

Once Upon an Apocalypse

"No, the Barbarian! Watch out! To your left!"

Vander whipped his head to the left, holding up his broom to block Grayson's Ax as he swung it toward him full-force.

"Woah, dude," Van whispered, his eyes wide. He never agreed with Grayson taking the real ax from The Johnson's garage. But Grayson said it was just so tempting, the door cracked open. *It was calling to me*, he had said.

"Come on, man," Grayson returned in a whiny whisper, "Don't break character."

Van pushed him off and jumped from the bed of the pick-up to the hood of the car parked behind it. As he scrambled to the roof, Grayson swung the ax with an exaggerated barbaric expression, in slow motion, crashing it into the windshield. The children lined up in the middle of the street cheered.

"Ranger! Ranger, help!"

Hannah, from the roof of a car parked across the narrow street, hurled sticks at Grayson, who held his hands up in defeat, dropping the ax that was half his size on the car as he slowly sunk to the ground and played dead.

"Yes!" Marty yelled. "Now hurry, Van, to the princess!"

Van dropped his broom and started to run across the tops of the cars until he reached the end of the line. He jumped down from them, dramatically landing in a hero pose. Then he sprinted to the gazebo in the middle of the square where Kate was standing, wearing the gown they had taken from the trunk from under Old

Mrs. Caroline's bed—the ancient lock on it had fallen off the first time they bashed it with a rock.

"Princess Kate!" Van yelled as he slid to his knees before the Gazebo. "We have journeyed far and wide—" the Ranger and Warlock assembled behind him— "from the depths of Lake Garner to the haunted halls of the Great School's of Old, to bring you this treasure. Will you accept my hand in marriage in return for these jewels?" He held up the jewelry box of Ms. Greer, who used to be their Literature teacher. Behind him, Marty and Hannah held up their own found treasures—a Fabergé egg everyone had made fun of Old Mr. Lee for collecting, and a Nationals trophy they had taken from the high school's shattered display case.

"Hmmm," Kate brought her finger to her chin, but then quickly— "Of course!"

Van picked a ring from the jewelry box in his hands, then dropped it, the rest of the worthless diamonds and pearls scattering across the pavement.

He ascended the steps and slid the ring on Kate's thumb—the only finger it would fit.

"Yay!" Grayson yelled, finally rising from his place on the pavement, next to the car where he had died. He ran over to the other children.

They smiled and cheered, but it became silent and they all looked around at each other.

"That was the end?" Hannah looked disappointed.

Marty checked his notes on his phone, "Yeah, that was all I had for the campaign."

"But we've been playing this since before The Sound," Grayson complained. "What are we gonna do now?"

“Well,” Van tried to sound hopeful, “we graduated from the basement to the town. We can adjust again.”

The kids looked around. All the cars’ glass shattered, either from their role-playing or from The Sound. The buildings all empty and burnt. The scorched shapes in the pavement and grass they pretended not to notice before, or used as portals within their story. But they knew what they were—ever since Kate found her dad and mom’s wedding bands within a scorched spot of two blobs.

The children were quiet, their eyes landing on the scorched spots around them, surrounding the Gazebo.

Van took a deep breath. “Maybe first let’s go find food.”