

Writer's Statement:

This is, as the document title might suggest, not where my short story writing started for this submission. The original idea that I have been working on for the past week just wasn't coming together quite quick enough, so I have shelved it for the next submission, and hopefully it has the time it needs to develop. Enter this piece, a fantasy story, which is what my mind could be counted on to pull together in a couple of hours to fill the void. It's a spin on a setting I've used for a D&D campaign in the past. It's set in a city that's under martial law, so there are some evil guards, but I also wanted to get to a rather succinct happy ending, so they're *inept* evil guards with some shred of good left in them. But a disclaimer that there is an attempted arrest scene. Really the only driving idea behind it was trying to show how nature has the potential to heal? Don't know if it shined through, but that was the inception. With that said, as much as this was a very rushed piece, I hope it is at least mildly enjoyable. I would definitely like to refine it into a more completed work, so I certainly appreciate any and all feedback.

Happy reading!

A Sight for Weary Eyes

The guards shivered as they paced down the nearly deserted street, but remained stoic. Straight-backed, hands on their sword hilts, faces like a grim mask, they might have been animated statues as far as anyone could tell. Two pawns of an army as uniform as the grey gambesons and the white, painted armor that they wore.

Kip watched them from a darkened doorstep set just within a narrow alley, palming a rock anxiously. He didn't know what he was going to do with it, if it came down to a fight. The guards weren't the local types—he was friends with most of their kids, and they weren't bothered by anything less than bandits or a troublesome goblin anyways—they were part of a new garrison being built in the mountain pass. Soldiers, he thought, rubbing his nose, was the apt name for them, but they couldn't call them that.

Kirkview was under a quiet military occupation, and Kip had the bright idea to be out after curfew, in a windstorm, picking his way across the city. He bent down and placed the rock

back on the doorstep. If he was caught he could play the dumb kid card, not that he was much of a kid anymore.

He groaned as they stopped, but they were just hunkering down in the doorstep of a butcher's shop as a great torrent of wind began to charge down the street, tossing up some of the snow that had been haphazardly cleared after the last storm. Kip retracted himself further into his own shelter, rubbing his arms in a vain effort to warm himself. If the guards didn't hurry up, he might just freeze out here.

After a few brutally cold minutes, the gale relented, and the guards shared a brief laugh and returned to their patrol, soon disappearing around a corner. Kip waited a few moments, stiffly watching for any movement. There was none, no creature was going to go out in this weather, at this time. It was just him and the guards in a lonely world of their own, and he could hear the clinking of their armor getting fainter, and fainter, until it was lost in the dull wheezing of the wind. A sign above him clattered softly, swaying back and forth, and there was a soothing clinking of a bottle rolling somewhere down the street.

Confident that he was alone, Kip steeled his nerves, pulled his hood tightly around him, and bolted across the street, another gust of wind blowing a dusting over his footprints.

He crept along the facades of the many gloomy, unkempt stores, past darkened windows that made them so deep and unknowable, even if he knew every inch of their layouts.

This street was his childhood, but it was in peril.

At last he came to his mark, a store with a falling railing, and windows even darker than the rest. A sign hung precariously by a single, bent hook, the other long rusted. He looked around quickly, and still seeing no movement, wiggled open the door, wincing as it creaked on its drooping hinges.

The store had once been that of a magician, a self-proclaimed fixer of broken things. Ironic, now, considering the dilapidated nature of the shop. They had fled three years ago when the traders from the coast first started to bring news of a ban on magic. Now, the shelves once lined with mysterious balls, delightful trinkets, and all manner of Elvish goods were lined with cobwebs and a sea of dust deep enough to get lost in.

But he wasn't here to reminisce, or scavenge (all the nicknacks that had been left were long since pilfered, though he hadn't dared touch any of the loot himself, what with fears of

curses and the like) but rather to creep down into the basement, where his friends had, during the looting, discovered a secret trapdoor that led down into an old network of smuggling tunnels.

He hopped down into the dark passage, and was surprised –not unpleasantly– by how warm it was. He felt around on the wall until he found a bucket tacked onto one of the supports with a few well-worn torches within it. He suspected that they had some sort of magical quality, for they seemed to burn indefinitely while desired, but he didn't want to think about it much. So far no one had sprouted an extra nose after using them, and he just hoped not to be the first. With his path lit, he set off towards his goal.

The outlet closest to the edge of the city was in an old woodshed behind a bakery. His friend Hutch's parents ran it, and he made sure to always keep the door cleared. It was impressively well hidden, so discovery wasn't a concern, it getting accidentally blocked was.

It was their group's private escape, as far as they could tell.

He blew out his torch –which fizzled with a concerningly bluish spark– and placed it in the exit's bucket, and pushed open the hatch while he was at it. He pulled himself up onto the dusty floor; the rich aroma of fresh-cut wood greeted him. He smiled, and made his way around a wood pile and out onto the street.

It was quiet, and he made his way quickly, yet stealthily, through the increasingly open streets until he was crouching behind a rickety storehouse that marked the edge of the city proper. Ahead of him was a rocky slope leading up into the mountains, the clear sky, alight with stars, stretching out to welcome him. He noted the start of some unusual color seeping into the vista; he wasn't too late, despite his delays.

Just as he was about to make for the trailhead where he would meet his friends, he heard a shout to his right, and saw two guards start running towards him from their nest in a grove of pines. He saw one of them fumbling to stash a still smouldering pipe in his pouch.

"You there, halt!" he cried, hobbling along. Kip tensed, ready to run up the slope. He knew he could outrun the two, especially in the dark, in terrain that he knew. But they only knew about him right now, up there they might find his friends. So he stood his ground.

"Just whatta you think you're doing out here?" The guard growled, panting as they reached him. His face was clean shaven, the other donned a neat beard. "Yer in violation of the curfew, you are!"

“What curfew? I was just going stargazing, sir,” Kip offered innocently, putting on his best confused face.

“Ah come on Mik, he’s just a kid,” said Beardy, rolling his eyes and letting go of his sword hilt.

“Yeah, but you know rebels come small these days, ’cause dolts like you say ‘aww Mik, it’s just a kid’, Jerrold,” Mik said, his voice gravelly.

“You are always going on about rebels, aren’t you Mik,” Jerrold looked at Kip –who was quite utterly frozen both physically and mentally– and shrugged. “Are you a rebel, kid?”

“Ah, no, sir?” Kip replied.

“No sir? Or no, *sir*?” Jerrold asked, emphasizing the conviction of the second form.

“No, *sir*, sir,” Kip eyed Mik, who was growing quite red, and gripping his sword tightly. Jerrold paused for a great long while, and his nose twitched in thought. A gust of wind rolled down the mountain, and buffeted them with a wave of cold. That seemed to make up his mind, as his nostrils shriveled, then flared with fiery resolve.

“Well, be that as it may, my overexcited colleague is still accurate to remark that you are out after curfew,” Jerrold said, shooting a withering glance at Mik, then an ever-so-slightly pitying glance at Kip. “We shall have to bring you to the precinct to await sentencing.”

That’s how it was with this new paradigm.

Kip began to fidget a bit, but tried desperately to compose himself. Apparently he didn’t compose himself well enough, because Mik grunted, “Gettin antsy are we? Hmm, awful suspicious if you ask me!”

“No one’s asking you, Mik,” Jerrold sighed. “Put your hands behind your back, kid. Make this nice and easy so my partner doesn’t have a go at you.”

Just then Kip caught sight of another figure, who was quickly coming up the street towards them. It was a guard of the city watch.

“Hello there!” The newcomer called as she approached. The two soldier-guards eyed each other, and Jerrold shrugged.

“Who goes there?” Mik called.

Kip smiled as he recognized her, it was Holly Fairson, his friend Teira’s mother. She introduced herself to the guards, largely ignoring Kip, save a slight, terse-lipped smile in his general direction.

“Is this really necessary?” She asked Jerrold, sensing the two’s dynamic.

“Well, ma’am...”

“Sergeant.”

“Sargeant, this kid is in clear violation of curfew. We’re bound to take him in, just as you are. I don’t see the problem here.”

“Yeah miss, this kid’s out here all suspicious-like,” Mik chimed in.

“What my partner means is he thinks this kid is a rebel.”

“Well, I can assure you that this boy is not a rebel,” Sergeant Fairson stared pointedly at Jerrold.

“Well, yes, I agree it’s highly unlikely, Sergeant, but that’s besides the point.”

“Do you want to know why this boy’s out here, guardsman?”

“Do lighten us,” Mik groaned. (“Enlighten,” Jerrold added under his breath.)

“Look up,” she said simply.

While he had been detained, the aurora had started to make its entrance in force. It lit up the sky with more majesty than a hundred sunsets, and more colors than most people saw in a lifetime. Ribbons of striking purples, ethereal greens, reds, blues, and some colors that Kip was sure couldn’t even be named twisted and coiled gracefully. It was a sight unlike any other, or indeed any other aurora anywhere. It was singular, gracing only the sky above their mountain range, and only once each year at that.

“Well I’ll be,” Jerrold gasped, and even Mik let go of his sword in awe.

“Before the curfew, there was an annual celebration city wide for our Aurora,” Sergeant Fairson told them, her face alight with joy. “I guess that this kid just wanted to get a better look at it. I mean by all rights you could have a mob on your hands clamoring for this view, I hardly think that one harmless kid looking for a bit of beauty in this world is hardly worth the fuss of arresting.”

Jerrold was quiet for a long time again, this time seeming to chew over his choices. There wasn’t any great kindness in his icy eyes, but as the lights danced upon them, there was a certain wonder retrieved from some darkened corner of his mind, and some extant humanity shone in them with a twinkle. He sighed deeply, and took a step back.

“Very well, Sergeant, I suppose you have a point. Besides, Mik, if we brought him in we’d have to explain what we were doing so far off our patrol. You know that the Captain

doesn't like you smoking that elvish stuff, it's near enough illegal. Come to think of it, wouldn't that new decree that just came out last week have done it in?"

Mik bristled, then shrugged, and started to walk back into the city, fumbling his pipe out of his pouch and tossing it into the shadows. Jerrold eyed it with a sudden fear, like it might come along to bite him.

"Stay out of trouble, young man. And count your luck. If we see you breaking curfew again, no second-guessing. Got it?" Jerrold didn't wait for a response, and with another long look at the sky, turned and followed his partner, kicking the pipe further out of sight.

"Am I glad to see you here! Thanks a dozen," Kip beamed.

"Don't mention it," Fairson smiled, and tousled his hair. "Now get up there before the rest start to worry. And tell them to come down one at a time the long way round, just in case other guards are out looking."

"Of course!" Kip waved back as he hurried up the mountain, grateful that Sergeant Fairson still had the power to look out for them. As he was nearly out of view, he saw her pick up the pipe, and give it a puff. He crossed into the treeline with a chuckle.

There was a bluff along the trail which looked out over the vast, snow-covered fields on the other side of the mountain. It took him an hour to reach it, but he made it, and was welcomed by his friends, and a small shelter.

He didn't tell them about his run in, and instead bundled up under some thick fur blankets they had gathered, and watched the sky dance.