” He pauses for a second, long enough that Laila starts to think it might be true. “Apart from the Empress. She got away, they said. Slipped the city’s sieve like a sliver of silvered—”

Laila leaves the room while Dorian is still searching for his next word. Perhaps a walk will do her some good. At least she knows Dorian won’t follow her outside, since he never leaves the castle.

She is assured that, for the moment, he has no idea just how close the Empress is. But with the walls of

the city broken down, even his ignorance won't hold for long.

"What in the world are you doing?" Stan asks. "You're not *cooking*, are you?"

Dorian is clattering around in the kitchen with a collection of utensils that he's not quite sure how to use. At this precise instant, he is whisking egg whites with a potato masher, with surprisingly good results.

Despite appearances, Dorian is not quite as stupid as he would have the world believe. He wouldn't have survived for centuries as a vampire, particularly not as a rogue vampire living outside of the protections of the city, if he wasn't hiding a fierce intelligence beneath his exuberant verses and flamboyant outfits. His head is more than simply a convenient place to keep his flowing chestnut curls. It wouldn't do to let "Francesca" know that, though.

But Stan has earned his trust. It's time to come clean.

"I'm making a soufflé," he replies, holding the bowl of whipped egg whites upside down above his head for a moment. "Perfect!"

"What's a soufflé?" Stan asks.

"A deliciously light and airy confection that was popular amongst fancy folks before the Fall."

"And you know how to make one?"

"Evidently."

Stan presses his lips closed, composing himself for

a moment before replying. “You can *cook*? All this time, you’ve been able to cook?”

Dorian makes a *so-so* gesture with his hand.

“Then why have I been doing it all?” Stan yells.

“Because you’re a wonderful person and I am a terrible ingrate. I’ll make it up to you, I promise. I shall make you roasts to set your mouth watering. I shall craft cakes to delight your palate. I shall whip up every flavour of soufflé that your heart desires, but this one shall be flavoured with raspberry and elderflower, for my princess’s luncheon.”

She’ll be used to the best of the best, Dorian thinks. If he has any hope of getting her to trust him – and he is determined that she will – then he will need to treat her in the manner to which she has become accustomed. Namely, as an empress.

Because of course Dorian knows who she is. He recognised her the moment she first turned up on his doorstep, which is the only excuse he has for his unforgivable rudeness – and tactlessness – when she first arrived.

Before he shut himself away in his castle a decade ago, he would watch her sometimes from outside the city walls. He’d see her in her palace, attended by her servers, surrounded by her guards, and he’d wonder how it felt to be so untouchable. Was she as lonely as he was? Before Stan came along, Dorian would sneak into the city to steal the uncontaminated blood he needed to survive, and he’d wonder if she missed the

thrill of the chase. He'd watch her with her scores of admirers and wonder whether she remembered one chase in particular, centuries ago, when a plain young man entranced by her beauty fell willingly into her bed and under her teeth.

Perhaps she didn't realise that they'd kissed forcefully enough to bring a drop of her own blood to his lips. Perhaps she didn't know that, all those centuries ago, she was the one who made Dorian the vampire he is today.

After she left him, Dorian remade himself so that he would never be so easily forgotten again, but apparently he did his job too well. His appearance may be memorable now, but to his once-vampire princess he is unrecognisable. He will have to remind her.

And this is the first step: raspberry soufflé. The very dish they ate that fateful night in Dubrovnik just after his debut theatrical performance, just before their final kiss. Now that his blood can no longer be the way to her heart, and his poetry is falling flat, perhaps the soufflé might work instead.

His brutal, brittle butterfly must have a soft edge somewhere, and Dorian intends to find it.

When Laila comes back from her walk, there's a strange aroma emanating from the back of the castle. Strange, but delicious; some sugary, half-remembered shadow of a scent that tickles her memory and sets her

mouth watering. By the time she follows her nose to the kitchen, she's almost placed it: it's baked and fruity and light and...

"Raspberry soufflé!" Dorian announces, sweeping a silver cloche from a dish set in the centre of the newly-polished, if slightly rot-pitted, table. He gives Laila a significant look, as though he's waiting for a reaction.

"Well done," she says. "Did you want a pat on the head?"

He sighs. "Just sit and eat."

She does as Dorian says because she's hungry after her walk and she likes desserts, not because she intends to obey him, but he smiles as they sit, and Laila suspects he's taking her actions as compliance despite her glare. What comes next only confirms her fears.

"Are you enjoying your soufflé?" he fishes.

Laila is – it's delicious – but she refuses to give him the satisfaction of saying so. She ignores him and takes another mouthful.

"And how was your walk, gentle maiden?"

"I'm not gentle," she snaps.

"I know you're not," Dorian replies. "I was speaking euphemistically. When one is attempting to soothe a dragon, one does not start by telling her how fierce she is."

Laila is unsure whether to be flattered or offended. What does he know about her anyway? Nothing at all.

Not even her real name.

“I don’t *want* to be gentle,” she says, defiant rather than shameful. She will not apologise for the things she has done to survive. In her eyes, everyone is some kind of monster. “Do you think I should be like you, a kind little nobody sitting here in your tumbledown castle while the world carries on outside without you? Do you even know what the world *is* anymore?”

“Tell me,” he says, undeterred.

Laila finishes her soufflé while she tries to condense her feelings into words, wondering all the time why she’s bothering to explain herself to this sad little vampire. “Hollow,” she says eventually. “Empty. Maybe I’m partly to blame for that, but then what does it matter? It’s all futile anyway. You can be the queen of the world one day and a ghost the next, back where you started and worse. Maybe a hermit’s life like yours is the best anyone can hope for, away from everyone, no pain and no gain, worthless and pointless.”

Laila is expecting anger from Dorian, or at least offence, but instead he gives her a look that is filled with more quiet intelligence than she had credited him with. Perhaps she underestimated him.

“Come with me,” he says after a moment, getting to his feet.

She doesn’t move. Faced with this new version of him, she is suddenly uncertain.

“It’s not far,” he says. “And it’s within the castle.

You won't even dirty your socks."

Against her better judgement, she allows herself to be led.

The tower in which Laila has her room might be the tallest in the castle, but the window opens directly into tree canopies that hang over the grand entrance. There's no view. The tower they climb now, up twisting wooden staircases of brittle wood that creaks with every step, is at the very back of the castle. When they emerge into the open air, there's a gap in the tree line that opens a vista stretching across the forest, through the mountains, past the remains of the city and off to the point where the horizon curves around the Earth.

If Laila were a different person, it might take her breath away. As it is, she merely shrugs one dainty shoulder and says, "Good view."

They watch it for a while in silence. A long while. A green lizard creeps a staccato path along the stone wall of the tower top. A squirrel leaps between the treetops that frame the view, rattling the branches so a few motes of leaf litter drift into the sunlight. A murmur of starlings concertinas across the afternoon sky, condensing and stretching and whirling its way to the baked blue stucco of the city.

"Laila?" Dorian says.

Lulled by the peace, she turns to him unthinkingly. He smiles at her, *gotcha*, and her stomach rolls as she realises she's just answered to the wrong name.

“You know who I am,” she says. Her mouth is dry.

“I do.”

“Since when?”

“All along.”

*All along.* He knows she was once a vampire. He knows she was once the Empress. All along, he knew what she was. She isn’t sure what makes her more angry, the knowledge that she’s been deceived or the fact that he has witnessed her fall, that he knows what she was before and sees what she has now become: nothing.

“You let me believe I was fooling you,” she says, holding back her rage. “Why?”

“I hoped you would remember on your own, but you don’t recognise me at all, do you?”

She squints at his face. He’s not unattractive, beneath the long hair, the ridiculous suit and the... is that a diamond ear stud? Ridiculous vampire.

“Dubrovnik?” he prompts her.

She waves a hand dismissively. “It’s been gone for centuries.”

“Remember when it was still there? A cool autumn night. A walk along the beach to a little restaurant on the waterfront. A room above the bar—”

“The raspberry soufflé,” Laila finishes, her mind thick with the memory.

“Yes.” Dorian smiles. “The raspberry soufflé.”

“And you were the digestif.” She bit him, she remembers. It was that kind of night. He was simpler



then, without the baubles, silks and affected airs. He had that same sense of wonder in his voice, though, the same playfulness he has now when he's spouting off his awful poetry. He looked at her the same way too, as though there were secrets in her eyes that he was desperate to decipher.

"You look different," she says.

"I am."

Given that he was human then and is now a vampire, this is something of an understatement. Laila doesn't remember turning him. She'd remember if she'd done that, wouldn't she? To have any hope of turning someone into a vampire there has to be more than a casual connection between the two of you. For the transition to work, someone has to be in love.

Laila is fairly sure it wasn't her. Perhaps she can see the appeal in Dorian's frilly silliness and his earnest art – something she would never admit even to herself – but, even across the centuries, she would remember if she had been in love. But perhaps Dorian was the one in love. Perhaps he still is. The poetry and cookery would suggest as much, though that feels to Laila like the trappings of love rather than the thing itself.

Unless his attempts at courtship are truly as earnest as his terrible verses.

Her mouth feels dry again as she asks, "Am I the one who... Was it my fault?"

"If you want to put it that way," Dorian says. "I

wouldn't. I needed to change."

"You haven't changed that much." Laila smiles, just a tiny bit, just for a moment. "Your poetry certainly hasn't got any better," she adds, in case he gets the wrong idea.

"Neither has your taste in literature."

Laila needs to change the subject before the conversation descends into flirty banter. Laila does *not* flirt.

"But why live as a rogue?" she asks. "If you knew where I was all this time, why not come to the city?"

"I don't know. It's not like you were expecting a second date. And I might not have changed, but the world has." He looks away, letting his gaze trail out to the horizon. "I've been in the forests, you know. I've seen the mass graves, the rotting bodies, the monsters our kind have made of themselves. But for as long as I have Stan to supply the blood I need, I can choose to stay here and ignore it. Maybe that's a cowardly thing to do, but I'd rather remember things as they were before the Fall, or imagine how they will be once nature clears away the mess we've made. I don't want to see what we've done to the world."

Laila joins him in looking out at the treetop canopy spread before them. It's teeming with life and potential, filled with birds and squirrels and cats and bugs that, in time, will recycle the horrors that her empire created. Eventually, her legacy will be swallowed up just as surely as the ruins of the world

before the Fall were swallowed by the forest.

“It’s nicer from up here,” he says.

Laila doesn’t disagree.

There are yet more visitors the next day, knocking at the castle gate. This time, Dorian is the one to greet them.

“Fucking hell,” the first one says as he tumbles inside.

It’s raining again and the man is soaked. Three equally-drenched women pour in behind, shoving the man out of the way in their search for shelter. One mutters expletives under her breath.

“Um, hello,” says Dorian, then he remembers how Stan greeted Laila and realises his own performance is inadequate by comparison. “I mean, ahem, welcome! Welcome to Castle... It doesn’t have a name, actually. Castle Dorian, I suppose.”

But none of the visitors are looking at him anymore. Instead, their gazes have all slid sideways, drawn magnetically to the woman who is now standing beside him.

“He’s Dorian,” Laila says. “Me, you already know.”

Within seconds, all four of their visitors are on their knees in front of her, babbling about the Empress’s inevitable return to power and their intent to support her in retaking the city, even though they themselves are newly-humanised. There are more ex-

vampires on their way, they say, and Laila can expect to have the support of each and every one.

Which means she'll leave him, Dorian supposes. He knows well enough that she's spent every moment of her stay scheming and plotting her resurgence. Now that she has tasted power, all she wants is to be reinstated in her majesty. So he's surprised when he turns to Laila and sees that, rather than being increased by their adulation, she appears deflated, like a sad raspberry soufflé. By the time Stan has joined them and ushered their guests through to the kitchen, Laila seems to have sagged under the weight of their expectations.

She doesn't want this, Dorian realises. She doesn't want to be the Empress anymore.

"I need your help," she says when they're alone. "I need to get into the city and get something out."

"What?" he asks.

"The blood of the king. It'll purify my blood, turn me into a vampire again and give me back my power. And then..."

She doesn't have to finish the sentence. He knows what comes next: she'll leave, along with all the other ex-vampires who are on their way here, they'll recapture the city, recapture the humans, and begin destroying the world again.

He can see it all in the cutting of the flesh, the burning of the bodies and the letting of the blood.

Dorian thinks for a moment, then says, "No."

Laila is taken aback. "What do you mean, *No*?"

"I mean no, we're not doing that," he replies calmly.

For a moment, she is quiet. She clearly didn't expect him to argue. "Well, why the fuck not?"

"Let me ask you this," Dorian says, facing down her rage. "Why do you even want to be a vampire? What's the appeal?"

Laila is incredulous. "You really are an idiot, aren't you?"

"Humour me."

"Fine. Then who wouldn't want to be that fast, that agile, that strong?"

"That thirsty for human blood," Dorian adds. "A weapon in a human skin. The better question is who *would* want that? And I'll tell you my answer: someone who's been made to feel weak."

Laila's cheeks pink, as though the accusation is rushing furiously through her veins.

"How *dare*—"

"You didn't just forget about Dubrovnik," he says. "You've also forgotten what you told me that night. Haven't you, my sanguinary siren?"

Laila freezes.

She didn't mean to tell him, Dorian knows. He doesn't flatter himself that he was anything other than an available ear after a long day and too much wine, but after she bit him, perhaps when she thought he was unconscious, she told him about the man who

came and took her whole family's lives away, then gave her life back to her and her alone. On the very night she accidentally remade Dorian, she'd told him about the night she herself had died and been remade.

Dorian wants so badly to believe that she told him that story for a reason. He wants to believe she chose to turn him, that she wanted him. He's an idiot to hold onto that hope, but he does, because he knows who Laila is underneath her armour. He's seen what she does to mask her pain. Maybe no one else in the world would forgive her for all the suffering she caused, not least the suffering she caused him, but Dorian does.

"You watched them die," he says. "It made you feel weak."

"I'm not weak," she growls.

"I didn't say you were. I don't think you ever have been, my dragon lily. But now that most of the vampires are gone, why do you still need to be strong?"

She looks him in the eye and says, "You're still here."

It's a challenge, but Dorian takes it as a demand. Quicker than she can track, he takes her hand in his and brings it to his lips, taking her contamination into his body as he presses a sharp kiss into her palm. The effect is instantaneous: one minute he is superhuman, the next he is nothing more than human, nothing less.

Laila gapes at him, then realises what she's doing and snaps her mouth shut. Dorian expected that she'd

be angry, at least at first, but her anger never comes. Instead, there's a shift in her eyes. She looks almost relieved. A choice is made, an opportunity is lost, and with it goes the obligation to see that opportunity fulfilled.

"Well," she says after a while. "That was idiotic."

Dorian swoons back against the wall, clutching his chest. She almost smiles.

"This is not a joke," she says. "What am I going to do now?"

"Stan had an idea about that, actually."

"Oh?"

"There are a lot of ex-vampires roaming around the place."

"One more now," Laila says, staring at the small cut on the palm of her hand as though mesmerised by the blood. "I'm leaking."

"I'm sorry, my firebird. Would you like me to kiss it better?" he teases.

She brushes him off, shaking her attention from the cut like she's shaking rain from her shoulders. "Just tell me about your stupid idea."

"Well, we have this newly-cleaned castle. We have empty rooms. We have supplies. We could give the ex-vampires somewhere to stay while they work out what to do next. Somewhere safe from those humans who might be looking for a little vengeance."

"Maybe that vengeance is overdue. Maybe they don't deserve any mercy."

“Maybe everyone deserves at least little.”

She meets his eyes and for a moment they just look at each other.

“A sanctuary,” she says.

“Exactly. The Sundown Sanctuary for Sagely Sobered Sometime Sanguinivores.”

Laila raises one dainty eyebrow at him. “How long did you spend thinking that up?”

“A while,” he admits.

She takes a moment to consider, then says, “All right.”

He smiles at her.

She smiles back at him. Just a little, but it’s enough to make him hope.

*Josie Jaffrey is an indie author of urban fantasy, paranormal romance and young adult fantasy who lives in Oxford, England. This short story is a sequel to Sovereign, Josie’s young adult dystopian fantasy series, set in a world where the last remnants of humanity are under the control of vampire nobility. Check it out [here](#).*



# Lady Pallen's Kiss

Ceril N. Domace

The problem with sorcerers is that they're far too obsessed with the aesthetics of curses to consider how they'll impact the world around them. Sure, it might sound like a grand time to turn a rude nobleman and his surroundings into a beastly form that matches his inner self, but at the end of the day, the nobleman isn't the only one suffering here. In fact, his life might not even change that much. Most curses follow an all-or-nothing mindset and dozens, if not hundreds, of innocents are caught in their webs. The noble's personal matters are still handled by his servants, and he is still invited to local soirees, for fear he'll punish those who ostracized him when the curse is inevitably broken.

But when the noble's lawmen and crafters are suddenly turned into furniture and dishware? That's when a region starts to go downhill. Taxes aren't collected, roads aren't maintained, and bandits move into the summer homes the noble can't use while he's got hooves for fear of damaging the marble.

That's not even touching the whole trend of hiring

a sorcerer to curse a spoiled heir until they mend their ways. Too many parents want to use magic to solve their problems instead of actually parenting their children, and the world suffers for it.

It's a nightmare. One the various rulers of the fifteen kingdoms would rather avoid without annoying the types of people who cast those spells if at all possible.

That's where we come in.

"We" being "Professor Clarkfowler's Exterminators, Wranglers, and Travelling Librarians". It might sound like curses are outside the purview of a magical pest control company, but our founder, the alleged "professor" Cynthia Clarkfowler, viewed situations like these as an excellent opportunity to expand the transformation magic section in our library. Especially since the ones hiring us to break these curses usually have more money than sense, which makes the bean counters in the home office very happy.

Now, I've met stranger people than Professor Clarkfowler, but not by much. She insists she's human – despite obviously being at least a quarter air elemental – and regularly makes tea out of alchemical reagents that would kill most people. The employee handbook has a whole section on how to politely refuse if she offers you a drink and another detailing what kind of medical care the company will provide should you accidentally drink it anyway.

That being said, I've never met a more brilliant person in my life. She might have an unorthodox approach to any given situation, but it almost always works. More importantly, her library is second to none and not only has she read every book, but she's also annotated most of them.

Only the hardest – and perhaps most foolhardy – people survive working with Professor Clarkfowler in the field. I was neither of those things. In fact, even for a wood gnome, I was remarkably introverted, which is why I was so shocked when one of the senior librarians pulled me out of our new bio-alchemy books, plopped a notebook in my hands, and congratulated me on joining my first field mission.

I'd only been working with Professor Clarkfowler as a junior librarian for a month at that point and, prior to this, had fully believed I'd spend my entire career there organizing the books and preparing research docketts for our pest control teams. It was a good job that fulfilled my internship requirements and allowed me to borrow as many books as my heart desired while I worked on my dissertation.

Truth be told, I wouldn't have been here at all, except the professor refuses to fill out paperwork, and Garrett Talthen, her second-in-command, hoped to keep a low profile while working with nobles in the kingdom of Hearthbreeze. He wanted someone who knew how to talk to nobles and who understood the value of a well-written and concise report to handle

the customer service while he and Clarkfowler dealt with the curse. Especially since Professor Clarkfowler was no longer allowed to talk to our noble clients after the cannibal mousefolk incident.

All of this is to say that despite what Garrett says, it was definitely not my fault he was thrown through that window.

“And you’re sure you know the proper customs for greeting Laird Brayden?” Garrett asked for the tenth time as I hopped out of the wagon. We’d stopped at the end of a long road that led to our final destination, a towering castle. The walls were burnt black and stained with smoke. Great metal spikes stuck out along the top of all the parapets, occasionally lighting up like a firework whenever lightning from the perpetual storm cloud above decided to strike.

All that combined with the gargoyles swooping around the towers answered any questions I’d had about whether a sorcerer had recently visited here.

“Yes, of course. Nobles in Hearthbreeze are frequent customers. All the librarians know how to deal with them.” I rolled my eyes and readjusted the straps on my pack.

I’d managed to pack three extra dresses in varying levels of formality, two cloaks, seven books, and a heap of spare quills and ink before the senior librarians kicked me out and I still wasn’t sure I’d brought enough. I wanted to be prepared for anything,

up to and including a high ball, falling in a moat, or being chased by a bookworm. Better to satisfy that appetite with the written word and not gnome flesh, even if that meant my backpack was almost as tall as me.

Garrett adjusted his colossal fake red beard as he followed me down from the wagon. Unlike me, he hadn't bothered bringing a bag. He had his cloak, his axes, and three enchanted scrolls in his back pocket. How all that – plus the aforementioned fake beard, which was important for reasons he refused to tell Professor Clarkfowler *or* me – meant he was prepared was a mystery, but he'd been doing this for longer than I'd been alive so I wasn't going to question it too much. That being said, between the beard and his cloak I wouldn't have known it was him unless someone told me.

Professor Clarkfowler was waiting morosely at the gate, sadly watching the wagon trundle away. Apparently, it was allergic to curses and she'd rather it wait for us a safe distance away rather than risk the books becoming unorganized because the wagon couldn't stop sneezing.

She too looked oddly unprepared for this job. In lieu of a cloak, she wore a brightly patterned cardigan and a green summer skirt that matched her hair. The only concession she'd made to the frigid weather was swapping out her normal broad-brimmed hat for a wool monstrosity with a poof of yarn on the top and

holes cut in the side for her pointed ears.

Hearthbreeze was a cold and lonely kingdom composed mostly of humans and elves in the southwest region of the fifteen kingdoms. Despite this – or perhaps because of this – they were renowned for their cheer, their parties, and their excellent mead. I'd spent some time here when I was young before the current ruler's ongoing quest to find his missing brother – the true heir and the one who'd actually been trained to rule a kingdom – had driven most people with sense out. From what I'd heard, he'd blockaded the borders and had every house, wagon, and cavern searched. Repeatedly. For nearly thirty years, the only way into or out of Hearthbreeze was via teleportation circle or filling out a long and complicated series of forms that all but ground international trade to a halt.

The only positive side to that whole affair was that banditry had plummeted as their normal haunts were regularly patrolled by the king's soldiers.

"Leave Siobhan alone, Garrett," Professor Clarkfowler said. "It's not her fault that you volunteered for this." Her darkened demeanor noticeably cheered as she turned back to the castle and considered its tainted edifice. "Oh, look at that! That's a Class Five sleeping curse if I ever saw one."

"It's important," Garret insisted, gingerly stepping across a massive puddle that was equal parts mud and ice. He paused, considered the sheer size of the

puddle, and then offered me a hand across. I took it, because the top of my head barely reached his waist and I wasn't interested in getting mud on my brand-new boots or my good skirt. And it wasn't like he couldn't pick me up with one hand if the situation required it.

Once I was safely on the other side, he resumed talking like he'd never stopped at all. "Laird Brayden is one of the most powerful nobles in Hearthbreeze. If we can secure them as a client, we'll be able to open a branch office in this district."

I cut in before he and Professor Clarkfowler could go any further down that rabbit hole. It was hard to stop Garrett when he started talking about finances and expanding our list of branch offices. "I think it's only Class Three, professor. The trees in this part of Hearthbreeze are the descendants of a handful that got caught in a particularly powerful hundred-year curse so they look demonic anyway. It's a regional thing."

And the wood burned beautifully. When one tried the pastries here it was incredibly easy to forget the ovens used to produce them were heated with the souls of the damned.

"Really?" Professor Clarkfowler squinted and then her eyes widened dramatically. She hopped up and down and squealed, clapping her hands like a child. "Yes, I see it now. The curse lines barely reach the foundation. Dare I say, I expect anyone in the cellar when the curse was cast was unaffected!"

“It looks like most of the magic is being channeled into keeping the storm cloud going.” Despite myself, I couldn’t help the shot of excitement that tore through me. Wood gnomes rarely left their home forests, but I’d always loved reading about the world beyond our trees and the magic that flowed through it like water. I’d left home just days after reaching my majority and immediately ran to the nearest wizard’s university to feed the intense desire for knowledge that infested me. The only reason I’d been able to drag myself out was that my school had internship requirements. That and Professor Clarkfowler had a truly magnificent selection of curse lore, which was the subject of my dissertation.

We occupied ourselves on the long walk to the castle proper with debates about the efficiency of various curses and what information we had on this particular curse.

Laird Brayden had sent an urgent message to the nearest office last week, demanding help in saving their daughter, Lady Pallen, from the nastier effects of a curse she’d paid a local sorcerer to cast. He’d agreed to put her into a magical sleep, never aging, never dying, until her true love kissed her. Normally, this wouldn’t be a problem. Laird Brayden had multiple children and Lady Pallen wasn’t even the heir, but in this case the spell had also transformed her family’s castle into a dark and foreboding ruin, which was exceptionally bad for business and for social calls.



All in all, it was a fairly standard sleeping curse, albeit with a strong transformation component, that didn't need to be taken care of immediately. Laird Brayden ought to have been put on the waiting list and one of our teams would've been sent out as soon as we had availability. It might have taken a week or two, but the curse would've been dealt with. The only reason we were here now was that Garrett – despite being a sensible person who'd left Hearthbreeze when the king had started looking for his brother and had stayed far away ever since – had insisted we take the job immediately.

“Do you think Laird Brayden will let me take samples of the curtains before we break the curse?” Professor Clarkfowler asked absentmindedly. “There's a delightful malevolence in transformed fabric that has the research division begging for more examples.”

I shrugged. “I'd doubt he'd notice, but I didn't bring any sample jars with me, so I can't help with any of that.”

Most objects under a transformation curse rarely persisted that way once the curse changing their form was broken – even the trees would eventually return to their standard pine and oak shapes once all the curses connecting them to the various underworlds were broken – but a good sample jar would preserve the curse long enough for research.

Gods, I should've thought of that. This was a

fantastic research opportunity and here I was, thinking about my safety and political niceties when I could have gotten one over on my supervisors by turning in a wide variety of fabric samples.

Oh well, that was a thing to remember for next time.

Laird Brayden had interrogated the sorcerer in question, who produced an entirely legal contract between him and Lady Pallen that prevented him from assisting in breaking the curse. We were supposed to get a copy of that contract as soon as we arrived, and I admit I was looking forward to it. Curses always had such delightfully pedantic terms that a clever tongue could twist this way or that. True love's kiss was a popular way to break sleeping or transformation curses, but I'd read about ones that required the cursed person or people to make clothing out of water, sing without using their voices, and even convince stone to cry. It was a fascinating field, one I'd loved my entire life. I'd even written my university entrance essay on gnomish curses. This one might be standard, but who knew what kind of legalese the sorcerer had worked into the fine print!

Garret followed behind us as Professor Clarkfowler and I discussed the finer parts of curse contracts and dragged his feet the entire way. It was impossible to read his expression, hidden as his face was by his cloak and fake beard, so I couldn't say how he felt about the situation. I couldn't even see his ears,

which were a wonderful way to judge a half-elf's emotional state. Still, the reluctant pace of his steps continued all the way to the castle, where thirty or so large tents were set up on the front lawn.

Up close, the castle was like something out of my best nightmares. Most of the windows were shattered or boarded up. Thick briar patches with thorns thicker than my wrists surrounded the castle, completely covering the doors and windows on the first floor. Best of all, there were humanoid shadows in the windows above us, ones with no visible bodies to cast them but which nevertheless moved about as if they were cleaning up dirt or beating out the curtains.

A rotund human dressed in thick furs and vibrant orange robes hurried up to us, a frantic look on their plump red face. "Are you from Professor Clarkfowler's pest control agency?" they demanded, raking their eyes over our odd group. "Because if you're not, we aren't interested in buying anything."

Professor Clarkfowler and I exchanged a look and I stepped forward.

"Yes, we're here as representatives of Professor Clarkfowler's Exterminators, Wranglers, and Travelling Librarians," I said quickly, very proud of myself for not stumbling over my lines in front of Garrett and Professor Clarkfowler. This was why I was here after all. "May I assume I have the pleasure of addressing Laird Brayden?" I asked, smiling up at the rotund human. "We were told you had a curse

problem here."

"Yes, I'm Laird Brayden." They wiped their forehead with a silk handkerchief and let out an exhausted sigh. "Thank you for coming so soon, I have no idea what Pallen was thinking, but half the staff have been turned into shadows and four of them are trapped in the cellar – thankfully, we found a small gap in the briars at the back of the house with a small window so we can pass them food and water – but otherwise we haven't gone inside since last week."

I blinked once and then again, slowly letting my mind digest the rush of words Laird Brayden had thrown at me. Garrett's knee pushed into my back, reminding me that Laird Brayden was still expecting an answer. "Ah, well, do you have the contract? Or, even better, is the sorcerer still here? We need to know as much as possible to break this curse."

"Oh, of course, of course." Laird Brayden snapped and an elf in fine silks appeared as if out of nowhere, carrying a silver platter with a thick scroll tied with a ribbon on top. "Thank you, Jenkins," they said, taking the scroll and immediately pushing it at me. "I'll call again if we need you."

The elf bowed, looked us over with something that could've been generously described as interest, and vanished just as suddenly as they appeared.

I blinked and took the scroll. "Thank you—"

But Laird Brayden wasn't done. "There's a gap in

the briars at the back, like I said. There's a window just above it that leads into the armory. We haven't dared go inside, but you should have no trouble."

"Of course," Professor Clarkfowler said loudly, ignoring Garret's sharp grunt. "We'll take a look at the contract and have that curse broken in a jiffy or your money back!"

Laird Brayden thanked us profusely – which felt a little premature, in my opinion, seeing as we hadn't even cracked the contract open yet – and led us around the castle. Sure enough, in front of a lovely-looking fountain with swans carved all over it, there was a gap in the brambles around a small extension to the main property.

While we walked, I opened the contract and scanned it quickly. Despite its relative thickness, there wasn't much to it at its core. Once I got past the standard nonsense about not holding the sorcerer legally responsible for any loss of life, property, or freedom caused by this spell and the cursee assuming all reparations and damage fees incurred therein, the terms were simple.

A standard true love's kiss provision, a normal hundred-year wait – after which the curse would naturally dissipate – and far at the bottom, in tiny, tiny print, an addendum that a kiss from a suitably wealthy and/or powerful noble would also break the curse, but there would be no guarantee the cursee would know whether they were their true love or not.

All really boring, if I was being honest. The only interesting thing was the stipulations about the transformation magic and even that was only that the brambles were specifically not to be linked to any hell dimension as Lady Pallen did not wish for her true love (or suitably wealthy and/or powerful noble) to have to go on some quest to reclaim their soul if they got scratched or gouged by the thorns whilst on their way to the highest room in the tallest tower. That bit was very clear. Anyone with a chance of breaking the curse was to be given a clear pass to Lady Pallen.

Honestly, part of me wondered why we'd been called. All they'd need was a slightly stronger sorcerer to cast a different curse over Pallen's curse, tie the two together, and break that one and they'd be as good as gold. The only thing *we* could do is finagle the language until a kiss from one of us would break the spell. After all, if you talked long enough, even a curse would do just about anything to shut you up.

Once I'd read through the scroll and regurgitated what it said to my companions, Laird Brayden instructed three burly human men to shove us, rather ungracefully, through a broken window ten feet off the ground. My backpack caught on the latch and Professor Clarkfowler had to untangle me lest Garrett and the ever-growing crowd of servants get treated to the sight of my knickers.

That aside, the inside of the castle was... interesting. The five feet between us and the window

was bright and cheery. The wood was clean – apart from the broken glass – and freshly stained, and the weapons hanging on the wall and under the window were free of rust and decay. It was a fairly good example of what this castle probably looked like before the curse took hold. Everywhere beyond that five feet though... well, I'd seen ruins with fewer cobwebs and spiders. The wall hangings were rotted through and falling off their hangers, the metal parts of the weapons and armor were little more than piles of rust, and the floor looked like it had been through at least two floods.

Garrett set his shoulders and pressed on, indicating that Professor Clarkfowler and I should follow. "Come on," he said tiredly. "Let's get this over with."

Professor Clarkfowler dashed after him, heedless of the cobwebs fouling her hat, hair, and clothing. I followed at a more sedate pace, but still hurried. The last thing I wanted was to be left behind in case the sorcerer had thrown in some tricks on the main levels.

The halls were in as much disrepair as the armory. The paintings on the wall, which were cracked and broken, featured scenes of a divine-looking elven woman being tortured by an array of figures, each fouler and more horrid than the last. In each image, a distant elven man, cloaked in gold and with a fiery head of red hair, watched, gradually coming closer. Presumably, this man was the one who was supposed to save the woman, which made me smile. It was a

rather quaint touch in this day and age.

Garrett hadn't just chosen his fake beard because it was the only one we had at the moment. He too had a glorious head of bright red hair. Perhaps we'd be able to trick the curse more easily than we expected.

Still, my admiration for the paintings came to a sudden stop when our party was confronted by a semi-corporeal shadow that stood nearly ten feet tall. It bore no weapons and had no shape beyond "vaguely humanoid", but looking at it sent chills down my spine. A little part of my brain screamed that this shadow would kill me and make me into something like it if I didn't leave immediately.

The others didn't look nearly as affected as me, which was entirely unfair. My fear was almost certainly artificial and generated by the shadow, but that didn't mean that my legs felt any stronger or that I didn't need to recite gnomish chants in my head to stop myself from running away.

"Pardon me, sir or ma'am or other unknown respectable being," Professor Clarkfowler called, flagging down the shadow. It turned its head toward us and I let out a whimper. "Excuse me, but could you lead us to Lady Pallen? We're the exterminators Laird Brayden called. We've been asked to set things here to rights and get everything that's currently not how it should be back to how it belongs."

The shadow wavered and I held my breath. It was always risky to address things conjured up by curses,



even when you were fairly certain they were transformed employees. They might be required to prevent anyone from trying to break the curse, after all. My dissertation advisor had once fought an entire battalion of knights to break a curse, only to realize they'd beaten up a group of bewildered gardeners when the curse was broken. It took the university ten years to finish paying the restitution fees for their injuries.

Fortunately, this wasn't the case. The shadow flickered, grew and then shrunk, and finally pointed down the hall, toward a staircase nearly hidden by a torn tapestry.

"Ah, thank you," Professor Clarkfowler trilled, skipping toward the staircase. Garrett and I followed close behind. He nodded at the shadow to thank them even as they raced ahead, and I thanked my gods that it hadn't gone badly. Now that the shadow wasn't looking at me, it was almost bearable to be near it.

If we got out of this today, I would have to see if Professor Clarkfowler would let me hunt down the sorcerer responsible. A fear spell like that would be very useful in keeping foolish adventurers away from law-abiding dragons – and driving them toward the tax-dodging ones.

The stairs themselves were all I could've asked for in a cursed staircase. It spiraled up higher than I could see, had no railing, the wood was mostly rotten, and an entire chunk about ten feet up was gone entirely.

The sorcerer hadn't skimped on making it difficult to get up here, that was for certain.

But, as the shadows insisted, their spindly and non-corporeal fingers tugging at our hair and clothing the entire time, up them we would have to go.

And up the stairs we went, following first one, then two, then at least a dozen shadows practically tripping over themselves to be the first to get us to Lady Pallen. We stayed close to the outer wall as often as possible. Professor Clarkfowler went first, as the lightest of us; I went next since I was the shortest, so either of them could catch me if I fell; and Garrett went last, as the heaviest, and also as the only one of us that knew how to fall without hurting themselves.

It was a slow climb. Each step needed to be carefully tested before our feet went down and twice Garret and Professor Clarkfowler had to toss me across gaps larger than I could jump. The shadows were no help at all. Having no physical form at the moment, they had no way of telling which boards were weak.

True to form, though, we did eventually make it all the way up the stairs – at least five stories if I had to place a guess. Truly, the whole thing lived up to the contracted terms of the highest room in the tallest tower. The only mercy was that the shadows didn't try to follow us into the room. I definitely wouldn't have been able to come up with my best arguments if I had to deal with them while I did so.

That being said, I made a mental note to have a word with Laird Brayden about perhaps installing a lift in case Lady Pallen decided to do this again.

The room the shadows led us to was ten feet wide on all sides with four windows evenly spaced to let in the light. It was completely empty as well – at least, apart from the cobwebs, the greasy-looking black spiders, and the half-elven woman in plate mail, lying as if dead on the dais in the middle of the room. She wasn't even breathing.

I nodded as I stepped into the room, pushing past Professor Clarkfowler to get off the staircase and on to the relatively unrotted wood in there. "I think that's her."

Professor Clarkfowler and Garret whispered to each other as I inspected things. Theoretically, since we'd been able to get here at all, the curse should be easy to break according to the terms in the contract. Since I had food and water, we had at least two days to finagle the specifics of the curse before we could find a loophole that would allow one of us to break it.

I stood on my tiptoes to get a closer look at Lady Pallen. She was a large woman, like her parent, and almost entirely made of muscle, unlike her parent. I couldn't be sure, but I suspected that she would be taller than Garrett if they were both standing. At any rate, she wore heavy-looking plate mail and held a sword longer than I was tall.

"She must want a warrior," I said out loud, circling

the dais. Then I remembered the paintings downstairs and I hummed. “And I bet she’s got a martyr complex. Maybe she thinks finding her true love will fix some greater issue or save her from some sort of trial?”

Professor Clarkfowler came to my side. “My thoughts exactly. If we can nail down her reasoning, it might make negotiations go smoother.”

I shrugged and pulled the contract out. “Well, we won’t make any progress by just sitting here. Do we want to try kissing her right away or should we go the standard negotiation route?”

Humming, Professor Clarkfowler dropped to the ground and crossed her legs. “Well, if we kiss her we’ll have to do some extra talking with the curse to justify why it should count our kisses retroactively.”

“That makes sense.” I hiked my skirts up and sat down beside her. Rooting around in my bag, I pulled out a water skin and a chunk of cheese wrapped in wax paper. “Cheddar?”

“Oooh, yes please.”

Eating probably wouldn’t break the curse unless Lady Pallen was particularly passionate about a specific meal, but it couldn’t hurt. I always thought better when my belly was full after all.

Garrett didn’t join us. Instead, he approached the dais and sighed like he’d just witnessed a stubborn child fall off a table they’d been repeatedly told to get down from. He stared at Lady Pallen, a morose look

on his face. “Why’d you do this, Pallen?” he finally whispered. “You know it was never going to work out.”

I opened my mouth to ask Garrett what he meant and whether he had some personal connection to Lady Pallen that would make this whole process go quicker, but he leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss to Lady Pallen’s lips before I could so much as squeak.

Like an explosion, the magical energy that was supposed to sustain Lady Pallen for a hundred years burst out and tore through the castle. Cobwebs were swept away, broken windows were repaired, and the gargoyle sitting on the windowsill turned back into a dove. From down the stairs came the sound of crashing and cries of pain as the former shadows regained their old forms on a presumably still-rickety staircase.

Lady Pallen surged up to a seated position as the dais underneath her turned into a battered old couch. Her hands moved even faster than the magic and she grabbed Garrett. Before we could stop her – or even toss Garrett a rope or blanket – he was flying through the air, screaming at the top of his lungs. He smashed through the window with a tremendous clatter and plummeted out of sight.

Then she blinked as if coming out of a trance and lowered her fists. “Was that Prince Garrett?” she asked, edging closer to the broken window and squinting over the edge. Faint curses drifted up from

far below us, where Garrett was no doubt pulling himself from whatever the briars had become now that the curse was broken. He was a remarkably sturdy man.

Without skipping a beat, Professor Clarkfowler leaped to her feet and tugged Lady Pallen away from the window. Linking their arms together, she guided her toward the stairs. “Nonsense. Everyone knows half-elves can’t grow beards. Especially not red ones.”

Laird Brayden thanked us profusely for waking their daughter and apologized just as profusely for the injuries Garrett had sustained while going through the window and landing in one of the rose bushes.

The man himself had stumbled from the rosebush – sans his fake beard, which had gotten tangled in the bushes – and immediately hightailed it for the wagon, ignoring the shouts of Laird Brayden, their servants, and me from the tower window. Professor Clarkfowler was unable to convince him to leave the wagon, which left me to finish up the finer points of the job and arrange for payment.

Lady Pallen had been ushered away by her parent’s servants as soon as they saw her, each tittering about how much trouble she was in. From what I heard, I assumed our pay would be coming from her allowance.

As for our employer, they were only too happy to push a bag of gold in our hands as a down payment

and insisted they would trumpet our services to anyone who would listen. Thankfully for Garrett, they didn't ask how we'd broken the spell, otherwise, I feared there would've been a wedding on the horizon – and I got the feeling that wasn't what Garrett had come here for.

But they were happy to leave well enough alone, so I didn't push it. Besides, since Garrett wasn't here – and was presumably bandaging his injuries so he didn't bleed to death in the back of the wagon – I didn't have to arrange for our diplomatic corps to attend Laird Brayden's next party. Instead, I convinced Laird Brayden to hand the curse contract over to us for further examination and negotiated with his kitchen staff for a basketful of pastries. Those would keep us well-fed while we bandaged Garrett up, and then he could tell Laird Brayden whatever he wanted when he sent them our bill.

Humming to myself, I took a bite from an absolutely delicious apple fritter and waved goodbye to Laird Brayden.

All in all, not a bad first mission.

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# The Blessing of Vampires

D.N. Bryn

“Beatitude Castle’s stability never lasted for more than a decade or two before another tragedy would befall it.” The tour guide’s voice echoed through the castle’s lofty main hall, resounding hollowly in the empty space with its worn brick and high ceiling. “Often the family would vanish without a trace, leaving the place to languish under the thrall of a vampire squatter, until a group of hunters eventually took the vampire down, allowing for a new family to move in and starting the cycle over.”

Tragedy. Vampires.

Two words that no one seemed able – or willing – to detangle. They crawled up Clementine’s skin and tried to resettle into his bones the way they had when they’d first taken his life by storm some months ago.

Vampires. Tragedy.

One begot the other, certainly, but to Clementine, it seemed their tour guide’s ordering was all wrong. This place had known vampires – had seen them try to

make a home, over and over, each time ending with a stake to the heart or a bullet to the head. Of course these humans would still see the tragedy as the vampires' existence and not their struggle, not their pain, not their deaths.

Clementine tried not to let himself drown in the thought.

In the peace of the old castle, with its sturdy brick walls as statements of eternity and survival, Clementine tried to imagine the period between the tragedies: the time when a vampire had claimed this small morsel of beauty as their own.

The castle's twinkling dust motes would have floated with the same timeless, graceful suspension they as did now, catching in light that spilled from the dining hall's high, stained glass windows. Three of the panes were visibly cracked, another two replaced by sheets of plain glass, but those that remained painted the center of the empty place with a brilliant rainbow that lured Clementine into its touch.

Clem had already seen too much sun for one evening, hiding in the back seat behind dark glasses and a low hood while his boyfriend sped them through the twisting mountain curves just in time to catch the final tour of the day. Still, he slid into the light, casting himself in patterns that had existed for hundreds of years. It danced across his pale fingers and shone through his golden hair in streams of color that sent a thrill through him, even as he felt the sun-

poisoning ache in his bones. Had the vampires of this castle felt it too, been touched by this same sun? Been burned by it?

Justin's hand covered his, shielding him with tanned skin and Filipino tribal ink and old scars. The man squeezed Clementine's fingers gently, and Clem let himself be pulled back out of the direct light. This, he was sure no vampire had ever had at Beatitude Castle before: a human to love them, to dedicate everything to, to build a family with. It would have been hard enough for two queer human men, and outright impossible if one was a vampire.

Behind them, the tour guide's voice grew more distant as the main group moved into the next room. "Some say the cycle of stability and tragedy is a curse shaped by the first vampires to overtake the place, and that it's only a matter of time before that tragedy happens again... and the vampires return."

If only they knew. But then, Clementine wasn't exactly the threat most people thought of when they heard the word "vampire". How could he be, when he spent more time nerding out over science, writing ridiculous amounts of Spock x Kirk fanfic, and abetting his boyfriend's eccentric salt and pepper shaker collection than he did attacking humans in alleys? Though it certainly helped that the one human he *had* attacked in an alley had been freely offering him blood ever since.

Justin stared after the tour group, his nose

wrinkled. "Fuck them."

Clementine checked that no stragglers were staring before wrapping his arm around his boyfriend's shoulders. "You'd think that eventually they'd find a new villain to blame for every human mistake, wouldn't you? Doesn't the vampire tragedy spiel get boring after a while?"

"Right?" Justin grumbled. "You know what wouldn't get boring, though? If I got to fuck up every person who bought into it."

"All of them? Across the globe? That sounds incredibly exhausting, and I can't imagine I'd get to see you very much. I'd have to find someone else to feed on." Clementine teasingly caressed the length of his boyfriend's neck. Even through the layers of skin, he could feel the beat of Justin's heart in his veins. His fangs responded by slipping free, and with the sound of the tour group fading away behind them, he didn't bother forcing the pair of sharp canines back into hiding. Any chance to exist with them unconcealed, he would happily take, even if these moments could only come when his back was turned to the rest of the world. The fact that the sight of the fangs often provoked his boyfriend into baring his neck in all sorts of taunting ways was a bonus. "But I suppose we *do* have to take over this castle. It's fate, after all."

"Now that I can get behind." Justin lifted his head, pressing a soft kiss to the edge of Clementine's lips.

“If we lived here, you could be the beautiful, strategic prince, and I’d be your gruff, loyal knight, forever kneeling at your feet.”

“No,” Clementine objected with a snort. “If I’m the prince, it’s only fair that I do the kneeling.” And with the speed and grace of his vampirism, he demonstrated the statement, holding Justin’s hand before him. “Besides, you’re the knight, you have a sword. You could take it and just so delicately...” He slid one of Justin’s fingers against his throat, feeling the pressure of it as he swallowed.

A knowing smirk spread across Justin’s face and he dragged his nail along the underside of Clem’s chin, tipping it slowly up. “What sin am I pardoning you for?”

“Loving you when you didn’t think you deserved it,” Clementine whispered.

The way Justin’s expression deepened, the happy and the sad bleeding together, made Clem want to tell him all over again how wonderful he was. How much he was worth this. Instead it was Justin who spoke, his concern sharp and chiding. “You’re shaking.”

So he was. And his bones were aching, just a bit. “We’re on vacation. I get to have a little sunlight if I want it,” Clem protested. That light would fade fast once it dipped below the hillside, but its final orange glow seemed to be shining all the brighter to overcompensate.

“You know, a quick drink would ease it faster. We

*are* on vacation, after all.” Justin’s smirk returned, and he dragged his fingers teasingly across his own neck, head tipping to one side to show off the curve of it, long and lean with his tattoos peeking out above the collar of his jean jacket.

Clementine snatched his hand with a grin. He led Justin into the smaller medieval kitchen off to the great hall’s side, but its windows still brought in swathes of the setting sun, so Clementine kept moving, toward the open doorway the tour guide had pointed out as the entrance to the basement. With each step they took into the darkness, the air grew muskier and the quiet overwhelming. Clem’s eyes adjusted to the low lighting by slipping into his monochromatic night vision.

Arms trembling with the sun-shakes, he leaned against the cold stone of the basement wall and pulled Justin close. As his boyfriend pressed against him, hips to hips and breath warm on the collar of Clem’s sweater, Clementine took a moment just to enjoy his presence, the flutter of his dark lashes and the bob of his throat, the solid width of his shoulders and lean length of his torso beneath, the way he held himself so agile and tense, even if half of that was born of his violent past and half from the back pain that never quite released him. How many vampires had been blessed with this privilege over the years? How many had managed to hold onto it once they found it? Clementine could not imagine anyone luckier than

him, and part of him hated that. There were so many others who'd deserved their own Justin – some, according to the tour, who'd been killed in these very walls.

He was so very lucky indeed, and so very grateful.

“I love you,” Clementine whispered, like it was a secret and not a cord they'd wound between them, stronger and tighter with each passing month, a thing that was turning *always* into *forever*.

Justin smiled. His human vision could not quite connect with Clem's gaze in the darkness, but it held a sharpness to it all the same. “Then show me.”

By god, Clementine would.

He possessed Justin's mouth like he was that first vampire to storm these castle walls, taking hold of his one little piece of the world and suspending it in time for his own pleasure. Justin pushed back, pushed like the passing of eons and the breathless decay of the building around them. They could not change the past, perhaps, but they could brighten their own future, for a few minutes at least.

Clem kissed his way down the side of Justin's jaw with ruthless precision. He received a chorus of groans, Justin's hands gripping into his hair, and when he buried his fangs in Justin's neck, the sound his boyfriend made – hot and heady and breathless – was just as delicious as the blood that followed. As Clem fed, Justin rutted against him with the kind of intensity that would finish them both if he didn't let

up. It made Clementine bite harder, one hand gripping Justin's ass as he fought for purchase on the wall with the other. Arms still trembling, he dug his fingers into a crack between the stones and held on like he was trying to meld himself into the place, to leave an etching of his lust and love for longer than their simple lifespans could last. Orgasms were a moment, but the breath of their moans and the depth of their yearning would linger here through the cycles, a contrast to the castle's curse. Something alive to combat all the death.

Clementine's lungs caught and he moaned into Justin's bleeding neck, gripping the wall harder. The rock within gave way beneath his fingers. A grinding startled him. Then the wall disappeared.

Clementine had the instinct, at least, to retract his fangs from Justin's neck as he fell backward. His feet slipped over a ledge and he tumbled through the darkness with a weak, whiny shriek. He hit the ground hard. A groan left him, in every way different from the one he'd been making above.

Justin shouted frantically at him. A phone light burst on, momentarily blinding Clementine as his boyfriend started down what had to be a ladder built along the side of – of whatever the hell this place was. A shaft? An old basement tunnel? It had to be two or three stories below the cellar. If not for his vampiric genes, that plunge would have left him far worse for the wear. As it was, he could already feel some gnarly



bruises forming.

Clementine groaned again, but gave a gruff, “I’m okay,” as Justin squatted gingerly beside him, clearly trying not to antagonize his chronically aching back. He held one hand to his still-bleeding neck, and Clem forced himself to sit up, giving it a quick lick to close the wound before squinting through the receding pain and the lingering sun-shakes to stare up at the top of the shaft. The trap door – trap *wall*? – above them clunked shut.

“Fuck,” Justin cursed, then again, slower and softer as he lifted his light properly for the first time. “Fuck...”

“Yeah,” was the only word Clementine could find in response.

He could have sworn they hadn’t fallen through a door or a shaft, but through a portal, directly into the past. They stood once more in the castle’s kitchen, but the room was no longer bare. Pots and pans, elegant furnishings and simple decorations, all old but well-kept and organized to perfection. Light no longer streamed in through the windows, the glass darkened to a pitchy black with embedded designs of fruit and flowers and farm animals. The quiet that stretched through the space was a sound all of its own, claiming the hush of their breaths like a jealous lover.

Through the wide archway at the end of the room, he could just make out the great hall.

“There’s no service here,” Justin said.

“Probably because we’re underground.”

“Yeah. Probably.” But the way he said it, it was more like a prayer than an agreement. Clementine felt the weight of it in his chest. They had fallen down a shaft in a basement. They had to be underground. That was all there was to it. But *all* hardly covered the room around them.

Slowly, Clementine stood, his aches and pains forgotten. Justin’s phone was just bright enough that his night vision refused to set in properly, so he drew out his own to add to the light. He took one reverent step, then another. Apprehensively, he trailed his fingers over the wood of a countertop, shuddering at the lack of dust.

“What do you think...” Justin started, but he didn’t seem able to finish the thought.

Magic wasn’t real – vampires weren’t supernatural, they were genes and hormones and a dash of science that their society didn’t quite understand yet, but they weren’t magic. This wasn’t magic either.

It couldn’t have been...

Clementine swallowed, the last of Justin’s blood still on his lips. “I think there’s only one way to know anything for certain, and that’s forward.”

Justin shone his phone back toward the shaft. “You don’t want to try the trap door again?”

“Do you?”

Clementine couldn’t see Justin’s smirk from

behind his light, but he could hear it, sharp and brilliant. “Not a chance.”

“Then so long as I have my black knight here to protect me...” Clementine held out his hand.

Justin’s fingers slid between his, grip firm and warm. “Lead on, my prince.”

They moved cautiously through the kitchen, wondering at the beauty of the antiques, from the engraved silver utensils to the polished wood-burning stove to the jarred, pickled leeches on the top shelf, their bodies a dark sanguine color. After the first sweep of his fingers confirmed the lack of dust, it felt disrespectful to Clementine to touch anything, or perhaps outright dangerous, like the humans who ate the fairies’ food in legends and locked themselves into that realm for all eternity. This place, at least, was beautiful.

Beautiful, but eerie.

“These can’t all be from the castle’s founding,” Clementine mused. “They’re too new, relatively speaking. I’m not great at time periods but these are, what, Edwardian? Victorian?”

“Edwardian was right before the First World War. That was around the start of electric lighting.”

Clem lifted his brow.

Justin shrugged, like historical facts were his forte instead of his usual mixture of charity and punching people in the face. “I found a DIY channel that recreates early 20<sup>th</sup> century shit. It’s pretty fascinating,

actually.”

Now that did sound like Justin. “Did they recreate any entire castles and then hide them beneath crumbling tourist attractions?”

Justin paused to stare at a set of tiny crystalline cups. Three of them were stained red inside. “Something tells me this wasn’t built for the mere chance at a viral video.”

Clementine swallowed. They kept moving, but he glanced back at the little glasses twice before they made it to the next room.

The walls of the great hall rose tall and clean and in perfect repair, each slim window bearing a pane of stained glass with a series of floral and celestial designs far more elaborate than the ones above. Immaculate antiques furnished the space, and the long, brightly colored carpets covering the polished stone floor made Clementine want to pull off his shoes in respect. He shuddered down the instinct and moved toward one of the portraits that hung between the room’s four scenic tapestries.

A woman sat at its center, clothed in a gown of black velvet and deep emerald satin, her dark hair pinned elegantly up.

“That’s definitely Victorian,” Justin said, then made a sound. “Oh. Damn, do you see that?”

“Yeah.” Clementine felt something odd pulling in his gut, an ache behind his eyes, and suddenly he wasn’t sure how to breathe, at least not while staring

at her, enthralled under the piercing of her dark gaze and her sharp smile. But he couldn't look away either – couldn't look away from the little pair of fangs that protruded over her canines. "She was a vampire."

"They said that vampires lived in the castle from time to time..."

"But not like this," Clementine finished for his boyfriend. "As vagabonds, not aristocrats. The tour claimed they had *killed* the royals who lived here. Though perhaps they could have replaced them, or..."

Now it was Justin's turn to finish his thought, the year-old trauma still not quite scarred over for Clementine. "Or turned them, maybe."

But Clementine had been there – he'd been the wealthy, high-society human who woke up from an accident to find what civilization deemed his humanity stripped away from him. Holding onto his old life, hiding what he was, had been nearly impossible. The constant stress of it alone would be enough to break someone over time. He couldn't imagine the woman in the portrait could have maintained her old status for long after turning.

"Look at this one," Justin called from further down.

Clementine's heart caught again at the next picture, this time not because there were vampires, but because they weren't *all* vampires. The three fanged individuals posed casually with two humans, not counting the close-lipped child who clutched the now

greyer and thinner – but still just as gorgeous – matriarch’s skirt. There was something else odd about the portrait too, and it took Clementine a moment to pull himself out of his existence in a predominantly queer-accepting community and his obsession with gay-majority fandoms to notice it: the way the two feminine people in the picture *held* each other like a married couple. Behind them, one of the men had his arm draped affectionately over the shoulder of a vampire who didn’t conform to any of their fellows’ gendered styles, while the third vampire watched them like they were starlight.

Clementine swiped a finger under his eye before he quite realized what he was doing. Crying. He was crying, for these people he didn’t know, for their hidden lives that had been locked in perfect majesty in this haunting place beneath the ruins. Somehow, despite living in a world that did all it could to destroy them, their family had found peace.

Justin wrapped an arm around him, pressing a soft kiss to Clementine’s cheek.

Peace, for a little while at least. Clementine recalled the tour guide’s description of their tragic cycles, the desolation and reclaiming of the castle over the centuries. How long had there *been* a family here? How often had the place been locked, suspended in time as it waited for caretakers who would never return?

In a way, it was almost more devastating than the

decay above them. At least the ruins still saw love, feet passing through and voices bouncing off its walls. Here... here this place seemed liminal; a grave not for the peace of the living but the true mourning of the dead.

The lack of dust though... the neat arrangements...

Clementine's skin crawled. He kept walking, his feet carrying him toward the open doors on the other end of the room.

As he moved into their archway, someone else stepped out. She could have been a ghost, with her skin nearly as pale as her white nightdress and her long platinum hair braided down her back, but the way she grabbed him was undeniably physical, fingers gripping into his sweater as she bared her teeth. Her fangs sliding down.

Clementine returned the posturing on instinct with a hiss, shoving her back forcefully enough that he heard something rip in his sweater. "Goddamn," he muttered, feeling for a tear.

Then they were both just staring at each other.

"How did you get in here?" The other vampire demanded, her gaze bouncing between him and Justin.

Clementine held up his hands. "I'm so sorry, this is all an accident. My boyfriend" – he figured that was probably a safe term to use around someone who lived in an old building constructed by queers – "and I had just popped down to the basement so I could feed, and I activated some sort of trap door and – well, here we

are!”

She narrowed her eyes. “You didn’t touch anything, did you?”

“Just two inches of the counter in the kitchen and the floor where we’ve stepped.”

“We’re gonna go with that as a no, then.” She sighed. “I’m Shaylee. And you are?”

“Clementine. And this is—”

“His human,” Justin cut in, angling his chin as he said it and running his hand across his neck in a way that might have seemed like ordinary twitchiness if he hadn’t paired it with those words and a smirk, and if their awkward disentangling earlier hadn’t left him with two little blood-smeared bruises. “Justin.”

Clementine wanted to murder him almost as much as he wanted to see how many more bruises he could give the man. He forced himself to turn his attention back to Shaylee. “You’re real, then, and this is real, and we’re definitely not caught in some bizarre time loop situation?”

“You took that damn tour where they talk about the *curse*, didn’t you.” She sighed. “Right. Let me introduce myself better. I’m Dr. Shaylee Michaels. I’m an archeologist. *My* human is an anthropologist. We’re here from the Vampiric Historical Society.”

“There’s a Vampiric Historical Society?” Science was Clem’s thing, not history, but he still felt a bubble of excitement at the thought of vampires conducting any kind of research, even if they were forced to do so



in secret.

Clementine thought he caught the tiniest grimace from Shaylee. “There’s five of us, not including my partner. We don’t have the resources or the personnel that human groups do, but we’re doing what we can to locate and preserve anything with historic vampiric significance, even if it’s grueling and frustrating and finds like this take us years to fully catalogue and restore.” She glared at him.

Clementine laughed, soft and low and breathless. “That you’re saving our history – finding the pieces of us that have been forced into the cracks and making sure that someone still remembers – that’s *incredible*. God, this place alone is! Seeing this, knowing who first built it, lived in it? It proves– they prove–” He waved back toward the portraits, but he couldn’t finish through the lump in his throat.

Justin saved him. “They prove that people like us– people like you–” Gently, he turned Clementine’s head and kissed him in such a way that his lower lip nicked on Clem’s fangs. Clementine gave an instinctive suck, a flash of Justin’s bittersweet blood rewarding him before his saliva closed the wound again. Justin pulled back with a smile. “They prove that we have been living brave and beautiful lives for a long time. And if they can do it, so can we.”

“So can we,” Clementine agreed.

Shaylee made a little soft *huh* noise, and the very edge of one of her lips cooked up. “They do indeed.”

Her gaze drifting to the dark chamber behind them. “If you left a car in the castle lot, you should probably return before they close the gates, but while we’re here...”

She reached for a little knob built into the wall, and when she hit it, the chamber lit up, not from lamps or bulbs, but straight through the windows, as though the darkness of the underground had been replaced with a thousand fairy lights. It gave a life to the place that hadn’t been there under Justin’s simple phone light, turning its colors lush and its shadows joyous.

“They were originally gas-fueled,” Shaylee explained, “but we installed an electric alternative that still preserves the original.”

“It’s gorgeous.” Clementine breathed out, and it felt like he had been holding the air inside himself since they’d first fallen, reluctant to let it mingle with a place as old and foreign as this. But this fortress was not so foreign after all. With the lights shining through the stained glass and the portraits smiling down on them, it seemed to welcome them in, no longer invaders but lovers. Lovers, and family – one spread across genes and oceans and eras. “If the above-ground castle went through cycles, as the tour claimed, were they safe here?”

“It wasn’t all great for them, but from what we’ve gathered, the families who lived here – a mix of blood relatives and those who’d been adopted into the fold –

would set up in the above castle during the years when suspicion and hatred were lowest, building their stores through their surrounding farmland and what trade they could, then move down here more permanently when they no longer felt safe,” Shaylee explained. “Someone still had to come and go during those times, and it wasn’t a perfect system, but they got to be themselves at Beatitude.” She gave them a knowing smirk as she added, “In more ways than one. In the end, eleven generations maintained this property before the family shrunk too small to keep it up. The group you were looking at were the last. When the family lost their final vampiric member, the remaining humans – the young Genevieve and her elderly father – finally decided the upkeep was too great, and they locked the place up for good.”

“But that wasn’t really the end, was it?” Clementine asked. “There’s you now, and your partner.”

“I guess so.” Shaylee gave one final, admiring look around the room, and Clementine knew it was true – she loved this place as much as the vampires of old. It would be safe in her hands. “Someday we hope we can share it with the rest of the world. Prove just what incredible lives these vampires had, despite society trying to tear it away at every turn.” She shut the lights back off. “Until then, they can rest in peace.”

Rest. Peace.

It felt like a fitting interlude for a castle called

Beatitude – not a tragedy, but a momentary lull before the full return of life and love the place deserved. And as Shaylee led them to the surface, Clementine’s hand clutched tightly in Justin’s and his heart full and warm like nothing else this vacation could have given him, he delighted in just how wrong their tour guide had been.

This castle wasn’t cursed with vampires, but blessed with them. And that blessing would keep coming back around, time and time again. Because vampires like them weren’t going anywhere; they would keep carving space and joy from their world in whatever form they had to, until the blessing cycled back around again.

*D.N. Bryn is a queer, disabled author of speculative fiction and fantasy romance. Clementine and Justin first meet when Clementine hilariously fails to attack Justin in an alley and gets more than he bargained for in *How to Sell Your Blood and Fall in Love*, the second book in the *Guides for Dating Vampires* series. Preorders can be found [here](#).*

# The Two Henrys and the Tailor

Gemma Church

Once there was a prince called Henry. He was quite an unimpressive prince. He did not excel on the battlefield, he refused to slay dragons and his mind was as sharp as a marshmallow. But he was extraordinarily kind and gentle, qualities that his father had tried to beat out of him from a very early age.

“Why doesn’t he play with swords and try to drown kittens as the other boys do?” The king would say to his wife. “And what’s this obsession with gold clothes? The way he saunters around the kingdom, making a spectacle of himself, it’s embarrassing. I can only imagine what the other kings say behind my back.”

The queen would often shrug off her husband’s complaints about their only son. “He’s not hurting anyone, dear, and you must admit he does look rather good.”

The king would walk off in a huff when the queen

said such things. Not because he disagreed, but because he knew that she was right.

Once there was a miller's daughter. She was quite an impressive miller's daughter. She had strong hands to grind the grain into flour and thick arms to carry the bags of ground meal on market days. But she also got quite fed up with people simply referring to her as the miller's daughter. Her name was also Henry.

"As in Henrietta?" customers would often ask her.

"No, as in Henry," Henry would say, before lobbing the nearest quern stone at their stupid heads.

"Why can't you just behave and settle down with someone nice?" Her father would invariably sigh, feeling at a constant loss with his only daughter. "Someone who can look after you? I've had your dowry saved up for years and you're not getting any younger."

In this, Henry would concede, her father was correct. She was now at the ripe old age of eighteen. Every other girl she knew was already busy with wailing bairns and whining husbands.

But she had no intention of settling down with anyone. She had far grander plans. Plans involving dragons. She just had no idea how to make those plans come real.

Once there was a young tailor. He had a secret, a secret that he only shared with one person now,

because this secret had destroyed his father.

The tailor's father had also been a tailor in a neighbouring kingdom. They say he had been a hard-working man who was determined to give his wife and son a better life. His ambition to succeed drove him to work through the night and day, often ignoring his family in the pursuit of trying to give them more, while failing to recognise that time, not wealth, is the only commodity that no one has enough of. Until, one day, his wife's time ran out and he was left to care for his young son, alone.

The tailor's father was not a natural father, but he was a natural craftsman, so, he sat his son in his workshop and taught him all he could about being a tailor. He was delighted to discover that the young boy was also talented, picking up the basics of tailoring as easily as other children pick up bad habits.

At the age of seven, the boy would sit in his mother's old rocking chair, his skinny legs dangling over the side as he stitched so fast the needles were a blur, uniting threads and fabrics into whatever was required, be it fine gowns, thick breeches or embroidered handkerchiefs. And the boy did have a particular talent for embroidery, just as his mother did, thanks to his small hands and thin fingers, sewing beautiful patterns onto the cloth his father cut. On every garment, the boy cross-stitched a small bunch of forget-me-nots, his mother's favourite flower, in memory of the woman he still mourned and always

would.

The boy soon grew into a young man in everything but his stature, remaining only as tall as a child of seven. He ignored all the predictable taunts from the unkind customers who walked into his father's shop. Instead, he avoided people altogether and hid in the back room where he could work and stitch, happy in his own company and that of his father. And the tailor and his son were happy with the work they did. Contented.

Yes, for a time, they were contented, although the son would often catch his father gazing out of the shop window at the gentlemen and ladies promenading past, his mouth twitching and pulling into a thin line.

"Why is it those that have such fine things, have them so easily?" he often asked no one in particular, rubbing his calloused palms together. "Look at their soft hands. They have never worked a hard day in their lives."

His son knew better than to answer his father when he was filled with such envy, his jealousy bubbling and broiling at the surface, ready to spill over into rage at the drop of a thimble. So he would creep into the back room, to his mother's rocking chair and tuck his little legs under him where he would begin to stitch and stitch until his father's black mood passed.

But there was a problem. The son often got carried away with his embroidery, creating beautiful patterns



and scenes until there was not enough thread for him to stitch another stitch. This angered his father. “How can we make ends meet when you’re using up all this thread on your silly patterns?”

The tailor’s son didn’t want to point out that his stitched patterns were the reason that they could increase their prices, why people came from miles around to buy pieces featuring his embroidery. Instead, the son came upon an idea. He was resourceful even back then, finding ways to work around problems to please everyone.

“Father, what if I were to spin the thread as well as stitch it as mother once did? I did watch her for many an hour at her spinner’s wheel, and if I can create fine garments and cross fine stitches, surely, I can spin the thread that we need too?”

His father nodded. His son sat down and touched each component of the spinning wheel with care, wiping the film of dust from the top of the fly wheel and pressing the treadle until he was satisfied with the rhythm of his foot. His father nodded approvingly, and the boy’s heart swelled with pride.

Next, he loaded the empty bobbin onto the spindle and carefully adjusted the tension so the bobbin would stay properly seated during his spinning.

His father nodded once more and handed his son a few yards of yarn, a rough off-cut from the floor that wouldn’t be missed as the boy practiced this new skill. But the father could have given that lad a mile of

the finest yarn around and not one fraction of one inch would have gone to waste, for his son was a natural in this craft too. He tied the yarn to the bobbin's shaft, threaded it through the hooks of the maiden and back to the orifice, and started spinning like he'd been spinning for years.

His father clapped his hands and then clapped his son on the back, so hard he nearly knocked the small lad off his stool. They both laughed and celebrated at his success, father hugging son and son not knowing how to react to this most unusual turn of affection from his father. But when his father saw what his son had spun, he dropped his arms and snatched the thread.

“What’s this? How did you do this?”

The father held the spun thread in front of his son's eyes, the line catching the sunlight pouring through the shop window and sparkling, just so.

The son cupped the thread in his hand. It was heavy and cold. Brilliant and exquisite. He had spun gold, pure gold. The line of metal reflected in his father's eyes, cutting his face into a cruel shape, a shape that the son would come to recognise in the years ahead as that of pure greed.

Over the years, the father made his son spin more and more gold thread as the tailor became wealthier and wealthier. But money was not enough for the tailor. He wanted to be accepted into the highest of high societies.

They say that the small lad was no longer allowed to embroider or stitch clothes. His father commanded that he was to spin and only spin. Kings and queens from kingdoms both far and near came to the tailor with their demands for clothes only stitched in the golden thread that his son had spun.

The tailor's son was miserable, but his father would not listen to his complaints, pushing his son in front of their admirers more and more to win favour with those high classes. The son was treated as if he was some spectacle to be prodded and poked, while the tailor played the raconteur, telling folk grand tales of his son's skill and magic hands.

The wealthiest customers were also the cruellest, and this boorishness rubbed off on the lad's father. The tailor laughed with the gentry as they mocked his son's diminutive stature and shy nature. He paraded his son around palaces and banquet halls as the wealthy threw coins at his son's feet and his head, demanding he spin and do as they command as if he were a court jester. A freak. A fool. The lad was called many things during this time, many cruel things. No one ever asked his real name. No one ever asked him anything.

They say his father became blind to the real treasure before him, the treasure of a son's unconditional love for his father – a love that was so strong yet unrequited that the boy continued to suffer under the blind hope that his father's realisation of his

sins would one day shine as bright as the gold his son spun.

That day did not come. His father grew crueller still, whipping the lad and demanding he spun more and more, until his son's fingers bled and his heart broke at seeing his father descend into such cold-heartedness.

Until, one day, a kind prince was visiting and asked to see the spinner of the golden thread. They were about the same age and when the tailor was brought before him, the prince saw the lad's misery, recognising glimmers of his own father's callousness. Fellow victims can always see what their abusers try to hide.

The prince helped the tailor's son to escape, hiding him in his travelling case and whisking him away to his own kingdom where, he promised, the lad would never be exposed to such cruelty again.

"You can have your freedom on one condition," the prince said, wiping the tears from the boy's eyes and handing him the key to an empty shop.

The boy swallowed, suspecting the worst. "What is it, Your Majesty?"

"That you spin your golden thread only for me, to create the finest clothes this kingdom has ever seen."

"And will you be wanting to sell my thread as well? I have no love for gold, you can take what you want."

The prince frowned, looking genuinely confused

by the question. “Why, I have more than enough gold, but I can never have too many fine clothes. And not from a tailor as fine as yourself. Your life is your own now. I only request that you help me to look my very best.”

“You don’t need my golden clothes for that,” the young tailor said, not meaning to speak with such honesty and wishing he could snatch his words back into his mouth.

But the prince just laughed and hugged the tailor. The tailor hugged him back and, in that moment, he knew what unconditional love truly was, for the young tailor loved the prince with all his heart. And what the tailor did not realise in that moment was that the prince had fallen in love with him too.

Their love grew and was eventually spoken one afternoon in the tailor’s shop. They say their hearts intertwined and shone as bright as gold each time that they met, every Thursday where they were free to live the lives they wanted to live. Lives they could not live outside of the sanctuary of the tailor’s shop, until a girl called Henry walked into their lives.

When the prince would visit the tailor’s shop, he did so under the guise of choosing his next outfit for the next ball where he was expected to drink like a man and dance with potential suitors and make merry.

Truth be told, it was all an act.

Those days gave the prince free rein over the shop

with all its glorious garments and materials and, most importantly, dresses. The prince would sit for hours with the tailor, drawing up beautiful designs for equally beautiful dresses and then the prince would delight when the girls of the kingdom came to his balls wearing his dresses, completely unaware of his hand in the designs.

One Thursday, the prince was dashing down the kingdom's cobbled streets, past the butchers, blacksmiths, fletchers, and taverns, hopping over puddles, straight towards the tailor's shop.

"Has the Dhaka muslin arrived yet? I have a wonderful idea in mind." The prince asked, skipping into the shop with a jingle from the door's bell. "Oh."

The prince stopped dead in his tracks, because the shop was not empty as it usually was when he visited. Today, there was a rather grumpy and sturdy-looking girl standing on a footstool with her arms crossed as the tailor pinned up the hem of a pale green dress. When she breathed out, the seams looking ready to burst.

"Who are you?" The prince asked. "This shop should be empty when I visit, by my order." He looked down at the tailor and scrunched up his mouth.

The tailor removed the pins from his mouth and spoke with an affected tone that the prince had never heard him use before. But then, the tailor and the prince had never had company in the shop before, and it was important to keep up the pretence of a majestic

prince visiting his lowly tailor. “Your Majesty, I do apologise. This has been a rather difficult fitting and has taken much longer than I anticipated.”

“I told you not to bother. I’m never going to wear this contraption anyway.” The girl scowled and scratched her neck.

“I don’t blame you,” the prince muttered under his breath.

The tailor raised an eyebrow, but it was the girl that spoke. “I’m sorry? What did you say, Your Majesty?” She retorted, shooting the prince a glare that could have felled a dragon.

The prince, who was accustomed to the cruel stares of strangers, barely registered the gesture. “I said that I don’t blame you for not wanting to wear that dress. It’s simply all wrong for your shape and complexion. The cut is too tight in all the wrong places and the colour...well, you should be wearing bolder tones, an emerald green perhaps, not those pastel shades. You look like a limp stick of celery.”

There was a moment when the tailor held his breath, expecting the girl to hit the prince squarely in the face. But she didn’t. She laughed and laughed, holding onto her sides to prevent the dress from ripping and falling all around her. “Exactly what I thought, Your Majesty, but I’m afraid I am a poor miller’s daughter without the means or the imagination to commission anything better.”

“We both tried to come up with something better,

but the dress is the best of a bad bunch,” the tailor conceded. “Is there anything that Your Majesty would recommend? You have quite the eye for these things.”

The tailor winked and the prince felt his heart flutter. The prince gathered himself and rested his pointed chin on his hand, observing the girl’s frame. He wondered if something from his own, secret collection would suit the girl better. Their physiques were quite similar. Their measurements, he estimated, were identical. It was only their complexions that contrasted like night and day. The prince had the colouring of a field of wheat, his golden skin glowing with his long, flaxen hair sparkling in the afternoon’s light. The girl was leached of colour, her skin as white as milk and her black hair curling down her back like a cascade of filigreed iron. They were an opposing pair, only equal in their beauty.

The tailor cleared his throat. “So, what would you suggest, Your Majesty? With this dress?”

The prince stepped back, furrowing his brow. “I do have some recommendations to help you find something finer. Something to make you the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. All at my time and expense, you understand. I simply cannot have any of my subjects walking around in such ghastly attire. It would be a crime against fashion.”

The girl blushed. It was true what people said, the prince was a kind man. But he also was rather naive. She chose her next words with care, not wanting to



offend him nor sound ungrateful. “I thank you, but even if you could find the perfect gown, even if you could make me the most beautiful woman in this kingdom, it would be a waste of your time and money and the tailor’s skill and materials.”

The prince’s broad shoulders sank. He could not imagine how or why a beautiful dress was not the solution to any of life’s problems. “Why? Why would it be a waste?”

“Because I never intend to wear this dress or any other dress. I’m only here to please my father, who is desperate for me to go to some awful ball and find a match.”

The prince shuddered. “You have my full sympathies. I find myself in a similar situation where I am of the age where I must choose between marriage or a quest. A diabolical decision. But that is not something to concern yourself with. So, what do *you* want to wear?”

Henry’s one-word answer was not what the tailor or the prince were expecting. But that answer solved all of their problems.

The next day, the prince marched into the castle’s armoury.

“Um, hello?” he called, his voice echoing across the vaulted ceilings.

A man appeared, as tall as he was wide, and grunted at the prince. “Whatdoyouwant?” he asked,

apparently unable to speak in anything other than one long sound.

“Why, I want a suit of armour to fight dragons with!” the prince declared, putting his hands on his hips in what, he hoped, was a strong and heroic stance. “For I am going on a quest!”

The armourer was confused.  
“Andwhoareyouthen?”

“I’m the prince of this castle and kingdom! Although, to credit you, sir, this *is* the first time I have been down to this delightful, um, place of work?”

A rather large rat scuttled across the prince’s silk slippers as he said this last bit. The prince suppressed his scream, not at the sight of the rat but because it had left large, muddy prints all over his new silk shoes.

The man grunted and signalled for the prince to step forward and be measured for his armour.  
“T h o u g h t y o u d i d n t w a n t t o f i g h t .  
Thoughtyouweregettingmarried.”

The prince lowered his voice by several octaves to sound as gruff as the armourer did. “Oh, kind sir, I am as keen as mustard to fight. Please make me armour as light as air and strong as steel, for I am to have many adventures in it!”

The armourer nodded. “Yousaidthat.”

“Oh, and could you make the metal green? Emerald green?”

The armourer shrugged and got to work,

measuring the prince's body while running his fingers across the fine, gold thread woven throughout the prince's clothes. "Nice bit of work this."

The prince smiled and nodded. "Yes, the tailor of this town is a wonderful person. Such a talented craftsman as, I have heard, you are too."

The armourer blushed. "Thankyeyourhighness. Butthereisnooneastalentedasthetailor."

The prince smiled and nodded once more as kind people often do when they are too embarrassed to ask someone who they don't understand to repeat themselves ad infinitum. The armourer noted the prince's measurements and started work on the finest suit of armour the kingdom had ever seen, coloured emerald green and with a thin thread of gold woven through the chain, threads that the prince supplied himself.

When the armour was finished, the prince slipped it on and stood tall. It was not to his taste, but he noted it was fine work and as beautiful as the scales of the most spectacular dragon. A suit of armour to make anyone brave enough for what must be done next.

"Have you heard? Have you heard?" The king shouted, shaking his wife to awaken her one bright morning.

The queen opened her eyes, slowly, looking around her chamber and glaring at the king for disturbing her beauty sleep. "Heard what?"

“Henry! He’s asked the armourer to make him a suit! He’s going on a quest.” The king jumped up and down on the bed like a child on Whitsun morning, jostling the queen and making her feel quite giddy.

“*Our* Henry? Our Henry is going on a quest?” The queen sat up against her soft pillows.

“Yes!”

“Our Henry, who has only ever raised a sword to remove cobwebs from his bedchamber ceiling?”

“Yes!”

The queen’s heart stung and sank. There was no way her son would survive five minutes outside of the kingdom. “I thought he chose marriage over a quest. That I was going to find him a nice girl to marry instead?”

“That’s what I thought! But he said it’s not in his nature.”

“Well, that much we can agree on,” the queen said, worrying a loose thread on her bedspread. “When is he setting off on his adventures?”

“He’s leaving for the mountains this Sunday! Wait until I tell the other kings about this!” And the king skipped out of his wife’s chamber, singing all the way down the stairs.

The queen sighed and lay back down, but found she could not get back to sleep. She tossed and turned until she heard a note being pushed under the crack in her chamber door.

The miller was holding his daughter in a tight embrace. “This Sunday? And you’re sure? It’s all rather sudden, not that I’m complaining! I’m so glad I sent you to that tailor now. It was worth every penny, and you can wear your new dress as a wedding gown now!”

She smiled at her father, her heart dipping at the lie she was telling, but reassuring herself that it was for the best. The truth would break his heart. “Yes, I am sure. The tailor and I are to be married this Sunday and then we are to move to the next kingdom, where he will set up his new shop and we will live happily ever after.”

“Oh, I will miss you, my love. But this tailor makes you happy, does he? He’s such a strange little man, I didn’t think he was the marrying kind.”

“Yes, he has made me happy.” This proclamation, at least, Henry reassured herself, was not strictly a lie. The tailor had made Henry very happy by coming up with the plan that he had. Very happy indeed.

Sunday came, and with it one departure and one union. They say the prince had never looked braver, more confident, more princely as he galloped into the mountains in his suit of green armour, ready to have adventures as only a prince could. He didn’t even remove his visor when he bid the king farewell. But his father was not too proud to shed a tear, seeing his son gallop into the distance and fulfil his destiny. A

princely destiny.

The prince was never to be seen again within that kingdom's walls. But many stories were relayed of a prince called Henry who travelled far and wide, excelling on the battlefield and slaying dragons. A prince who was happy and brave, but often short-tempered and liable to throw large stones at your head if you dared to ask his name more than once. But, they say, this prince called Henry did all the things that princes were expected to do. Well, almost everything, for he never found a wife and never provided an heir for the throne.

It mattered not. Sometime later, the queen had another child. A girl. She called her daughter Henrietta. And while the queen's naming choices were not exactly original, she was astute enough to surround the child with tutors and mentors. When Henrietta was crowned queen, some decades later, she took the throne alone and they say her reign was one of compassion and ingenuity, that there was never a wiser ruler across all the kingdoms of the land.

The queen was not present when her son left the kingdom on that sunny Sunday. They say she was heartbroken at his departure and refused to leave her chamber. They were wrong. Because, instead, she donned an outfit borrowed from her maid and veiled her head, disguising herself to slip out and attend a small wedding on the outskirts of the kingdom. The wedding invitation had been pushed under her

chamber door the morning she learnt of her son's quest – an invitation penned in the unmistakable looped hand of her son.

When she read the invitation, she smiled and understood in an instant that, unlike her and countless others, her son would choose his own path.

And so she attended the wedding where the tailor married his one true love on that same Sunday morning as Henry left the kingdom. They say the bride wore a beautiful golden dress that shone as if spun from pure sunshine. There were so many forget-me-nots woven into her hair that you could not see that her hair was yellow, not black. And she also donned a thick, silk veil to obscure her face, refusing to remove it when the ceremony ended and skipping up the aisle with her new husband, only pausing to kiss the hand of a veiled maid whose heart now sang to see her son so happy.

The newlyweds moved to a new kingdom, a kingdom where no one knew them. The people there were very kind, almost as kind as the tailor's new wife, a tall lady who was always found wearing a golden dress of some description of another.

The wife manned the front of the shop because her husband, she explained, was not much for people and preferred to stay at the back of the shop, stitching and working in peace. She, however, loved to talk to the customers and design the garments that they would wear. It was the perfect division of labour. The perfect

marriage.

“And what’s your name?” Their first customer asked when she opened up the shop that first Thursday morning.

“My name? It’s Henry,” she said.

“As in Henrietta?”

The tailor’s wife paused. “Yes. Why not?”

“This tailor, we’ve heard so much about him from the neighbouring kingdom, not just about his skill with a needle but also rumours about what he creates. Is it true that he spun gold for the prince in that kingdom?”

She laughed as she lied. “Most certainly not! Otherwise, why would we be content with this little shop?”

The customer nodded in agreement. It was a far point and, in truth, a ridiculous story. As if anyone could spin gold. “And what’s your husband’s name?”

“Oh, he’s quite particular about who he tells his name to. I think he gets embarrassed – it’s such a strange name.”

“Well, how about you give me three guesses of his name every day until I guess it right?”

Henrietta clapped her hands. “Oh, that sounds like a wonderful game. And when you guess his name, we shall make for you whatever your heart desires! For free!”

The customer shook Henrietta’s hand and went away with a spring in his step. He came back the next



day and the next, trying to guess the tailor's name.

Soon, everyone in the kingdom joined in the game and tried to guess the tailor's name. No one ever did.

But then, what unbelievable circumstances would ever lead to someone guessing the name Rumpelstiltskin?

*Gemma Church is a sci-fi and speculative fiction writer. She recently received a diploma in creative writing from Cambridge University and is currently working on her first novel, a sci-fi adventure for middle-grade readers. Find her [here](#).*

# How To Rescue a Princess: A Beginner's Guide for the Aspiring Hero

Alice James

*Once upon a time, on a Saturday, in a magical land...*

If the inn had seen better days, they'd taken place a long time ago, but there was no solid evidence that they had ever occurred at all. The Hungry Dragon had the look of a building that had been quite remarkably shoddy and unalluring from day one. Indeed, arguably any 'better days' were yet to transpire and would in fact come into being when the entire edifice caught fire and burned to the ground, evicting several hundredweight of vermin and, almost certainly, equal amounts of black mould, dry rot, wet rot and fleas. The peeling door, swinging half-heartedly in the summer wind, sported rusty hinges and a broken latch. Still, it was at least unlocked and, as Prince

Lionel the Youngest pushed it open, a pleasing scent of hops and barley drifted out.

“Hello?” he called. “Good publican, show yourself.”

There was a scuffling noise and a figure stood up from behind the bar. Rather to Lionel’s surprise, it proved to be a girl dressed in huntsman’s garb, clutching a hefty dagger in one hand and a studded wooden club in the other. Her black hair was cut short to her jaw, framing a brown freckled face and an impressive scowl. Lionel blinked.

“My most humble of greetings,” he said. “Might you be the proprietress of this establishment?”

“Maybe,” she said, “depending on who’s asking.”

Lionel swept his heavily embroidered cloak to one side so that he could flick it up with an elegant flourish as he gave her a low bow. Gold lace glimmered.

“Greetings, maiden of Lorica,” he said. “My name is Lionel, and I seek lodgings and sustenance this night. At dawn, I shall make an assault on Loric Palace and attempt to rescue the sleeping princess therein from her incarceration, before marrying her and becoming the liege of this realm.”

The girl looked at him. He appeared to be carrying a scythe. At his feet he had placed an elderly wheeled travelling trunk. Through the door it became all too painfully obvious that he had made this last leg of his journey on Farmer Bun’s elderly grey donkey. She

raised an eyebrow.

“You?” she said.

He bowed again.

“Indeed, most favoured lady.”

“With a grass cutter, a suitcase and a borrowed ass?”

He winced.

“The steed was unintentional,” he said. “My horse threw a shoe in the village. An unlucky throw indeed.”

She put the dagger and club down in the manner of one who sees no immediate use for them.

“Fine,” she said. “It’s your death. But if you’re going out to get totalled tomorrow, I’ll want payment in advance. My name is Muriel and I’ll be your landlady tonight.”

Shortly after dawn, Muriel set a stein of small ale and a plate of cold meat and cheese in front of her unexpected guest. He had soft ringlets the colour of milk, gentle green eyes, and the smooth peach-toned skin of a man who’d never laboured under the sun for a single day of his life. He was also as slim as a lathe – she put the odds of his being able to heft a broadsword at well below zero.

“You know, seven hundred and twenty-three noble knights have perished trying to get into that place,” she said. “The last attempt was four years ago, when General Gondis rode in on a war elephant with an

enchanted sword and some plus-three armour of not getting slaughtered. The dragon tossed his wishbone out fourteen minutes later and it was already picked clean. Really, this inn should change its name to the Well-Fed and Getting Plumper by the Minute Dragon.”

Lionel took a sip of beer and picked up a chicken drumstick. He nibbled at it thoughtfully. Muriel had to admit that the man had lovely manners.

“I don’t have a lot of choice, alas,” he said. “What I *do* have is eleven older brothers and a father who gambled away the royal treasury before any one of us was so much as weaned. We’ve so little money to pay servants that I spend most of my days in the royal greenhouse growing tomatoes. I’ll be lucky to inherit so much as a plant pot. It’s quest or bust, to be frank, and I don’t have any armour, so jousting and single combat are right out.” He dabbed at his mouth with an embroidered kerchief. “Also my horse, Peony, is great at dressage but hopeless on the field of battle, so I don’t think I’m destined to be a legendary warrior either.”

“Oh dear; that doesn’t sound ideal.”

He shrugged.

“I wasn’t born with the best of silver spoons in my mouth,” he said. “More of a silver toothpick, really. Do you actually run this inn?”

Muriel snorted.

“I wish. My uncle’s in charge, but he’s come down

with man flu so profound that to talk to him you'd think he had Black Plague, White Pox and Scarlet Fever simultaneously. I've been taking soup up to his chamber twice a day but if he's still faking near death tomorrow, I'm just going to strangle him and save him the effort."

Lionel reached over and patted her hand.

"My dear father the king is quite the same, you know," he said confidently. "The only bill he always pays is the court medic's. He always fancies himself sick with some ailment or other, though all that really afflicts him is total bankruptcy and the wrath of my mother."

She laughed and watched as he finished his plate of food and drained his mug of foaming beer. Silence fell on the tavern, broken only by the ticking of an elderly cuckoo clock that seemed out of place, strangely at odds with the medieval nature of the rest of the building. Indeed, the whole tavern seemed oddly empty, as though waiting for patrons who had been anticipated but had yet to appear... There were two unused chairs set around the heavy breakfast table, as though a party of four should be gathered together, rather than just the two of them. Eventually Lionel spoke.

"Let's give it a little longer, shall we?" he said. "Just in case anyone else should, you know, turn up."

Muriel rolled her eyes.

"Let's hope so; we don't have a single ranged

weapon between us.”

They sat in silence. The clock continued to tick. At one point the cuckoo emerged, emitted a strangled squawk, and then retreated again. Eventually Lionel threw down his fork and stood up.

“I guess it’s just us,” he said. “Which is a shame. Our prospects would be much better if we had, say, casually encountered a fighter with an enchanted broadsword and a fire mage with an addiction to Spoonerisms and really bad puns.”

“What’s this ‘we’ and ‘us’ rubbish? I’m a peaceful interim landlady, minding my own business here. Why would I be coming?”

“Perhaps you’ll kindly decide to show me the way to the castle? Come as my guide or something?”

“Show you the way?”

Muriel stomped to the battered inn door and threw it wide. Above the inn, dominating the landscape, the massive hulk of the castle loomed over them, a citadel of so many battlements and crenelations that it seemed unlikely that there could be sufficient space left inside for a water closet, let alone a palace. Below the walls, the infamous labyrinth of thorns crept down the mountainside, its spiny hedgerows appearing as an intricate lacework of dizzying proportions.

“There you go,” she said. “Knock yourself out. Say hi to the dragon from me in the 0.4 seconds you get before he roasts you into oblivion.”

Lionel sighed. He turned his green eyes on her. He

really was remarkably pretty.

“How about we make our way to the start of the maze together as you regale me with the grievous tale of mad King Loric and his beautiful daughter, the Princess Tiffany?”

“Tiffany? What kind of dumb name for a medieval princess is that?”

Lionel continued to gaze at her. She felt her heart melt within her chest.

“Someone put points into Smoulder,” she said crossly. “Fine. Follow me.”

As they walked under the beating midday sun, prince and peasant together, Muriel regaled Prince Lionel with the strange history of crazy old Loric and his magical maze.

“Once upon a time, this land was ruled by a powerful wizard king, Loric the Mage,” she said. “His daughter was so beautiful that he feared unscrupulous suitors would steal her away. Desperate to ensure that she married only the bravest and truest of men, he built a vast and magical labyrinth around the palace, full of traps and monsters. Only a great warrior with a pure heart would be able to make it through to the centre. Finally, Loric cast his Tiffany into an enchanted slumber from which she could only be awakened by the kiss of her true love. Honestly, Lionel, this is a whole load of misogynistic shit.”

Lionel reached down a hand to help her over a



tussock.

“It’s not even that I’m bothered by,” he said. “I’m wondering why you would go to the trouble of changing the story of Sleeping Beauty. I mean, what’s wrong with pricking a finger on a cursed spinning wheel and falling asleep for a hundred years?”

Muriel wrinkled up her nose into a frown.

“Maybe no one knows what a spinning wheel looks like anymore?” she hazarded.

“No, that makes no sense. No one knew what they looked like when I was a boy either. It can’t be that.”

“Possibly pricking a finger doesn’t set enough dramatic tension up?”

Lionel looked unconvinced.

“I guess,” he said. “Or not. Any more details on the labyrinth?”

“Let me check... Nope, just ‘a vast and magical labyrinth around the palace, full of traps and monsters’ is all.” Oh, hang on, there’s a bit more. ‘The hedges were almost five metres high, thick and impenetrable, bearing razor-sharp thorns some two inches long.’ There you go.”

The prince pushed a hand through his blonde curls.

“Damnit, that’s nonsensical, measuring the hedges in metric and the thorns in imperial. Does no one even proofread this stuff? Honestly. Well, we’re here at last. Ready?”

It was Muriel’s turn to look unconvinced.

“Shall we give it another ten minutes to see if

anyone joins us? They might just be running late.”

Lionel made a nose of protest and she threw up her hands in frustration. “Look, Lionel, it’s an enchanted maze followed by a cursed castle, stuffed with who-knows-what kind of monsters and at least one dragon. I’ve got a mace and a dagger; I’m only hand-to-hand, grappling and strategy. You’re...” She tailed off. “I mean, what the hell kind of class are you anyway? You’re carrying a scythe, for crying out loud. Can you even use that as an offensive weapon? Whatever did you spend your points on? I bet you didn’t get that stupid embroidered cloak for free.”

Lionel looked wounded.

“Muriel, there’s no need to be mean. I’m a multiclass bard-druid-wizard; I put most of my points into horticulture and couture. It’s the only way I could get my backstory to work.”

“Couture? Is that even in the manual? Look, Lionel, you always do this! You insist on some ridiculous origin story that has nothing to do with the actual main plot, and then you’re completely useless for three quarters of the scenario before getting wiped out right before the big bad and leaving us underpowered for the final boss fight.”

There was a white-hot silence. Lionel bit his lip and then threw his scythe down onto the grass. He sat down on a rock and rubbed his face in his hands. When he looked up at Muriel, there was a pinched look to his face.

“Well, at least I turned up. Unlike some.”

Muriel’s mouth fell open. After a few attempts, she closed it again and slumped down on a rock next to him.

“That’s uncalled for.”

“Is it?”

Muriel fumbled for a tissue before remembering that they didn’t exist.

“Oh, crap, I don’t know. Look we’re here, there’s no use maundering. Can we even get through this damn hedge without fireballs?”

Lionel leapt to his feet.

“Now there,” he said with a touch of smugness, “there I might be able to help.”

Swinging back his cloak so that its acres of embroidery shimmered in the sun, he pulled out a gnarled and ancient-looking stick with eldritch runes carved along its length. He held it out to Muriel.

There was a silence.

“It’s a wand,” Muriel said.

Lionel nodded.

“Indeed, maiden of Lorica. It is that very thing.”

“Just the one wand when we have, you know, an entire labyrinth to navigate and literally zero fire power.”

Lionel attempted to raise an eyebrow enigmatically; it almost worked.

“Don’t doubt me, fair one,” he said. “My hidden depths are, I will admit, well hidden, but they are also

remarkably deep when plumbed.”

“You’ve got your mojo back all of a sudden,” she said.

Lionel twirled the wand and managed not to drop it.

“That’s because I have a cunning plan and it looks as though it might just work,” he said.

Muriel cast her eyes up to the heavens and briefly prayed for a lightning strike. There wasn’t so much as a wisp of cloud to be seen, however, so she threw in the towel.

“Go on, I give in – spit it out,” she said. “What does it do?”

Lionel gave the wand a super-casual flip that sent it spinning over his head. With a whirl of his cloak, he caught it behind his back left-handed, then tossed it back over this shoulder into his right hand.

“Woo!” he said. “A natural twenty. Worth an extra point into Dex just for that. It’s Level 18 Insect Plague.”

“It’s...” Muriel broke off and looked up the hill ahead of them, the seemingly endless tapestry of the maze winding around and around, presumably filled with diabolical and ingenious surprises that definitely included at least one dragon. “OK, look as smug as you like. How many charges has it got?”

Lionel grinned. He made no effort at all to hide his smugness.

“Just the one – I couldn’t afford more. And listen,

when I've cast it, leg it down the hill as fast as your legs can carry you, OK?"

"Sure, but why?"

"Because I've read the manual. Right, here goes. Abracadabra!"

It has been written that the enchanted black locusts of Moss Gulliath can strip an olive grove down to the stumps in less than a minute; certainly they made short work of King Loric's ancient maze of thorns. Within moments, the hillside was obscured by a mist of green fragments, the chattering of insect teeth swelling to a roaring cacophony of destruction. Muriel stumbled down the slope with her hands clasped to her ears, and when they reached the grassy meadows by the inn again, she sank to her knees, screwing her eyes shut as though that could help to damp the deafening roar.

Strangely, when the clamour of the locusts began to ebb, it was to be replaced by the sound of crockery clinking. Opening her eyes, she saw that Lionel had spread out a picnic blanket on the grass. He had unlatched his traveling suitcase and was lifting out glasses, plates and little waxed packages of sandwiches. She raised her eyebrows at a chilled bottle that owed nothing to medieval alewives – but a great deal to the vintners of the Champagne region of modern France – and which had been lovingly wrapped in a linen cloth.

Lionel grinned.

“GM must have been distracted when he read my equipment list,” he said. “I honestly didn’t expect to get that one through.” He opened it with a satisfying pop and poured her a glass. “Ready for the show?”

She drained it in one in case the GM should try to retrospectively enforce some authenticity and held out her glass for a refill.

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about but, sure, bring it on.”

He topped her up and gestured up to the top of the hill where the green mist of vegetation had all but settled, revealing the chaos and terror that it had briefly concealed...

Freed from their spiny incarceration, every monster that mad old King Loric had seeded his maze with – and that happened to possess eyeballs – turned to regard the two adventurers with an inhuman gaze. Then, as a single and terrifying group, they took to their feet – those that happened to possess such appendages – and began to thunder down the hillside towards Muriel and Lionel, teeth, horns, tentacles and other appendages ready for battle.

Muriel gave a shriek but Lionel caught her wrist.

“No, that’s not right,” he said loudly. “I checked. Only monsters with an Intelligence of six or higher will actively seek out the party and attack them. The rest will merely turn on the nearest potential foe and attack.”

The universe filled with a sense of confusion and consternation. Then the monsters – among the throng Muriel had identified aboleths, a pair of mind flayers, a githyanki *and* a githzerai – began to shamble back up the hill, some of them arguing about where they had started from.

There was a brief moment of silence and then a different kind of chaos erupted as the monsters, mindlessly and with no discrimination, set upon one another and began a battle to the death.

“Oh boy,” Muriel said. “This is quite the floor show.”

“Right?” said Lionel. “Oh, look at that.”

He raised a hand and pointed, and Muriel swallowed a gurgle of laughter at the two annoyed mind flayers who were futilely attempting to pick their way down through the battle and slaughter the adventurers.

“Um, excuse me,” the first said. “If I could just pass? I have an Intelligence of 17 and I absolutely no intention of participating in this undignified hullabaloo.”

Its words were cut off as it was engulfed by a gelatinous cube. The second, nimbly sidestepping, shook a tentacled head.

“How shameful,” it said. “What a brawl. To think...”

But it never spoke again. Its head, severed from its body by the bite of a passing naga, sailed through the

air for a few metres before being eaten by a posse of giant rats.

Through the unfolding maelstrom of violence, however, two figures were passing, and no monsters on the battlefield had the power to impede their path. They were unmistakable, and Muriel's heart filled with such terror that she felt it was turning to ice in her chest. The demon lord Demogorgon and his ancient enemy, the devil Asmodeus, were heading their way, and she knew that – with no other fighters to assist them and especially at their current experience level – she and Lionel were doomed.

She could see that Demogorgon's eyes were on her, all four of them, while Asmodeus had his malign sight turned towards Lionel. Their certain deaths would be swift but infinitely painful and the great adventures that they had yearned for would now never come to pass. Muriel prepared to meet her maker.

Lionel cleared his throat.

“No, no; that's not right either,” he intoned clearly. “Demogorgon and Asmodeus have been bitter enemies for more than a thousand years. There's no way they would set their enmity aside to squish a barmaid and an apprentice druid prince.”

“Hey! I'm not a barmaid.”

“Sorry, trainee fighter.”

For a second time, a sense of wrongness fell over the world. Then, moments before they would have drawn close enough to Lionel and Muriel to tear them



limb from limb, Asmodeus and Demogorgon instead fell upon one another and began a duel that could only end when one, or indeed both of them, lay upon the earth as a bloodied corpse.

“This should be epic,” Muriel said. “I’ve always wondered who would win in a showdown between these two.”

“Me too,” Lionel said, “but they’re so evenly matched it probably boils down to the dice rolls.”

“Did you pack popcorn?”

He passed her a bowl.

“Not quite popcorn, but I have these wonderful smoked tomato pork scratchings; in my backstory I use the produce from the palace greenhouses to make marvellous dishes that bring happiness to those who eat them. My recipe for tomato-stuffed whole roast hog is revered across the kingdom and was even once known to have quelled a furious dragon with its tempting aroma, perfectly crispy skin and mouth-watering flavours.”

“Seriously?”

Lionel, his mouth full, nodded.

“Mmm hmm.” He swallowed. “The dragon still turns up every Saturday to consume one – and of course to rid the kingdom of any passing monsters. It’s the reason my brother the heir is so jealous of me that he banished me from the kingdom. Seriously, did you even read my character sheet? Ten gold pieces Asmodeus wins.”

Muriel nodded.

“You’re on,” she said. “Oh look, Demogorgon’s already snared him with a tentacle.”

There was some slithering, some thudding and then a hideous rending noise. An entrail flew over their heads and smacked into the inn door.

“Ouch,” Lionel said. “Poor old Asmodeus. I hope he didn’t need that spleen for anything.”

Before he could speak again, they were interrupted by howls of fury and agony. For a few moments, both battling fiends were engulfed in a cloud of brimstone smoke from which a spray of blood and ichor exploded. When the vapour cleared, it revealed Asmodeus, minus a couple of horns and an arm, sitting astride the flailing form of his ancient enemy, who was down to one flapping tentacle and one head.

“No!” wailed Muriel. “Demogorgon, don’t give up; you can do this. I believe in you.”

Almost as though her words gave him strength, Demogorgon reached up with his remaining steaming tentacle, pierced along its length with many gaping wounds from the devil’s horns, and with a final burst of savagery, tore off Asmodeus’ head.

Muriel burst into spontaneous applause but Lionel, casting his bowl of pork scratchings to one side, leapt to his feet, seized his scythe and hurtled towards where the vile demon Demogorgon, perilously wounded and close to breathing his last, lay spasming on the grass. The prince began wildly hacking and

flailing at the creature with his scythe.

“Hurry,” he said. “I don’t think I even get a weapons bonus at all for this thing; I’m on hand-to-hand stats, at a guess, and without modifiers I doubt I could take down a pot plant. And Muriel – if we kill him, we get all the experience points just between the two of us. We won’t even have to share with those two losers.”

Muriel clambered up and drew her dagger. After some rather disgusting and sticky sawing, she severed Demogorgon’s final head from his body. Then she stood up and stood back and admired their handiwork.

“Nice,” she said, “but you still owe me ten gold pieces.”

Lionel burst out laughing and Muriel found herself smiling. For the first time, she felt that the day hadn’t been a monumental waste of time. Before she could dwell on her sudden change of mood, however, there came a great roar of fury from the top of the hill. A multicoloured dragon as high as a house stood on the battlements of the castle, her five snarling heads silhouetted against the sky. As Muriel watched, the beast launched herself into the air and, after spiralling magnificently a few times, came to land in front of them between the corpses of the dead demon and the deceased devil.

“I am Tiamat, queen of the great wyrms and render of souls,” the creature howled. “Prepare to meet your doom.”

Muriel looked admiringly at the glimmering multi-chrome scales and vast taloned wings and felt a touch starstruck.

“The Great Dragon of Waterdeep?” she enquired shyly.

Tiamat bowed and sunlight shimmered on her mailed horns.

“The very same.”

Muriel bit her lip.

“Who laid waste to the kingdom before slaughtering all its armies and royals and making her lair within the halls of the summer place?” she ventured.

Tiamat bowed again.

“Whose legendary treasure mound is so high that it once took a halfling two days to scale it before you ate him at the top?”

Tired of bowing, the dragon shrugged a wing.

“That’s me,” she said.

“Wow.” Muriel paused. “I mean, forgive me gushing but you are so much more impressive than you look in the manual.”

The great dragon’s glimmering scales took on a hint of crimson.

“A lot of people say that,” she murmured before adding with a burst of honesty: “I mean, briefly, before they die.” She looked over Muriel’s shoulder and gave a start of recognition. “Oh, it’s you!”

“Wait, what?”

Muriel spun around. Lionel was sweeping into one of his glorious bows, the folds of his cloak swinging up quite wonderfully.

“Majesty,” he said. “What a delightful surprise! I didn’t think to find you here.”

Tiamat nodded civilly.

“This is my main gig right now,” she said. “Loric paid me a lot of gold, and all up front.”

Lionel smiled. Muriel could tell from four feet away that he was just radiating smugness.

“I meant, it’s Saturday, though,” he said, with a glance up at the sky as though to make sure any relevant deities were paying attention. “You know, when you’re due at my Dad’s palace for your weekly tomato-stuffed wild boar?”

Once again, the universe seemed at a loss for a moment, perhaps even a touch frustrated. Then the dragon clasped her clawed front feet to her snout.

“Lordy, you’re right,” she exclaimed. “Ever since I was cast in the Lord of the Rings as Smaug, I’m in so many campaigns simultaneously it’s hard to keep track. Well, I’ll be off. Hope the sleeping princess is pretty.”

She unfurled her great wings and seemed just on the verge of leaping into the air when a buzzing noise sounded, and an armour-clad warrior stepped out of the grass as though teleported in from another world. His mail gleamed. His vast sword glittered. His winning smile and white teeth cast even Lionel’s into

the shade.

“Forgive my lateness, fellow adventurers,” he cried in fearless and bell-like tones. “I am Gerhart of Nivea, and I have come to slay the dragon and save the day.”

Muriel looked away. Lionel looked appalled. Tiamat looked faintly amused. Gerhart, on the other hand, looked most surprised that his arrival wasn’t being greeted with more joy.

“Hello,” he said. “What part of “save the day and slay the dragon” did I say wrong?”

Muriel picked at a cuticle.

“Yeah,” she said. “Thanks, but we’re fine. Good for day-saving and dragon slaying on our own, you know?”

Perplexed, Gerard glanced over at Lionel, but the prince seemed to feel, for the first time, that this wasn’t his fight and had turned away to feed the remaining sandwiches to Tiamat.

Gerard threw up his hands in protest.

“Look, I’m here now,” he said. “Sorry I’m late, yada yada, but there we go. My grandmother was sick.” He swung his double-handed battle sword menacingly; enchantment runes were carved up the length of its blade. “Simon’s on his way too. So, anyway, GM slipped to me that Lionel has a Wand of Paralysis. You drop that bomb, Lionel my man, and then five minutes with this baby...” he swished the

sword again “...and we’ll all be feasting on warm wyrm sushi.”

“Actually, I’m cold-blooded,” Tiamat interjected. Gerard’s brow wrinkled up in consternation. “You know, lizard?” He shook his head and the dragon cast her faceted eyes heavenward. “Not a mammal? Oh by the head of Vecna, can we get a plus-literally-anything primer on basic biology here?”

Muriel didn’t speak for a few moments. She looked up at Lionel and he shrugged.

“Your call,” he said, “but I’ll support your decision, if that helps.”

“Thanks.”

She walked up to Tiamat and put her hands on the dragon’s mighty neck. Lowering her voice, she whispered: “He should be delicious. He spent his entire backstory feasting on fine wines and roast venison. Well, the bits of it that don’t need an additional and very specific content warning, if you get my drift.”

Tiamat lowered one feathered eyelid conspiratorially.

“I hear you, sister,” she said. “And without that Paralysis spell, no quantity of natural twenties can save him.”

They frisked what Tiamat had left of the corpse. Neither of them could even carry Gerhart’s armour or sword, but Lionel claimed a fine pair of boots that the

dragon had hiccupped up with some embarrassment.

“How do they feel?” Muriel asked.

Lionel hopped from foot to foot, an activity that sent his gold cloak swishing around quite delightfully.

“Hmm,” he said, “I can’t say for sure, but I feel...” He jumped into the air and spun around, landing delicately on one foot before pivoting to the other. “I feel really stable. But what about you? Knowing Gerhart, there’s a probably an amulet of attracting the opposite sex – or at least a tacky gold medallion?”

She patted his arm. “I need neither, good prince.”

Lionel gave her a little Smoulder. “That was never in doubt.”

Muriel gave him That Look. She hadn’t put any points into it, but it didn’t matter.

“Yeah, right,” she said. “Come on, let’s rescue a bloody princess. I’m sure that’s why we’re here.”

They made their way up the hillside, their footsteps crunching on the exhausted locusts that littered the ground, their carapaces bloated to bursting point. The monsters had slaughtered one another almost down to the last kobold. They gave the remaining gelatinous cube a wide berth and made their way to the castle. It was deserted, denuded of its secrets and its mighty dragon guardian.

“Which is a good thing,” Lionel pointed out, “when you consider that we have enough firepower between us to maybe grill a small marshmallow if it obligingly stays still for the duration. I assume she’s



up in the tower.”

“I guess, but don’t forget that the narrative has been changed from the original Brothers Grimm. You know, where she’s in the tower and pricks a finger on a spinning wheel.”

“I think in that version, it’s a spindle.”

“A whattle?”

“Never mind. I still don’t know why you’d change the story. Doesn’t everyone know that version?”

Muriel raised her hands.

“Not a clue. Maybe if we had encountered a fighter with an enchanted broadsword and a fire mage with an addiction to Spoonerisms and dodgy word games back in the inn, it would be more obvious.”

They made their way to the central tower. The building, dusty from a century of neglect, was empty of even the smallest lurking foe, as though it had not been anticipated that they would make it this far at all, and certainly not this quickly...

An ancient wooden door gave way to a single kick from Muriel’s boot and they climbed the spiral stairs within, checking for traps at every step but finding nothing untoward. The final spiral opened up into a sunny chamber, arched windows filled with roses and jasmine fronds on all sides. A soft music filled the air; there was the scent of summer. Set in the centre, a bed had been laid with white lace and silk. A girl lay there, soft blonde curls escaping from the gauze veil that obscured her face.

“Phew,” Lionel said. “I guess we’re here.”

Standing in the doorway, Muriel found herself hesitating. Here they were, glory within their grasp, but she felt only disappointment. She looked back at Lionel, standing behind her on the top stair. He gave her a token Smoulder and she managed half a smile.

“I guess we are,” she said. “Well, this is your moment.”

“Yeah, OK.” He cleared his throat. “Through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered I have fought my way here to the castle beyond the...” He looked a little lost and fumbled in the depths of his cloak for a piece of paper. “Righty ho: to the castle beyond the cursed maze of thorns to rescue the princess who will else slumber for all eternity.”

Muriel frowned.

“‘Will else’ – is that even grammatically correct?”

“Um, I think so.”

“Are you sure?”

“Muriel, I’m kind of winging this, OK? I didn’t expect us to get here this session and I haven’t prepared anything properly. I didn’t even bring a breath mint.”

“I’m not saying it’s definitely wrong, it just sounded odd.”

“Muriel!”

“Sorry.”

Lionel scrumpled up the paper and threw it onto the stone floor of the chamber where it bounced along

before coming to rest amid a mound of jasmine leaves. Then he approached the bed. He cleared his throat a couple of times and then leant down and gently drew back the princess's veil... and jumped back as though a scorpion had stung him on the lip.

"Woah, I don't think so," he exclaimed. "That's a big no from me."

"What's up," said Muriel stepping forward to see. "Is she ugly? Is she a hippo?"

"What? No! Muriel, what decade are you from? We don't fat shame people anymore and we certainly don't judge them by their physical appearances. No; she's just – Muriel, take a look. She's really, really young."

"Oh."

Muriel moved past him and looked down. Tiffany had skin so fair it almost glowed. It had never heard of whiteheads, let alone blackheads. It was as unblemished as morning snow and as dewy as the dawn. Her lips formed a perfect pink moue and her long black lashes made a half moon of lustrous black above her cheeks... A ridiculously revealing silk gown, which looked as though the stress and strain of sitting up would total it, had been sewn with a hundred thousand pearls and twice as many diamonds... And she was barely more than a child.

"I see what you mean," Muriel said. "I mean, in the Brothers Grimm version, she falls asleep on her sixteenth birthday!"

“Well, I’m not kissing an unconscious sixteen-year-old. I’ll be arrested, or at least I should be, and rightly so. She hasn’t given any kind of consent. And I’m older than the rest of you, remember; I had to repeat a year. I’m twenty-three. Seriously, I’m Prince Lionel, not Prince Andrew.”

Muriel looked down at Tiffany. Sixteen was feasible, maybe. But even so...

Her thoughts were interrupted by a familiar buzzing noise. An armour-clad warrior wearing Lionel’s old boots stepped out of the stone floor of the tower. He was dragging a slumbering form behind him by its left leg. On closer inspection, said form proved to be an old man sporting a ridiculously long white beard. He wore smoke-stained robes patterned with planets and stars, the fingers of his hands were fat with enchanted rings, and a plethora of wands and vials had been stuffed into his belt.

“Right,” Gerhart said. “So. GM said I could come back in, seeing as the dragon wasn’t meant to be there in the first place, so it couldn’t have eaten me, so I’m not dead. He said I had to ask you for the boots back though. And Simon’s here too, but he’s a bit the worse for wear, if you know what I mean. So, let’s kill some monsters and get some XP, eh?”

Lionel stepped forward to speak but Muriel pushed past him.

“How’s your grandmother?” she asked.

Gerhart frowned in confusion.

“What?” he said. “She’s dead.”

“I thought she was sick.”

Seconds ticked by and then Gerhart clapped a hand theatrically to his head. “Oh *that* grandmother,” he said. “I mean, I thought you meant *the other* grandmother. I mean, yes she’s sick. Very sick. Maybe dying. I mean, almost definitely dying. Yeah she has a fatal case of lymphatic cardiac emancipation of the, um, grandmother?”

Muriel rubbed her eyes.

“Just leave it, Gerhart. I worked out what day it is after you were eaten by Tiamat, alright. It’s December 10th; quarter-final playoff against France in Qatar. Did we win?”

Gerhart squirmed, but before he could respond, the fire wizard Simon opened his eyes and failed to scramble to his feet.

“Avast, young adventurers,” he bumbled from the floor. “I am the great wire fizzard Simon, here to lend you my ajical marts. Let’s journey to lild wands and may slonsters.” Muriel and Lionel just stared at him, so he drew in a breath. “Hello? The mage in the party who’s into spire fells and... Oh, never mind.”

Lionel looked up to the heavens, but they were in a tower bedroom and the ceiling gave him little inspiration, so he just looked down again. Then he drew in a breath.

“Simon, Gerhart, look, you’re both too late. All the monsters are dead now. We’ve finished the quest, we

somehow managed it without you, and we've got all the experience points – not to mention Gerhart's boots – so you can both of you just sod off. And I don't know why you made your character obsessed with stupid puns and Spoonerisms, Simon, but I do know that you'll have planned a totally unsavoury reason for it before the end of the scenarios like we'll be playing cards and you'll be sure to draw the Four of Hearts or the Six of Diamonds and, honestly, we can all do without that."

Simon the fire mage burst into a great bellow of laughter.

"Those are rad," he said. "I never even thought of those."

Muriel shoved back in front of Lionel. She had the look of someone ready to punch a face and she didn't seem picky about whose.

"Look, Gerhart, would you just fuck off and, when you get there, fuck off some more? You let me down all the time and I'm sick of it and you could have said about the football and we would have rescheduled the session but you didn't because you couldn't be bothered and now you're both drunk and I hate you and I hope I never see you again." She ran out of oxygen at this point and took a frantic gasp. "I actually had a better time today with Lionel than I ever have with you, as it happens, so just take a hike and try to fall off something high onto something hard."

She turned around and stormed to one of the windows and stood there with her back to them. Her shoulders were heaving.

“Look, babe,” Gerhart protested. “You don’t mean...”

He dropped to the ground in a silent heap. After a few moments, there was a loud buzz and his prone form vanished. Lionel pocketed the Wand of Paralysis and turned to where Simon was kneeling on the floor. The wizard still hadn’t made it to his feet.

“Yeah, Simon,” Lionel said. “I think I hear Gerhart calling you; said something about getting more beer.”

Simon blinked.

“Cool,” he said and, with a buzzing sound, he too disappeared.

Silence fell over the tower room. The princess slept on, Muriel dried her eyes, and Simon walked back over to the bed and sat down. He looked down at the sleeping maiden, her ethereal loveliness undimmed by the passage of a century, her hands unlined and perfect where they emerged from the spider-fine tracery of her almost entirely see-through gown.

“She does look extremely high maintenance,” he said. “You know, you can just tell that she’s not a pie and chips lass. She would definitely have 2.3 million followers on Insta and post a lot of ‘I just woke up like this’ photos after two hours of hair and makeup.”

Muriel grunted.

“And she’ll absolutely hate me,” he continued. “Remember, she’s waited a hundred years for, for – hang on, let me check the background notes. Here we go – for a great warrior with a pure heart. She’s going to be really pissed when she finds I’m a gardener with two expired wands, borrowed boots and a faulty horse.”

Muriel grunted again.

“And there’d be no cheeky ’Spoons on a Saturday night with her,” he went on. “It’d be sushi and cocktails at some bar with emojis in the name and lots of uncomfortable seats and a lot of man buns.”

Muriel grunted a third time; she was getting into the swing of it.

“Not that I want to dis a man-bun but, seriously, I definitely don’t think she’d be up for an all-night Call of Duty marathon followed by microwaved pizza.”

Muriel’s attempt at a grunt turned into a reluctant snigger.

“No,” she agreed. “But what’s your suggestion?”

“Well...” He jumped up off the bed. “The quest ends when one of us takes possession of the kingdom, right? Well, I figure that no one alive in this realm has ever seen this girl, so let’s tell them *you’re* the princess! We get married, become the king and queen, bish bash bosh, Bob’s your uncle, we all live happily ever after.”

“We get married?”

“Yup.”



Muriel looked away so that Lionel couldn't see the expression on her face.

"What about the princess? It doesn't sound very fair on her."

"It's better than her being forcibly kissed by a man seven years older than her and becoming a child bride under false pretences. They jail people for less these days – as they should! And I'm sure that some marvellous knight with a pure heart and a massive polearm will be along eventually."

Muriel turned to him. She was smiling very slightly. There was a hint of dimple. Seeing her face, Lionel beamed and held out a hand. She took it shyly and he pulled her in close.

"After all that talk of consent, I'm going to need you to agree to this kiss," he said.

Muriel cleared her throat.

"I agree," she said.

He put both hands on her shoulders and bent down. His lips drew close to hers. Then, suddenly, he drew back with a bark of laughter.

"I just worked out why the GM changed the story and got rid of the spindle," he said. "He worked out what Simon had in mind and decided he was having none of it. It all boils down to those stupid puns and Spoonerisms."

"Lionel, I don't care. The Reverend William Archibald Spooner did none of us a favour with his stupid wordplay. And Simon's puns are always

smutty as hell.”

“I know but this one is quite good – she was cursed because she pricks a finger...”

“Lionel, I said. I don’t care.”

“What? Oh, of course. Sorry.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her. And they all lived happily ever...

Muriel exploded in a fit of giggles.

“OK, I just worked it out; it is quite good. She fingers a...”

“Muriel!”

“Sorry.”

And they all lived happily ever after.

*Alice is a travel writer and photographer who also writes SFF and fantasy novels and short stories. Her series of romantic whodunnits, the Lavington Windsor Mysteries, is being published by independent publisher Solaris Press. Book One – Grave Secrets – is available [here](#).*

# The Mother of Calamities

T.R. Peers

Lisbet Lalique liked misty mornings. You still got a few this close to the mountains, even early in the Abelian summer. The mist rolled down the slopes and filled up the valleys and forests, and sometimes, if the light and the wind were just right, you could even see the city of Aquila rising up out of it as it brooded on the shoulders of the mountain it was named for. Lisbet's Papa called it the City of Sinners, because it was where the High Wizards and the Artificers who made the Golems lived, and the Golems were Abominations against the Will of Saint Thecla. Mama teased him about it, because Yules Lalique was, in truth, a fairly low-ranking Wizard who'd turned to the Church because any other form of progression was closed off to him, but she didn't do it too seriously because she loved him. For her part, Melissa Lalique was a hunter and woodsman, though she wasn't doing a great deal of either since she'd given birth to Ollie.

Lisbet's little brother was still very small – that was part of the reason she was out here this misty morning, and Mama wasn't.

Some people might have worried about letting a nine-year-old girl loose in a forest by herself, but Mama had taught Lisbet a great deal about woodcraft already, and Papa had shown her how to control her magic. Right now, her abilities were limited to simple things, like conjuring fire or making things float around a little, but one day he promised he'd take her to the city to start proper training. The Magisters of the Lily College would have called her a Warlock, but Papa had taught her how to use prayers to Saint Thecla at bed-time to keep the night-terrors away, so there was no danger of her magic running out of control whilst she slept.

Of course, magic and forestlore weren't the only things protecting Lisbet on her morning forage. There was also Big Henri, a massive Destrier that stood even taller than Papa. He was a piebald, with black-and-white blotches that Lisbet thought were very pretty, but apparently the Royal Knights preferred horses that were solidly one colour or another, and so Henri had been declared a Chaff and sold cheap. He was still big, strong, and easily-trained, however, and made an excellent draught horse – he was just carrying sacks of nuts, khile-fruit and kalaberries instead of a heavily-armoured Knight, which Lisbet thought must be much

nicer. And he carried her, of course. Getting on and off the horse's broad back was a bit of a challenge, to be certain, but nothing a little hop and a quick surge of Spirit couldn't fix.

Jumping around with magic was really fun, but you had to be careful not to go too high or you'd upset the Dragons and they'd be allowed to eat you. That was one of the Rules, that the Dragons, the Magisters and the Whales had agreed to long ago to end the Great War, and it was the one lesson everyone in the world made sure to tell their children, whatever they might think of Dragons, Magisters or Rules in general. No flying, no putting warships into the sea (that one upset the Whales, though Abelia sometimes annoyed them by doing it in shallow water) and no killing a Dragon, as if anyone could. Lisbet had only ever seen a Dragon once, from far away, when it came to feed on a cattle herd on Jeremiah's Grazing. The family that owned the field got paid a stipend by the Crown for keeping her happy, according to Papa.

Lisbet was about to hop down from Henri to inspect a promising-looking patch of mushrooms, still daydreaming about the first Dragon she'd seen, when she saw her second. For a moment she wondered if she was imagining it, or even if she'd made it real by thinking about it too hard, which Papa had told her could happen to powerful Wizards if they weren't careful. But that mostly happened in dreams, or it meant chairs fell over or you accidentally set

someone's sleeves on fire. She couldn't begin to guess how powerful you'd have to be to make a Dragon by mistake – or on purpose, for that matter. This Dragon started out as a small black speck, coming from the direction of Aquila, but as the last of the mist cleared she could see it was coming closer, and getting bigger, very quickly. It was shiny despite its darkness, glinting as if it were made of steel or dull silver, and had what looked like a nasty scar near its... she thought for a moment... *left* eye. Left was the way you turned out of the front door to go to the forest, right took you up to the mountains.

She stood up on Big Henri's back for a better look. Perhaps someone bigger, older and wiser might have been scared, but Lisbet paid attention to her lessons and she knew that Dragons weren't allowed to hurt people. That was in The Rules. Unless you broke the rules first, of course, but she was pretty certain she hadn't. Even so, she started to get the feeling that something was wrong. Dragons usually came down from the mountains to feed or have a bit of a look around – Mama said they liked watching what humans got up to, though they often sent eagles to do that for them – and then went back up again. But this one was heading straight for the forest. Lisbet couldn't think that there was anything a Dragon might find interesting there, and while, berries and mushrooms were unlikely to even touch the sides of

that huge belly, however tasty they might be. True, the Twining Tower to the north was a bit of a famous landmark, but Dragons didn't usually go sight-seeing.

Then there was the Dragon's... well, *expression*, that seemed to be the only word, though she didn't know if Dragons even had expressions. Its huge mouth was lolling open, exposing enormous teeth that seemed a bit broken, and the big eyes were half-closed. It looked like the way Papa's face looked when he was about to doze off after supper. Mama had taught her that some birds could sleep on the wing, but Lisbet had never heard of a Dragon doing it. The Dragon was really low now, and close, skimming over the treetops before disappearing beneath them with a clatter of branches. Lisbet closed her eyes and flopped down on Henri's back, bracing for the sound of the crash. It never came.

Wisdom fought a brief, unequal campaign against childish curiosity and was handily defeated. Besides, there might be some more mushrooms over there and Lisbet still needed ten more for tonight's supper. That was what she was looking for, mushrooms. If she happened to find a Dragon on the way, well, it wasn't supposed to be there, so it wasn't her fault. She coaxed Big Henri on with a click of her tongue, and a few minutes later they arrived at a small clearing, far too small to contain anything like a Dragon, even a baby one, if they had those. Nobody seemed quite sure about that. It did contain something else, though,

which was a pretty lady curled up asleep at the foot of a tree.

The lady looked like she must be very tall, and she had long, dark hair. She also wasn't wearing any clothes, which Lisbet didn't think was a very good idea, Dragon or no Dragon. After all, in the shade of the trees it really wasn't all that warm yet, and all over the place there were prickly brambles and Roderick's Bite, that plant with the triangular leaves that stung you if you touched it wrong (even if it did make quite a nice tea). Lisbet wouldn't want to go barefoot in Rodintyr Forest, leave alone bare... everything. She slid down from Henri, quietly, and tiptoed closer, avoiding any dry branches or crunchy pine cones that might suddenly wake the lady up. There was something funny about her, and after a moment Lisbet realised it was the lady's skin. It was pink and healthy and clean, looking like it'd just been scrubbed like bath-time with that nasty soap that stung worse than the Bite if you got it in your eyes. That, and it was completely unmarked, not scratched or cut or pimply or any of the things skin usually was, especially if you'd gone running around in the forest with nothing on. This lady's skin looked more like a baby's than Ollie's did, and he was still only six months old.

Suddenly the lady stirred in her sleep, and before Lisbet could scamper away she sat up abruptly.

"Oh! Er, hello. Where... am I, exactly?"

"Who are you?" said Lisbet, rather rudely. "What



are you doing here with no clothes on?"

"I asked first," said the lady, somewhat crossly. "But I'll answer you anyway. Consider it a trade, hm? And the answers are... I don't know, and... I don't know."

"You're in Rodintyr Forest," said Lisbet, cocking her head to one side with curiosity. "My name is Lisbet. I'm nine. How come you don't know?"

"Don't know what? That this is Rodintyr Forest, that you're Lisbet, who I am or how I got here?"

"Er... all of them, I think," said Lisbet. "Except you sort of do know that this is Rodintyr Forest, now."

"Do I?"

"I just told you it is!"

"That just means I know that you want me to *think* that's where I am," said the lady, standing up. Lisbet noticed that her skin wasn't quite perfect after all - she had a couple of faint scars just below her throat. "You might be lying to me. Never take anything on face value, Lisbet Lalique."

"How did you know that?"

"Know what?"

"My name!"

"You just told me your name!"

"No I didn't! Not all of it!"

"Oh," said the lady, with a frown. "Oh yes, well, it's practically written all over you."

Lisbet's eyes narrowed. Papa had told her that

some Wizards, and especially Lily Magisters, could tell your name just by looking at you in a special way. He couldn't do it, and they'd agreed that it was very rude.

"That's very rude," she said, making sure the lady knew she'd been bad. "You could at least tell me your name in return."

"I told you, I don't know what it is. Yet. It'll come to me. What's your mother's name, Lisbet?"

"Melissa," said Lisbet. There was something about the lady that she couldn't quite put her finger on, but she got the feeling that not telling her things was a bad idea, and lying was naughty anyway.

"Hmm. Melissa Lalique... I can work with that."

"Aren't you cold?" said Lisbet, suddenly. The Lalique family looked after the old hunting lodges in the forest, and it was part of their responsibility to take care of lost travellers as well. Someone with no clothes on who didn't know where – or who – they were probably counted. "Do you need something to eat?"

The lady looked at her in confusion, before snapping her fingers. "Clothes! That's one of the things I'd forgotten. I *am* a little peckish, come to think of it."

Lisbet went over to Big Henri, and found a sack that she'd only just started to fill. "This is Big Henri. He's my horse. Well, he's Papa's horse, but we all

look after him.”

“He’s a very nice horse, Lisbet,” said the lady with a smile. “Hmm... I think I knew a Henri, once. Not so big though. Or... horsey.”

“Here,” said Lisbet, handing her the sack.

“What’s this?”

“Food,” said Lisbet, rolling her eyes in exasperation, “and a sack. Once you take the food out, you can use the sack as a blanket to keep warm, silly!”

The lady – it really was annoying that she didn’t have a name, and Lisbet wasn’t going to let her borrow Mama’s – rummaged in the sack, digging out three small khile-fruits and a handful of nuts. “Hmm, well, hunger is the best sauce, as they say.”

“It’s early to pick khile,” explained Lisbet as the lady ate, sitting on the sack. “They’re a bit sour, but this time of year you can safely eat the stones. After we get into Pellas they get too big and hard.”

The lady suddenly snorted with laughter and almost spat out the last of her nuts, but she managed to control herself. Once she’d eaten, she stood up again and held up the sack. “Now... what shall we do with this?”

“You could cut holes in it for your arms and head, then put it over your shoulders,” said Lisbet. Grown-ups could be very silly sometimes. It suddenly occurred to her that the lady didn’t have anything to

cut the sack with and she felt a bit foolish.

“Hmm,” said the lady, holding up the sack in front of her. “Not a terrible idea, but it might be a bit like a hungry Magister’s pre-dinner lecture – too short to fully cover the subject. I think perhaps, this?”

She ran her fingers down the seam of the sack, and it came apart as if it’d never been stitched. Swiftly, she repeated the process with the other stitches, and soon reduced the sack to a single large sheet of rough cloth, which she wrapped around herself. Somehow she managed to look more regal in the simple outfit than some of the grand ladies of Court in Lisbet’s storybooks, even with her bare feet sticking out.

“Wow...” gasped Lisbet, amazed. “Are you a Queen?” She remembered Mama telling her that the Queen was a tall, dark-haired and very powerful lady, which seemed to fit.

The lady laughed. “No, not a bit of it, and don’t let Queen Tondarin hear you say that. Ah, I’m remembering things!”

Lisbet remembered something too. “Oh, the Dragon! I forgot about it. Lady, did you see a Dragon around here?”

“A big black one, with a scar over one eye?”

“Yes!” whispered Lisbet, excitement almost robbing her of her tongue.

“No. But then, I wouldn’t. Now then, Lisbet Lalique, another thing I’ve remembered is that I’ve

got to go and meet some people, so I shall thank you for your hospitality and be on my way. And if you are a wise little girl, you will go straight home and not go looking for Dragons. Dragons rarely want to be found.”

“I don’t think you’ll be going anywhere,” said a rough voice. “I think you’ll be staying right there.”

The rough voice belonged to an even rougher-looking man, who emerged from the trees at the south end of the clearing. He was wearing a battered metal chest-armour thingy with a lion on it, over an outfit of thick, quilted purple cloth, and he was carrying a large bow with silver inlaid in it. Mama had one of those bows, but she never used it for hunting. That bow, she’d shown Lisbet once, shot special silver-tipped arrows that exploded with magic when they hit something. You didn’t use them to hunt because usually there were only little bits left of anything they hit. The arrow nocked in this bow was one of those silver ones, and he was pointing it straight at the lady.

“Good morning, Sergeant DeVillia,” said the lady. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, yeah, fancy Wizard tricks, is it?” said DeVillia, his eyes wild. “I’m not impressed, not today! What you can do, Miss high-and-mighty Wizard, is stay right there, still as a Delatorio sculpture. It’s because of you that everything’s fallen apart!”

“I rather doubt that... or, well, actually from one

perspective you might be right,” said the lady. “But in any case, your weapon is unnecessary. Take whatever you desire, but please let the child go. She’s too young to see this.”

“I’m *nine*,” corrected Lisbet. “And I’m not scared. I’ve seen a wolf eat a chicken whole.”

“You *should* be scared, girl,” snarled the rough man. “Abelia is finished. I got back to me post and everything were smashed up, dead folk and ruin everywhere. It was their kind what did it, you mark my words. Wherever there’s trouble, there’s a Wizard behind it.”

“You should go to Thecla,” said Lisbet. “The Pontifex and the Sacred Century live there, and they protect people from bad Wizards, my Papa told me.”

“Yeah, I know that,” said the man. “And that’s why you are going to give me that horse and all your food, so I can fu—”

“*Sergeant!*” said the lady, sternly. “This is a nine-year-old child! Do not contaminate her mind with your coarse tongue!”

“You... you shut up!” snapped the man, his arm that was holding the bow drawn trembling. Mama had let Lisbet try pulling her bow – without an arrow, of course – and she couldn’t get it to bend a single tal. You needed the magic of a Seal, like the Seal of the Bow her Mama had, and even then it was tiring to hold it ready to shoot for a long while. “I’m going to

take that horse and the food and... head off to Thecla where it's safer. You can run home, little girl – and you, Wizard, will stay right there and not move a muscle or make another sound, you got that? Or else!”

“But... but... Big Henri is my horse!” Tears began to fill Lisbet's eyes. She didn't mind about the food, not really – Papa always told her to share it with hungry travellers – but she'd grown up with Big Henri and she loved the old horse dearly, even if he was going a bit blind.

“Yeah, well, he's mine now, isn't he?” said the man. “Go on, get lost, won't you? The Wizard's right, you don't need to see this.”

Lisbet glared at him. The lady might have been a little rude, but at least she'd said thank you. This man was really horrible, and now he wanted to steal Big Henri. Well, if he thought he could do that when Lisbet Lalique was around, she'd soon show *him*. She'd conjured fire before many times, usually in her palm to scare off a wolf or bear or in front of her to start up a camp, but she'd never tried to use it on a person. Papa would be angry, but he'd be even angrier if she came home without Big Henri and let the mean man do whatever he was going to do to the lady. She stretched out her hand, and felt the swell of heat as the fire rose. It was strong, made hotter by her anger and her fear, and in any case something funny had been going on with fire magic recently – Papa had nearly

burned the house down lighting the stove the other day. She let it roar up inside her and hurled it at the man with a shriek of the pure fury only an angry child was capable of manifesting.

She missed by ten feet, at least, and a huge ball of flame erupted into the forest behind the man, causing him to whirl with a bad word that sounded like the one Papa had used when the stove exploded. He was still staring at the flames when the lady appeared next to him and grabbed his arm. He dropped the bow, the arrow falling harmlessly to the ground, and sank to his knees with a groan.

“Thank you, Lisbet,” said the lady. “Now, you should calm Big Henri. I think the fire might spook him.”

Lisbet was horrified by the damage she’d done to the trees. A fire in the forest in summer could be really dangerous, and she didn’t know how to put it out. But there was something in the lady’s voice that made her obey her like she would Mama, so she turned around and spoke soothing words to Henri. The huge horse’s ears were flat against his massive skull, and she was so occupied calming him that she only half-noticed when Sergeant DeVillia suddenly let out a peculiar scream that was abruptly cut off. By the time she turned back again, the man was gone, and a few glittering shards of light were sparkling to the ground where he’d been standing.

“That’s better,” said the lady, as casually as if she



was talking about the weather turning nice. “I had a rather more... interesting distraction in mind for him, but it doesn’t matter how you cook the bird if the eating is good, as they say.”

Lisbet didn’t know what could have happened to the nasty man, and right then she didn’t care. “Lady, the trees! I set them on fire! I didn’t mean to!”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, that could be a problem, couldn’t it?” said the lady. “My friends are waiting for me in a cabin in this forest – it wouldn’t do for it to burn down around their ears. You know, a little girl like you really shouldn’t be trying to use offensive magic, it takes a lot of practice to learn to control it.” She walked into the trees, casting off her blanket as she went. Wherever she walked, the flames seemed to burn hotter, fiercer, but as she passed on they winked out into nothing. In less than a minute, a few charred trees and the smell of wood-smoke were all that was left of the fire.

Lisbet goggled. She knew powerful Wizards and Magisters could do clever things with fire and lightning and ice, but she’d never heard of one doing... *that*. There was only one creature on all of Tyrras that could treat a raging forest fire as if it were a minor inconvenience.

The lady knew what the Dragon looked like, but she hadn’t seen it.

Because she *was* the Dragon.

The lady picked up her sack-cloth, and tied it around her. She regarded Lisbet with a resigned expression, and sighed. "I suppose you have questions."

"Are you a Dragon?" asked Lisbet.

The lady smiled, "Well, you don't beat about the bush, do you?"

"Er, yes?" said Lisbet, wondering what that had to do with it. "If it's on fire, or something, or you think there's a rat hiding in it. You should use a stick, though, they bite."

"That isn't quite... oh, never mind. Answer me one question, then, Lisbet, and I will answer yours in turn. What do you think of Misandre De'laque?"

Lisbet frowned. "Who's she?"

"Me!" said the lady, giving a little twirl. "Lady Misandre De'laque, wandering Wizard, at your service."

"Oh," replied Lisbet, "Well... er, I think you're very pretty, and very strong, but a bit rude."

"No, I mean what do you think of the *name*? I took a bit from your mother, mixed it with a little from that unpleasant sergeant, and came up with something new!"

"It's a very nice name," admitted Lisbet. "Are you a Dragon?"

"Blast, I hoped you'd forgotten about that," muttered Misandre, "but I can see you're a very determined little girl, aren't you? Some day, you'll

probably make some poor boy's life very complicated, if he's lucky. And no, I'm not a Dragon, not anymore. But yes, that was me you saw earlier."

"I think you're calling a tawny chicken brown," said Lisbet, sternly. "Were you a Dragon when I saw you earlier, then?"

"Oho, I should introduce you to Julius Thule some time," said Misandre. "You have his kind of mind. No, not really, I wasn't." She waved a hand in the air in exasperation. "It's complicated."

"Papa says the truth is never complicated," said Lisbet. "When people say that, it's because they want to lie about it."

"Do you know, I could eat you, if I'm a Dragon?" pointed out Misandre. "Right here. It's only because you saved my life... in a manner of speaking, at least, that I don't."

"And *because* you're a Dragon," said Lisbet, obstinately, "and Dragons aren't allowed to kill people who don't break the Rules."

"It's not—" began Misandre, and then sighed again. "No, why bother? I'm still very tired. Let me sit down, Lisbet, and I will tell you my story, and then you can decide for yourself if I'm a Dragon or not, how's that?"

Lisbet nodded eagerly. Story-time was always fun. She wondered if the nasty sergeant might be a bit nicer if he heard the story, but he must have run away.

Misandre settled down at the foot of a big tree, and Lisbet sat facing her with a handful of nuts. You always needed a snack for story-time.

“So, a long time ago—” began Misandre.

“No, that’s not right,” said Lisbet. “You have to start with ‘Once upon a time’.”

“Is that another Rule?”

“Yes!”

“Very well, then. Once upon a time, there was a Dragon. She was big and black and very powerful, and all the other Dragons looked up to her and thought she was very important. You see, Dragons talk to each other in their heads, and this Dragon had a very loud voice in their heads, the loudest there was. Now, when this story begins, people lived in caves, because the Dragons wouldn’t let them build cities, and if they tried the Dragons would burn them down and eat anyone they found there.”

“That was very mean of the Dragons,” opined Lisbet.

“Yes it was, wasn’t it? Well, one day the big Dragon was out flying, and was about to go home to bed when she saw a human man. Now humans, to Dragons, don’t seem very important because they’re tiny and weak and live for so little time that it seems the Dragons have only just learned their names when they die. They treat humans like humans treat ants.”

“Mama told me to be nice to ants,” said Lisbet.

“One day she caught me putting them in Ollie’s crib, and he ate one, and it made him cry. Mama scolded me and I didn’t get any supper.”

“Quite right too, I’m sure,” said Misandre. “But anyway, this man was different. He seemed to burn with a hot flame, hotter even than Dragon-fire, and the big Dragon thought he was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. She knew he wouldn’t live very long, but that just seemed to make him even prettier. So she flew closer to get a better look, but the man got angry and threw lightning at her.”

“Well, maybe he thought she was going to eat him!” said Lisbet, eyes wide.

“Yes, probably. After all, what with all the burning and killing most people back then hated Dragons, which I suppose you can’t blame them for. In any case, the Dragon was surprised, because the lightning hurt, and no human ever born had managed to hurt a Dragon before. That just made him even more interesting, so she flew a little way away, and did something no Dragon had ever dared do before. She turned herself... into a human!”

Lisbet munched on a nut. She’d thought that part of the story was pretty obvious, but Misandre seemed to think it was a big revelation.

“But the Dragon didn’t realise how dangerous that was. You see, Dragons are very, very large, and humans are very, very small. And even at that time, the Dragon had lived for thousands of years and had

more memories than could possibly fit into a tiny little human head. So when she turned herself into a human, she forgot that she'd ever been a Dragon at all. In fact, she forgot almost everything except that she wanted to find the man, and when she did find him, the man saw that she was the only person he'd ever seen who burned as brightly as he did. So they fell in love, and— have your parents told you where babies come from?"

"I've watched the rams at tup," said Lisbet, proudly. "Mama says that's where lambs come from, and babies work the same way. But with less wool."

Misandre shrugged. "Close enough. Well, they fell in love, and soon had children. In fact, they had seven, and they were very special children, the first ones ever to be part human and part Dragon, though because both of their parents were humans the Dragon part was very small and quiet. Now, as time went on and she got used to being human, the Dragon began to get more and more of her old memories back. They were still out there, you see, floating around, she just had to find them again. And eventually she began to hear the voices of the other Dragons in her head again. You see, the other Dragons hadn't been worried when she went away, because Dragons sleep for fifty years at a time and she'd been about to go to sleep when she saw the man who became her husband, but now the fifty years were almost up. And her husband was

getting older, and he still hated the Dragons, who wouldn't let him build any cities, and a war was brewing."

"Wouldn't he be a very old man, if fifty years had passed?" said Lisbet. Her grandpa, who lived in Thecla, was over seventy and he was really, *really* old.

"Yes, but remember he was special," said Misandre. "He was the same at eighty as most men are at forty. Not much difference to a Dragon, but very impressive for a man. By then, the man had got bored of his wife, and bored of having children, and had gone away to build a city and find a star to put on it, but that is another story. So the Dragon, who had remembered who she was, changed back to her Dragon-shape and flew away. But she hadn't realised that all the memories she'd found were only a small part of her Dragon-memories, so when she changed back they got lost in the Dragon's huge head, and for a while she forgot who she was again. By the time she remembered, the War had started, and the other Dragons expected her to lead them. So she did."

"Against her husband and her children?" gasped Lisbet. "That's horrible!"

"Remember, the Dragons thought of humans like humans do ants," said Misandre, "So the Dragon thought she wouldn't care, but it wasn't true. She soon found herself secretly trying to stop the other Dragons from hurting her family, even though they

killed many other humans, including some of those that her family had taught to use magic. And the Dragon was sad, because she was cursed by something no Dragon had ever been cursed with before. Love.”

“Isn’t love a good thing?” said Lisbet. “Mama and Papa love me, and sometimes I hear them telling each other that they love each other too, especially at night after they’ve been fighting. Or whatever it is they do that makes them make loud noises, anyway. They don’t do it when they think I’m awake.”

“Are you *sure* you know where babies come from?” said Misandre. “Anyway, for humans love is a good thing, yes, but for Dragons, who live for thousands and thousands of years and never normally forget anything, it’s a curse. And this curse made the Dragon upset, and she decided to stop the war. So when the last battle came, she flew straight at her husband and his children, and when they threw lightning at her she was going to pretend that it hurt and fall out of the sky. You see, she was still the biggest, most powerful Dragon, and she knew that if the humans could hurt her, the other Dragons would be worried and would listen if she asked them to stop fighting. But she’d made a mistake. You see, her husband had taught his children how to use magic very well, and the city he’d built was more of a fortress. It had a star he’d stolen on it which was very powerful and it had terrible weapons. So when the



lightning struck the Dragon, it really, *really* hurt. It hurt so much that she fell out of the sky for real, and crashed, making a big rip in the ground.”

“Did it hit you in the face?” said Lisbet. “Is that where the scar comes from?”

“The Dragon lay there, badly hurt,” said Misandre, ignoring the question, “And she realised that if the humans found her, she might die for real. She was too weak to fly, and she couldn’t fight, so she did the one thing she could – she turned into a human again. But because she was weak, and tired, and scared, she couldn’t remember what her old human body had looked like, so she turned into a new one. And once again she forgot that she’d ever been a Dragon. Meanwhile, the other Dragons saw that their leader had been knocked from the sky, and they couldn’t hear her in their heads any more, so they got scared too, and after the battle was over they made peace with the man and his children, even though they had managed to destroy his city.”

“And they made up The Rules,” said Lisbet. “And everyone lived happily ever after!”

Misandre laughed. “Ah, Lisbet. You see, this is the difference between children’s stories and real ones. For the Dragon, who was now a lady, life was very hard. She was still cursed, you see. She knew she loved a man and his children, but she couldn’t remember who they were or where they had gone. So

she wandered, looking for the man, and she found many men and had many more children, but they were never her family who she knew she missed terribly. But she still loved having children, and she loved every one of them, as a mother does, but as time went on and the Dragon voice got stronger in her head, so it got stronger in the heads of her children too. And because these children didn't have a special father like her first husband, the Dragon-voices slowly drove them mad, and she had to leave them behind when they destroyed themselves. And the other Dragons slowly learned that there was someone out there having children who were part-Dragon, and they got very worried because whoever they were, they couldn't hear them, and they hadn't signed up to The Rules like all the other Dragons had. So they called this mysterious person the Mother of Calamities, and they still hunt her to this day."

"That's a very sad story," said Lisbet. "But... how do you remember it? If you... if the Dragon forgot everything, I mean."

"You really *are* a sharp one," said Misandre, approvingly. "Well, you see, it turns out that being a human is like everything else, you get better at it with practice. But because she was a Dragon, she had a lot longer to practise than most humans do, so she got better and better at remembering who she was. Every now and then, of course, her human body got a bit old or someone noticed that she wasn't like everyone else,

and when that happened she would change it. And sometimes, if she got really angry or if someone hurt her, she could still change into a Dragon, but her Dragon-body was still weak from the lightning, so compared to how she had been it was quite small. And she couldn't stay a Dragon for very long, and when she changed back she was very tired and it took her a while to get her memories back again."

"And sometimes she forgets about clothes," said Lisbet with a grin. "You know, Lady Misandre, you were right. It *is* complicated, isn't it? You... the Dragon isn't really a Dragon any more, but she's not quite a normal lady, either. How does the story end?"

"Ah, well," said Misandre, standing up, "that's what I'm on my way to find out, isn't it? I have a plan, of course, but everyone does, and the thing about plans is that they never go quite the way you expect, no matter how old or clever you think you are. Run along home, now, and if anyone asks you, tell them you found a lady in the woods and gave her some food. Nobody would believe the rest of it, and it's not very nice to be called a liar when you're telling the truth, is it?"

Lisbet stood up as well. "I might get in trouble though," she said, sadly. "I was supposed to fill at least four sacks, and I've only filled three."

"Oh, don't worry about that," said Misandre. "Look at Big Henri."

Lisbet turned to see that a flock of birds were

flying all around the huge horse. A few of them had nuts, berries or mushrooms in their beaks, and as she watched open-mouthed they stuffed them in the sacks and flew away. She turned back to say thank you, because it was Good Manners, but Misandre had gone. She said thank you anyway, hoping the birds would tell Misandre about it later, and set off for home. From the cover of the trees, the newborn eyes of an ancient creature watched her go.

One tiny flame saved. So many lost, but one protected from a dangerous world and the cruel creatures that infested it. It couldn't make up for all she'd done, and all she was still going to do, but it was a start.

*T.R. Peers is an author, I.T. support technician and occasional dustman from Norfolk, England, who writes speculative fantasy and sci-fi with the occasional pivot into deeply silly comedy when the mood takes him. The story of the Thelenic Curriculum begins in *The Wake of Manadar*, in which cybernetically-enhanced infiltration agent Amanda Devereux is flung headlong into a world of magic and monsters. She's never seen anything like it, but the Lily Magisters have never seen anything like her, either. Check it out [here](#).*

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