



INDIE BITES

18: BARDS & BARGAINS

FANTASY STORIES WITH TEETH

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Letter from the Editor

Welcome to this quarter's issue! This time, we're telling tales about bards and bargains, and we have eleven stories of melodic mayhem for you to enjoy. In these pages, you'll find music both benign and bothersome, from magical protection tunes to the haunting snatch of song that teases at the edge of your hearing, and you'll meet bard queens, wannabe rockstars, and pirate pipers. Some of our authors have brought fresh life to old tales; others bring you into entirely new worlds of imagination. But whatever your taste, we hope this is a set list you'll very much enjoy.

Here at Indie Bites HQ, the sun has been shining, the blossom has been bursting out, and it feels like spring is well and truly in the air. Something about the sunshine coming back after a long grey English winter sets sparks flying for me, and makes all those planned projects start to twinkle enticingly again. Many of the characters in these pages are similarly coming to life, whether that's starting a new romance, finishing a long-awaited period of study, finding new purposes, or negotiating an end to something that's held them back – although please don't think it's all sunshine and blossoms in these stories, because there's plenty

for the darkness-lovers too. As always, we remind you this is an adult magazine with adult themes of sex, violence and death peppered throughout; we have provided additional content warnings at the top of the stories we felt needed them.

In terms of what your editors have been working on apart from Indie Bites, Josie has been finishing her sapphic dark fantasy series, the *QuickSilver* trilogy. We've also both been working hard on the first set of recordings for Josie's upcoming Silverse podcast, *Jack Valentine, Vampire Detective*, which explores Jack's first cases as a Seeker in Oxford; the days have been busy, but enormously fun, and we can't wait for you to hear it when it all comes together – the cast is spectacular at bringing the world to life. Apart from that, I fell in love with my own story in this issue so much that I've decided to turn it into a series of interconnected shorts that mash together classic romance tropes and adventuring classes – find out more over on my socials, or watch this space!

All those creative sparks flying have meant a little less reading time for both of us, but we've still managed a few good reads, of course! I particularly loved Claire Trella Hill's *The Shapeshifter Drives a Bargain*, which was oddly on theme for this issue; it's a short but delicious fantasy romance with the most gorgeously kind fae hero. Josie's been reading Cat Rector's romantic vampire horror novel *Coal Gets in*

Your Veins. She's loving the book's palpably ominous small-town atmosphere, and recommends it to everyone who enjoyed Charlaine Harris's *Sookie Stackhouse* books.

So that's what we've been up to – and we'd love to hear from you over on our social channels if you've read anything good lately!

Now, let's get bargaining. There's plenty to sink your teeth into!

Adie Hart
Anthology Editor

If you'd like to support the wonderful creators who contribute to Indie Bites, you can do that via our Ko-fi page [here](#). All donations are split equally between the authors and illustrators whose work is published in the next issue following your donation. (NB When stories by our editors appear in the magazine, they do not take a share of the donations we receive – we work for free!)

Submissions are now open for our August 2025 issue, *Dragons & Darkness*, and our November 2025 issue, *Potions & Paramours*. 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 R.K. Ashwick



By day, R.K. Ashwick herds cats in the animation industry. By night, she writes, bakes, and herds her literal cat around her living room. She lives with her husband (and said cat) in California.

She is the author of two nearly-completed cozy

fantasy trilogies: the Lutesong series, which begins with *The Stray Spirit*, and the Side Quest Row series, which begins with *A Rival Most Vial*.

Welcome to Indie Bites! This issue we're talking all about bards and bargains, so why not tell us a bit about your Lutesong books?

Funny enough, the Lutesong trilogy has both bards *and* bargains! We start with *The Stray Spirit*, when a desperate bard named Emry visits a rundown spirit shrine for luck. A magical earthquake strikes right at the end of his song, forcing a talkative spirit named Aspen to take cover... right inside Emry's lute.

A talking lute isn't a great look for a bard – particularly in a world where no one believes in spirits anymore – so, they make a bargain. Aspen will behave, and Emry will help Aspen figure out how to return to their grove. Easy peasy arpeggio breezy.

Except nothing is easy or breezy with these two. After roping in Emry's ex-girlfriend Cal – a brilliant and haughty scholar – to help with this little spirit problem, they discover the earthquake was only the beginning of their troubles. Throw in a bit of plant magic, Regency vibes, and a second chance romance... and you've got *The Stray Spirit*. A higher stakes cozy fantasy romance full of bards, forest spirits, and feelings.

The Spirit Well naturally (ha, get it – naturally) continues the trio’s adventures. The glittering city of Matlock has called for aid to save their garden spirits, and who best to respond but a bard, a spirit, and a scholar? They dive into Matlock’s social season, navigating mysteries, magic... and a marriage proposal.

And in *The Spirit’s Curse*, coming out this May, we follow their final journey. Stronger than ever, the trio delves deep into an old growth forest, where they wrestle with what it truly means to be a spirit... and what that could entail for Aspen’s future.

Speaking of bargains, what could a fae creature offer you that would tempt you into signing on the dotted line?

Infinite donuts, probably. Or money so I don’t have to balance a full-time job with writing!

How did you get into indie publishing? What’s your favourite thing about it?

I got into indie publishing because I saw the Cool Kids doing it and I wanted to be a Cool Kid. Seriously – I stumbled upon the Tumblr writing scene, saw indie authors who were writing what they wanted to write, doing cool pre-order campaigns, making awesome stuff – and I decided I wanted to do that,

too. Getting a book out there myself sounded a lot more fun than wading into the query trenches for years.

As for my favorite thing about it – weirdly, the art aspect? I love working directly with an artist for my covers and interior art, and I *also* love doing my own chapter icons and interior drawings. Unrelated to art, I also love meeting other indie authors and getting exposed to amazing books I might not have found otherwise!

What does your typical publishing process look like?

Right now, I'm trying to publish two books a year – but because it takes me over a year to write a book, that means I need to work on both of them concurrently. While book 1 is with beta readers, I'm drafting book 2. While book 2 is with my editor, I'm wrapping revisions on book 1 – and so on and so forth. I have a whole waterfall schedule to keep track of where I am in the process. Would I recommend this pace?

...No. No, I would not.

Do you have a favourite bard – or otherwise musical – character in fiction?

I literally just read *Sorcery and Small Magics* by

Maiga Doocy this week, so I must give a shout-out to violinist and scribe Leo. My lovely, messed-up boy. He needs a hug and probably a new violin case, with all the battering he went through in book 1.

Have you read any good indie fantasy lately?

Absolutely! I had the honor of beta reading *Goldheart* by Tess Carletta (which has a character who plays the lute!), *The Night Auction* by Lila Mary, and *Call Forth the Moonlight* by Z.M. Celestaire. (All MM fantasy romance, incidentally – I promise my upcoming TBR is more diverse!)

What's next for your readers?

The Spirit's Curse comes out at the end of this month! Pre-order goodies will be open until release day, if you want a bookmark and sticker to go with your book. After that, I'll be hard at work on wrapping my second trilogy, the Side Quest Row Series. For fans of Ambrose and Eli's shenanigans, *A Draught for a Dragon: Adventuring for Amateurs* will come out October 2025.

We can't wait! Thank you for joining us!

Short Fiction

In Concert

Allie Leigh

CONTENT WARNING

This story contains references to parental death.

“We shouldn’t be here!”

Though she did not consider herself to be brash, Elodie was not meek; she was more like a lion than she was like a lamb. She could, and frequently did, make her opinions known. Yet this evening, her voice strained to carry over the blustering wind which threatened to throw her and Lark from the cliff’s edge. It seemed, perhaps, as though the wind agreed with her, for it showed no signs of letting up.

Lark turned to her. Her blonde hair, which had once been held in an elegant bun, had been whipped free by the wind, and Elodie was sure that her own brown braid was in just as sorry a state. “Who’s going to stop us?” Her words were backed by the mourning clothes they both wore. If any *would* have dared put up a fight against the crown princess, it would not have been today.

Though she would have loved to return to the safety of the land below, Elodie refused to abandon her friend. Instead, she stepped forward, against all her better judgement, toward the cliff's edge, and joined Lark as she gazed upon a recently cleared section of the coast. A section which she knew had harboured the wreckage of Lark's parents' ship, only days before. She wasn't sure if staring at the site of their death was better or worse than Lark staring at their closed coffins.

Lark pulled a golden pendant from her pocket. Elodie couldn't remember ever having seen the princess wear this one before, but Lark certainly had no shortage of jewellery. "Allegro said they were on the deck when the ship hit the rocks." The queen-to-be let the pendant hang, and it caught the light of the setting sun as it twirled. "They were out in the heart of the storm, trying to broker a deal with some spirit, all for the good of the kingdom..."

Elodie wasn't sure if she imagined it, but she thought she felt the wind grow stronger. It howled, as if it were begging them to listen.

Lark sighed, returning the pendant to her pocket. "I'm sorry for dragging you up here. I just couldn't stay there. They were going to make me play. I know the song, but I just can't..." Lark's hands balled into fists as her jaw clenched. They were mere inches from

one another, but Elodie had never felt any degree of distance so strongly – the leagues the difference in their birth and station had placed between them. She would have given anything to close it. “What kind of bard queen am I going to be if I can’t even play for my own *parents*?”

“The kind who’s had a truly terrible couple of days,” Elodie said, seeing no point in trying to cushion the truth. “The kind who’s been expected to carry on without batting an eye, despite her entire world being turned upside down. The kind who’s going to do an *amazing* job, once she gets a chance to breathe, and gives herself just a little bit of a break.”

Lark let out another heavy sigh, though it seemed even that was not enough to expel all her worries. “I don’t think Allegro’s going to give me a break once I get back. *Especially* if I fumble the piece.”

“So what if you play a few wrong notes? You’ve made mistakes before.”

“It’s different now. Bard queens *can’t* make mistakes.”

As unfair as that sounded, Elodie knew it to be true. Through their songs, bard kings and queens granted boons to their citizens. But their gifts depended upon the songs they performed. If they made mistakes, then the blessings their citizens received would be affected as well. And their citizens

– *Lark's* citizens, now – were certainly in need of blessings. Between famine and the plague, their kingdom had not prospered these past few years: that was the only reason Lark's parents had risked going out in the storm. Their kingdom's plight had instilled in the king and queen a deep fear that if they did not act, they would lose their chance to save everything they loved. Their recklessness meant that Lark had lost everything *she* loved, instead.

Elodie knew it would do no good to offer Lark hollow reassurance, so she decided upon a practical approach. “Well, we'll just have to practise until there's no chance of you making any mistakes, then.”

Lark watched with wide eyes as Elodie retreated from the cliff's edge and pulled her lute from the straps on her back. She took a seat on a large rock and tapped the empty space to her right, beckoning for the princess to join her. Lark did so, pulling out her own lute and plucking at its strings, beginning a complex melody with which Elodie was passingly familiar. About three quarters of the way through, she stumbled over a particularly difficult passage, and notes which should have come together to form a pleasant harmony layered into a discordant mess instead. Instantly, Lark froze. When Elodie looked over, the light from the setting sun drew attention to the tears welling in the soon-to-be bard queen's eyes.

“Try again,” Elodie said softly. “Don’t stop this time. Just add a coda at the end of the verse. We’ll loop back around until you get it.” Lark pressed her lips together as though she were not entirely convinced, but did not argue. They reprised the same segment, and this time, when Lark’s fingers pressed upon the wrong strings, she did not stop, though she winced as her mistake left a noticeable blemish on an otherwise perfect melody. But as they soldiered on, while Elodie did not erase the dissonance her friend had introduced, she played with the original melody, so that by the time they reached the end of the verse, she had introduced a new harmony which allowed Lark’s dissonance to resolve into consonance. Lark stared at her, wide-eyed in amazement, as she clumsily looped her way back to a moment in the piece before her mistake had ever occurred. Perhaps what she had done had been too distracting, for when they reached the same section, Lark’s fingers faltered yet again, and Elodie wove in another new melody, making it seem as if the stray notes had been meant to be there all along.

They continued like this for the better part of an hour, as the sun dipped lower and lower on the horizon, and the mournful day’s light grew dimmer and dimmer, until Lark played the part once, twice, and thrice without error.

They sat together for a while, even after they'd strapped their lutes onto their backs and stopped playing. They'd settled in the final, piercing rays of the sun, bathing in its pink and orange glow.

"Can you promise me that we can always play together like that?" Lark's fingers crept toward Elodie's, but they didn't quite touch. Elodie wondered if she was intentionally holding back, or if she even realized what she was doing. "That you'll stay by my side, no matter how horrible the day? No matter who I become?"

"Of course." It was the easiest vow she had ever made. Elodie would have promised her anything, regardless of the colour of her clothes or the titles which preceded her name. "Always."

That seemed to bring Lark some comfort, for she smiled softly, and her fingers inched forward, closing the space between them. She *must* have been acting with purpose, for she reached out, tentatively at first, and tenderly slid her fingers between Elodie's.

Elodie's heart hammered in her chest, and it was a good thing that Lark's lilac gaze was fixed upon the sunset, for she was certain that her face had become a very conspicuous shade of red. They sat in silence, for she was unable to form any meaningful words as she focused on the erratic beating of her heart and the comfort of Lark's hand in hers. Until the light from

the setting sun became too dim and the fiery glow which had encircled them began to grey.

“We should probably head back,” Elodie said. Lark nodded, drawing her hand away, and Elodie immediately felt its loss.

“You go on ahead. I just need a few more minutes.” Lark reached for something in her pocket, and a lump formed in Elodie’s throat as she nodded.

She barely had a chance to look back – she needed to focus most of her attention on navigating the steep path in the increasingly heavy dusk – but as she left the cliffside, she thought she saw the flash of a figure silhouetted beside Lark. As she descended, she heard the future queen play a perfect, mournful tune, and she could have sworn that, hidden in the howling wind, there came a chilling reply.

Five Years Later

The sun shone brightly, doing its part to accentuate the vibrant colours of the streamers and pennants which hung throughout the town. Its dazzling beams of light illuminated the beatific faces of the citizens who crowded the stage which had been erected in the middle of the square.

Elodie stood off to the side of the wooden platform, watching with her hands clasped behind her back as mothers quieted excited children and fathers

craned their necks, trying to glimpse the still-hidden guest of honour. Elodie was alert, but there was little tension in her shoulders. She and her fellow guards were present as more of a formality than any sort of real precaution. She didn't expect to have to draw the sword that hung at her side. This was a joyous occasion – the people had no cause to rebel.

For today the Bard Queen would bless her citizens with her songs.

An eager hush fell over the crowd as Lark emerged from a small purple tent near the back of the platform, moving toward Allegro, who stood near the front of the stage, ready to address the people waiting below. She walked with an air befitting the ornate, golden circlet which rested upon her forehead. Her blonde hair was fashioned into a long braid, into which a string of glittering diamonds had been woven. Her gown was a deep violet, form-fitting at the top, then twisting and flaring at the waist, changing from silk to layers of fluttering tulle. As she walked forward, it seemed to dance, as if it had a life of its own.

As always, she took Elodie's breath away.

Elodie cleared her throat, looking at her feet, adjusting her posture as Lark took her place at the front of the stage. Even if her presence *was* just for show, it would not do to appear flustered or enamoured when she was in the queen's service.

“Thank you for joining us for this season’s concert,” Allegro said. The elderly man had also dressed in the finest fashion today, though his embroidered coat could do nothing to compare with Lark’s ensemble. “As always, those with a token may exchange it for a request and a song. If you have one, please come forth.”

As a general rule, Elodie found people did not excel at queuing. However, given the circumstances and the buzz of excitement that permeated the air, she thought the gathered citizens did remarkably well, forming a mostly orderly line with minimal fuss. Since the first concert following Lark’s coronation, their kingdom’s circumstances had greatly improved, thanks to her efforts and ability to satisfy all her subjects’ requests. After five years of this, no one worried their concerns wouldn’t be heard or resolved. No fists flew, and no harsh words were said. People approached the stage one by one and made their requests, and Lark responded to everyone in turn.

Even on a cloudy day, Elodie was convinced their queen would have been absolutely radiant. Ripples of shimmering gold danced around her, matching the brilliant gleam of her treasured pendant, as her dulcet notes drifted through the square, making real that which the townspeople desired: a cure for the aches which plagued an old woman’s bones; a charm to

guarantee a better harvest; a herd of new sheep to replace those which had been lost. For each request the citizens made, Lark replied with a flawless verse, and conjured up exactly what they needed with the powers afforded to her by her lineage.

Until a discordant second took the place of what should have been a pleasant third, and Lark's strumming suddenly ceased.

All eyes had already been on the Bard Queen, but while they had once been wide with awe, they were now filled with confusion. The woman whose request Lark had been fulfilling – who had asked for food for her hungry children, and who had likely been expecting baskets of the freshest fruits, the finest meats, and the fluffiest of breads – now gazed upon a pair of crates filled with what looked like edible, though somewhat wilted, vegetables. The woman's mouth hung agape, like a fish caught on a line. She quietly tried to regain her composure – Elodie suspected she didn't want to risk having the food, however unimpressive, taken from her – and bowed deeply, uttering strings of thanks as she and her husband hurriedly carried the crates away.

At the centre of the stage, Lark appeared catatonic. Allegro rushed to her side, placing a hand on her shoulder and whispering what Elodie assumed to be concerned words in her ear, but Lark did not reply.

She clutched her pendant in her hand, her gaze fixed firmly upon it. Ever since that evening on the cliff, Elodie hadn't seen Lark without it; but it must have been the angle, or the way Allegro was blocking the light, for the queen's treasured trinket seemed much duller than it had prior to the concert, as though it had lost its lustre.

Without a word, Lark turned on her heel and stalked toward the back of the stage. She bypassed the tent, causing Elodie's heart to spike as she left a frazzled Allegro to address a bewildered crowd, and a squad of puzzled guards to chase after a rogue queen.

In the old days, Lark would have told her anything.

"What *was* that?" she would have asked, and maybe Lark would have tried to play it off. Maybe she would have given her an impish smile – Elodie could imagine the one; the one that made Lark's lilac eyes glint and signalled that she was well and truly doomed – and tried to deny it. But Elodie would have pressed her. She would have kept pace with her friend, and Lark would have relented. She would have shared what was in her heart.

She couldn't keep pace with her now. The years had put space between them, and Lark, now a queen with the weight of a kingdom on her shoulders, barrelled on ahead. And though Elodie chased after

her, uttering cries of, “Your Majesty!” and, “Wait!”, Lark did not slow and she gave no reply. The queen did not stop until they returned to the castle, and the lock on her bedroom door fell into place. Elodie pounded on the door, begging for answers, but was met with only silence. The other guards turned away when it became clear that their charge had sequestered herself in her chambers. It was only when Elodie threatened to use the master key that hung on the ring on her belt, whether Lark liked it or not, that the queen momentarily emerged.

“I do not wish to be disturbed.” Elodie could see only a sliver of Lark’s face through the crack she had created between the door and the frame. “Tell the cooks I will not be requiring dinner. I expect I will be down for breakfast in the morning.” With that, Lark closed the door, and from the force with which she slid the lock back into place, it did not appear she intended to open it again.

Elodie vented her frustrations upon the stone floor as she made her way down to the kitchen to deliver Lark’s message. It was obvious that word of what had happened at the concert had spread, for hushed whispers and curious glances followed her as she made her way through the castle. No one was brave enough to approach her and ask her about it directly, which was just as well, for she hadn’t the patience to

reply.

When she returned to the hallway outside of Lark's room, nothing had changed. She reprised her post by the door, her back pressed against the cold, stone wall, and waited and waited.

Her feet began to ache. She shifted her weight, but that did little to ease her discomfort. She probably should have seen if anyone had been free to relieve her from duty for a while. That would have been *smart*. But she had been too preoccupied with her frustrations.

She allowed herself to slump to the floor, taking the weight off her feet. She could while away the hours *sitting* just as well as she could *standing*. *Waiting* for Lark to emerge. *Waiting* for her to explain *what* was going on. *Waiting*. *Waiting*.

But it had been a very long day, and it appeared Lark was not the only force working against her as her lids became traitorously heavy and her head fell forward, like a hammer seeking out a nail.

And, without meaning to, Elodie drifted into sleep.

She awoke to a series of crashes originating from behind Lark's door.

Her heart lurched as she scrambled to her feet, her hand racing to the hilt of the sword she clearly did not deserve. "Your Majesty?" she called, then, with more

urgency when she received no reply, “Lark!?”

Met with silence, she cursed the young queen and grabbed the heavy ring of keys that hung from her belt. It took her fumbling fingers too long to find the one which would grant her entrance, and her hands were shaking with adrenaline by the time she inserted the correct key into the lock and felt the bolt turn.

The room did not appear to be in disarray, but the source of the sound was clear: the window was open, its gridded panes bashing against the stone walls beneath the force of the wind.

Most notably, the room was empty. Lark was nowhere to be seen.

Elodie raced toward the open window, her brown braid swinging forward as she leaned over the ledge. There was a balcony a floor down, on which she could see some crushed crates – likely a secondary source of the commotion she’d heard. Someone had clearly made a hasty and inelegant escape from the window, probably with the queen in tow. She could only hope that Lark was giving them hell.

She certainly didn’t have time to find a better way down – not if she wanted to have any hope of catching up with these unknown captors – so, steeling herself for what she expected to be an unpleasant landing, she grabbed hold of the windowsill, swung her legs over, and dropped herself onto the crates.

She twisted her body midair, so that she landed on her side. The contents of the partially smashed crates cushioned her fall, but she still grunted when she made impact. She fully expected to wake up largely unable to move, but that was a problem for tomorrow. For now, she scrambled to her feet and followed the path around the curve of the balcony.

That was when she spotted them: a figure hiding in the shadows. Their face was obscured by a hooded cloak, and Elodie could see no one else with them, but she could take no chances. What innocent reason could there be for someone stalking around their castle in the middle of the night?

She descended upon them, moving swiftly before they had time to realize they'd been discovered. She forced them against the wall, pressing her forearm against their neck, as she drew her sword and angled the point of her blade beneath their jaw.

As the figure's head shifted back, she found herself staring into a pair of lilac eyes belonging to the very last person in the world she would ever dream of harming.

"Lark?" She backed off immediately, searching her queen's – her friend's – face for answers, but finding none. "What are you *doing*?"

Lark adjusted the clasp on her cloak, seeming remarkably unfazed for someone who had just had a

blade pressed against her throat. “I could ask the same of you.”

“My *job*.”

The queen twisted her lips, as though evaluating her reply. “A fair point, that.”

Despite conceding this minor victory, Lark did not seem inclined to elaborate, so Elodie tried to draw what simple conclusions she could from her friend’s appearance. No longer did Lark wear the same finery as she had at the concert. She was dressed from head to toe in black, in clothes which allowed for a wide range of movement: she was a perfect shadow, set to slip away into the night – save for her royal circlet and the dull, golden pendant which hung from her neck like a spent star.

“Are you trying to sneak away somewhere?”

Instead of answering, Lark’s lips curved into an impish smile, her lilac eyes glinting. In the span of a heartbeat, Elodie knew she was well and truly doomed.

“Why don’t you come along and see?”

As a child, Elodie had been led to believe that growing up would make things easier: her legs would get longer, her muscles would become stronger, her mind would be more capable of finding solutions to problems which once eluded it. Perhaps these things

were true, but growing up had only ever complicated matters between her and Lark. The years had done nothing but tie complex knots in what had once been the simple string of feelings running through her heart and make difficult that which had once been as effortless as breathing.

And so now they walked, in painful silence, through the weighty darkness of the forested cliffs.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” Lark finally asked, perhaps because she was bored, “since we went for a walk like this?”

Elodie blinked in confusion. “We went for a walk last week. Or have you tried to purge your near-death encounter with that enraged goose from your mind?” At Lark’s request, the two of them had taken a stroll through the nearby farmlands in search of a golden goose that was rumoured to have been spotted. When they’d found it, Lark had been determined to procure at least one of its eggs. This had not gone over very well with the goose, and had led to a protracted chase across the countryside, during which the young queen had been at a very real risk of losing one, or both of her legs, to the enraged fowl’s sharp bill.

Come to think of it, the two of them had been going on *several* walks over the past few weeks, each of them culminating in adventures more foolish and daring than the last. “The week before, we went

through the forest, where I had to fend off that ogre you challenged to a duel. And the week before that we walked along the coast, where I had to rescue you from *sirens*, of all things.” Elodie pinched the bridge of her nose, shaking her head at the absurdity of the memory. How did a *bard queen* manage to fall prey to sirens?

“In my defence, that water looked *very* clear, and they claimed there were *untold riches* at its depths.”

“You have an *entire treasury* filled with gold,” Elodie reasoned. Lark raised her eyebrows, as if to say, “It’s *different* treasure,” and Elodie sighed, defeated.

“None of those count, anyway,” Lark said. “I mean a proper walk, like when we were kids. One before *these*.” She gestured to the sword and shield that Elodie carried with her, then pressed her fingers against the circlet which rested on her forehead. “One before *this*. When we were accompanied by nothing but our lutes and our laughter.”

“We could go back and get them,” Elodie suggested. At the mention of acquiring their wooden instruments, she saw the glimmer of mirth that had come to life in Lark’s eyes flicker and die.

“No, we can’t,” she said with finality. “You heard what happened today.”

Elodie’s heart pounded like a drum. Finally, Lark

stood on the precipice of giving her answers, and she was terrified of saying the wrong thing, lest she prompted her to take a step back. But the queen only matched her silence, so she took a chance on her words.

“You... played a discordant note.”

“I made a *mistake*.” Lark said the word with such vitriol, it was as if this were the worst thing she could have done. “I don’t *make* mistakes.”

Coming from anyone else, this would have sounded like the claim of a narcissist, but time seemed to slow as Elodie realized Lark’s words to be true. Since that evening on the cliff five years ago, since right before she had taken up the crown, Elodie had not known Lark to play a single wrong note.

It appeared that Lark did not wish to linger on this topic, for she laced her fingers together and stretched her arms out in front of her. “Let’s just... talk about something else. How are you? How’s... guarding?”

Elodie raised an eyebrow, and Lark mimicked her expression, as though attempting to goad her into a reply. “What?”

“Ah, yes. How’s guarding the incredibly *easy-to-guard* bard queen?”

“*Ha-ha*. I’m not *that* difficult.”

“Excuse me, who broke out of her own room like a thief in the night, then dragged me into the deep, dark

woods, with no explanation? Some might think you're a scoundrel, Your Majesty, up to no good," Elodie said with mock horror.

"Oh, stop. Get a new job, if I'm such a handful."

"No." The immediacy of her reply seemed to come as a surprise to Lark, as the young queen's gaze darted away to study the winding path ahead, but Elodie's heart pounded in time with the strength of her resolve. Her fate had been sealed years ago. "I promised I'd be by your side, didn't I?"

Lark's lilac eyes came back to her, and it was as if she were pulled through time. The two of them were back on the cliff, their fingers entwined, basking in the setting sun's golden glow. They were not so far apart now; she could reach out and lace their fingers together again. She could do more...

But things were different. Lark was her queen, and she had to keep her heart leashed, regardless of the promises she had made.

"Besides, I don't know what else I'd do," she continued, breaking the spell she'd unwittingly woven.

Lark sighed, her gaze drifting once again to the path before them. "What a waste your life is on me, Elodie. You've got the whole world in front of you. Me... My parents gave me a name with wings, but I've done a fine job of clipping them. I don't think it

would make any difference *where* I tried to fly. Nowhere would be far enough away.” Lark was playing with the golden pendant around her neck again. Although Elodie could see that the moon’s light *should* have hit it, strangely, no reflection danced across its surface.

“Far enough from what?”

Lark looked up, letting the pendant fall against her chest. “From *him*.”

It was only then that Elodie realized where they were: the same cliffside they had come to five years ago, on the eve of Lark’s parents’ funeral. Only this time, they were not alone.

Silhouetted against the full moon was a boy. He shouldn’t have struck fear into her heart, but he did. He looked to be about ten, with eyes the colour of a stormy sea and glossy black hair in need of a cut. He tilted his head, regarding them like an inquisitive puppy, but as he did, his form momentarily shifted, flickering like a dying flame, leaving behind a ghostly after-image which lingered behind her eyes. One which bore a hungry smile, leering at them like a wolf waiting to sink its teeth into its prey.

“We shouldn’t be here,” Elodie said. She was sure of this. Her heart sung out in agreement, but this time, the wind did not. It gusted, pushing them forward, forcing them toward the boy. He did not seem

affected by it at all; his too-long hair did not even flutter beneath its gale-like force.

“We have no choice,” Lark said sadly, like a criminal resigned to the gallows. Suddenly, Elodie regretted calling her a scoundrel earlier. “I made a bargain. It’s time for me to pay.”

“What are you talking about?”

Lark held the pendant in one hand and pointed to the spirit with the other. “*This* is the spirit my parents were trying to contact when their ship crashed on the rocks. They were trying to make a deal; to bargain for power to ensure they had the skill to fulfill their citizens’ requests. They couldn’t, so I made one in their place.

“He promised I would master every verse, be able to fulfill every request without error, until the day a stray note would invade my perfect song. Until today.” Lark let her words hang in the air, her eyes drawn to the dull necklace in her hand. “This pendant used to shine as brightly as I did, but its power is spent. My time is up. I have to give him what he’s owed.”

Elodie looked to the ghostly boy, who was eyeing Lark as though she were a prize to be won. “Which is?” she asked.

Lark met her gaze, and Elodie feared she knew *exactly* what the young queen was going to say.

What could make someone throw caution to the wind?

What could drive someone to recklessness, but the fear that if they did not act, they'd lose their chance?

Suddenly, Lark's random outings didn't seem quite so *random* after all.

"Me."

Elodie wasn't sure if it was the wind or Lark's words which chilled her to the bone.

"He'll take my body." Lark looked to the boy, who now wore a smug expression. Elodie's fingers flexed around the hilt of her sword, though she didn't know what good steel would do against a spirit. "And I'll... I'm not sure what I'll become." She looked back toward Elodie, and Elodie thought she could see the beginnings of tears in the young queen's eyes. "I think you would have been able to tell the difference, once I changed. Still, I'm glad you followed me. I'm glad you could be here when I go."

The wind howled, threatening to swallow Lark's words. Somehow, they managed to reach her, but they rattled around inside her head, refusing to make sense. Elodie's hands tightened into fists as she fought to restrain them.

"I don't accept this!" She clasped one of Lark's hands between her own. The queen's eyes widened at this sudden display of affection, and perhaps it wasn't

appropriate, but she didn't care. Lark had always been there; it had always been the two of them. Even when she'd become queen, even when everything had changed. She'd stayed as close as she could. She couldn't lose her *now*. "You're just going to give yourself up? That's ridiculous!"

"Elodie..." Lark's eyes softened, and she placed her other hand tenderly atop Elodie's, as if to console her. "There's nothing *to* accept. I gave my word, years ago. It's already done."

"And what *were* your words, exactly?"

She had expected Lark to answer, but it was the boy who replied. He sounded like the screeching wind, like a branch slowly being wrenched from a tree. "*I will grant you a perfect song, until you can no longer play along. Discord will sully perfect tunes, and I shall return to claim my boon.*"

Elodie didn't want to acknowledge the shiver the boy's voice sent travelling up her spine, so she held tightly to Lark's hand, and put into practise every commanding air she'd ever learned during her years with the guards. "Those words *exactly*?" she asked.

The spirit nodded, and she allowed herself the faintest hint of a smile, though her chest shuddered as she spoke.

"Well then, 'perfect tunes'? Lark only made *one* mistake today. Only *one* tune was spoiled. It sounds

as though she needs to play for you again to see if the time is truly right, wouldn't you say?"

"Elodie, the pendant is tarnished, its magic is clearly spent. There's no need to—"

"Wouldn't you say, spirit?" Elodie repeated, her gaze locked with the boy's.

He didn't reply, but a spectral lute appeared in the air before Lark, which was answer enough.

"I would like one too," Elodie demanded. The air between her and the spirit rippled, and for a moment, she questioned if she had pushed her luck too far, if she was about to be blown off the cliff by forces she did not understand. But a matching, ghostly lute appeared before her as well, and she found it felt strangely familiar as she closed her fingers around its neck.

"Play," she said, turning toward Lark. "No matter what happens, no matter how many mistakes you make, just keep playing."

"But *what* are we playing?"

Elodie smiled, though her heart hammered in her chest, hoping it would bring her friend some peace. "Whatever you want."

Lark's lips pressed into a thin line, her brow tensing in concentration, before her fingers began to dance across the strings, plucking a familiar, yet complex melody. Given where they were, it was the

only one she could have picked: the same one they'd played together on this very cliff five years ago.

And, because history was destined to repeat, Lark's fingers stumbled over the same notes as they had when she was fifteen, inserting discord into an otherwise pleasant tune.

Lark knew what she had done. She winced, her shoulders rising as she looked at Elodie with panic in her eyes. The spirit had heard it. His malevolent glow intensified, the edges of his form seeming to hum with excitement. But Lark kept playing, just as Elodie had told her to, and when they reached the end of the verse—

With a flourish, Elodie resolved the dissonance into consonance, making it seem as though Lark's mistake had been intentional all along. Instantly, the power that had gathered around the spirit faded away. The boy's eyes grew wide, as though he did not understand what had just transpired. The tension eased out of Lark's shoulders, though her fingers slipped clumsily across the strings. Again, the light surrounding the boy flared, and Elodie's mind raced ahead, her fingers working to undo what had been done. With the dissonance resolved, the spirit's growing hunger was forcibly quelled.

A smile spread across Lark's lips, and while it did Elodie's heart good to see her friend's confidence

returned, she could have done without the arrogance it seemed to afford her. She could have sworn Lark started making tiny mistakes on *purpose*, from that maddening, mischievous glint in her eyes. Each time the spirit was promised power, only to have it torn away, he became more and more enraged. By the time they reached the end of their song, his form shook, pulsing in time to the phantom beat of a furious heart.

Her pulse raced, too. She looked at Lark's smiling face, and she felt as if she were soaring. She wondered if the queen felt the same. She held out her hand for Lark to grasp, and a piercing current travelled up her arm as her friend pressed her fingers into her palm. If Lark's wings were clipped, then she would carry her as she flew.

She turned to face the spirit, her voice booming like a drum. "Well, I wouldn't say that any of that was a spoiled tune, would you?"

"This changes nothing," the boy hissed, his eyes glowing red. *"Our bargain has not been erased. I will always be listening. She will continue to sow discord whenever she plays. What will you do, accompany her forever?"*

"Yes," Elodie said, lacing her fingers together with Lark's without hesitation; so much bolder now than when they'd tenderly reached for each other all those years ago. "That is a bargain *we* made, and one that I

intend to keep.”

The spirit pulsed with displeasure, but did not speak. The terms of his agreement with Lark were clear, and it appeared as though he was bound to their bargain just as firmly as she was. No matter how much it upset him, there was nothing he could do. Mixing his displeasure with the cries of the wailing wind, his spectral form broke apart and faded into the night, leaving her and Lark alone beneath the light of the moon.

It was only then that Elodie realized her legs retained about all the strength of a sheet of ice on a hot summer’s day. Fortunately, it was at that moment that Lark swept her into a hug, lifting her off the ground.

“That was amazing!” The queen spun her round and round, and Elodie had to close her eyes to keep the world from passing by too quickly. “*You’re amazing!*”

“You certainly didn’t make it easy,” Elodie chided. “Taunting him like you were. What was that about?”

“He deserved it,” Lark said, setting her down. “Besides, I knew you had it under control.”

“I just...” Elodie began. The words were on the tip of her tongue, but Lark was staring at her, her lilac eyes glimmering in the moonlight, and all Elodie’s intentions seemed lodged in her throat.

“You just...?” Lark prodded.

Elodie bit her lip. She was not meek. She could – and frequently did – make her opinions known. But she was tired of the tangled knot in her heart. Maybe, if she simply *showed* Lark, she could finally pull it free.

She pushed herself up on her toes, pressing their lips together. Her heart beat so quickly, she feared it might burst forth and take flight. But it seemed to remain caged as she brought her hand up to cup the side of Lark’s face, gently grazing her thumb across her cheek; an action meant as much to steady herself as to show her tender affection for the woman before her.

She pulled back, lightheaded, unsure if her legs would still support her. Lark said nothing. Maybe she needed to add some words after all. “I just... wasn’t ready to let you go. I don’t think I ever want to let you go.”

Phantom pinpricks made their way up her spine as Lark’s fingers ghosted across the rings of her chainmail, coming to rest against the small of her back. “Who says you have to?” Lark eased her forward, bringing her other hand to the side of Elodie’s face, running her fingers through her hair as she returned her kiss.

When they parted, Elodie hovered in place, letting

her breath mingle with the queen's beneath the light of the moon as their heartbeats synchronized. Until Lark let out a sudden laugh, and Elodie's heart spiked in concern.

“What? What's the matter?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Lark lovingly brushed a stray lock of hair out of Elodie's face. “Only, you said you didn't want to get a new job. But you, my loyal little guard...” She pressed a kiss against Elodie's forehead as her lips curved into her impish Lark smile. “I think you may have just given yourself *quite* the promotion...”

The sun shone brightly, doing its part to accentuate the vibrant colours of the streamers and pennants which hung throughout the town. Its dazzling beams of light illuminated the beatific faces of the citizens who crowded the stage which had been erected in the middle of the square.

Elodie stood in the centre of the wooden platform, watching with her hands clasped before her as mothers quieted excited children and fathers smiled, gazing happily upon the guests of honour. There were guards present, but they were more of a formality than any sort of real precaution. She didn't expect any of them to have to draw the swords that hung at their sides. This was an especially joyous occasion – the

people had no cause to rebel.

For today, *two* bard queens would bless their citizens with their songs, playing together in perfect concert.

Allie Leigh is an indie author of queer fantasy, usually with a fair amount of whimsy involved. Outside of writing she enjoys Dungeons and Dragons, video games, crochet, and petting all the dogs. If you'd like to read more of her work, check out A Sorceress and Scones: a queer, cozy fantasy filled with magic, found family, and a healthy supply of baked goods. You can find it [here](#).

Swansong

Zoe Shakes

There's a story I need to tell you. It will be easiest for you if you hear it now – if you hear it from me – and I'm happy to tell it. It's the least I can do for a sister.

The truth is, we're similar, you and I. You're just like me, just like us: you have the same hunger, the same need, the same fervour for the hunt. And you have the same prey, don't you? You and I and Florian and all the rest of us – we hunt the melody.

There's always been something uneasy in your soul. Back before you were here, I'm sure you had trouble sleeping. I always did. I'd wake up at 4am with a half-remembered dream-tune just teasing at my ear. I'd scramble to pull together what snatches of melody I could, record a voice note that I'd frown at by morning. Sometimes, I'd write a song. I'm sure you were the same. Whenever you wrote, you'd slave over it, right? You'd agonise your way through a sludge of chords, until you'd beaten together something acceptable. But you didn't want acceptable.

You longed for magic.

All the time, you could sense it – right there, a beat away from your fingertips, toying with you. Greatness was imminent, in that melody you could never quite pin down. You wouldn't stop until you could capture it.

Sometimes, in fanciful moments, you would tell yourself it was your vocation. You needn't be coy: I've been you, remember. You knew you had to find that tune before you could die, knew you had to commit it to vinyl. If your one job in the world was to be the person who found the melody and shared it, then that was a worthy calling. There were songs in your head – plenty of songs – but none of them were *the* song. And that bugged you, like a split-end that begged to be picked at. You'd gnaw away at the thought in the quiet, lonely moments, summoning notes to your mind with your eyes squeezed tight. And just when you thought you had it – just when you could feel it, test out the shape of it in your ear – it was gone.

I remember what it was like to be you. Florian and I, we came to this island just as you did. We sat on the boat and I watched the sea pull itself apart and together again. I admired it all – the reflections on the ocean like glowing stretch marks, the loosely

feathered clouds, the way all of it closed in around the island. Everything seemed so simple, then. I held Florian's hand and, when I looked at him, I wished I could find a tune that sounded the way that moment felt. How could I ever hold the depth of my feelings for him – my feelings for the whole, glorious world – in a series of notes? They weren't enough. They were never enough. Nothing, I knew, made me feel half so much as music did. Yet I couldn't stir up a song in myself. Not a real song, not the sort of song that means something.

"What are you frowning about?" Florian asked, and I laughed.

"Nothing. I'm being a tortured artist, you know? I'm in a beautiful place, so I have to mope and feel all hopeless."

"Oh, naturally." He nudged me in the shoulder, rolling his eyes in this way that said *I love you, you tragic little fool*. "Cheer up, eh? No one likes a depressed wedding singer."

That's why we were there, you see: to sing for a wedding. We didn't know the couple, but Florian had found a request on some Facebook group and jumped on it.

"It'll be a free holiday," he'd said. "And good exposure."

"Oh, of course," I'd said. "There's sure to be all

sorts of networking opportunity on a remote little island off the coast of— Whereabouts is it, again?”

“It’s called the Isle of Swans,” Florian had said, “and it’s right up north.”

“Sounds a bit cold for swans,” I’d said. “And for me.”

But there was nothing else on either of our calendars, and I wasn’t one to turn down free money. Besides – despite what I said, I had a good feeling about the Isle of Swans. You know the feeling I mean: the quickening in your blood, the tug at the edge of your lip, the sure, steady ticking in your chest. *That* feeling. You remember it, I’m sure. That’s something we all have in common. Every one of us felt the pull to the island.

So there we were, and the boat was docking up. It had been a strange journey – the sat nav hadn’t much liked the directions Florian fed it from the instructions the bride had sent him. And when we’d arrived, the boat that was ready to collect us was much smaller than we’d imagined.

“Isn’t there anyone else coming?” I’d asked, but the ferryman had shaken his head.

“Not today. It’s only you.”

It hadn’t seemed like a red flag, which is funny, isn’t it? It seems crazy, now, that we just hopped onto this stranger’s boat, with nothing but an overnight bag

and Florian's guitar. But it really did feel all right at the time. Oh, hark at me now. I'm talking all defensive – like I need to justify myself – but I don't, of course. I'm being silly. After all: you got on the boat too, when it was your turn, didn't you?

When we arrived at the island, any fear I might have had truly dissipated. The air was strangely warm for the north of Scotland, and the scenery was more beautiful up close even than it had been from a distance. The green of the trees was so much heavier than I'd seen before, like watching the TV on sports mode. It was like walking straight into a leafy chapel, stepping under a vaulted ceiling of high-flung branches. Everything was enmeshed in the undergrowth – roots and brambles clambered into one another, bound in this beautifully chaotic sort of tumble.

Sorry, this is all very gratuitous. I know you've seen it all before, you don't need me to describe it. But I want you to know how it felt, see, arriving for the first time. It was the type of landscape that I knew would inspire creativity in the right sort of soul. And when we arrived, I felt, just for a moment, that I *could* be the right sort of soul. It didn't seem fanciful, not then. I thought I could do it: write some expression of this exquisiteness, strap it down into a song. I could create perfection.

Of course, that wasn't the point of our visit. We were wedding singers: no one wanted a new song from us. Florian and I were here to perform the classics, to inject a bit of life into a party. I loved singing for newlyweds and their families, I really did. But there was always a pain in it – the sort of pain that only an artist can understand.

Have you ever sung a song so utterly magnificent that it kills you a little, inside? There's something awful about staring art right in the face and knowing that nothing you ever make will be quite so perfect. There are artists out there who pinned down their white whale tunes, artists taught by the muses to weave notes into gold. And when you hear a song like that, it makes the silly little scribbles in your Notes app feel almost shameful. There's no use trying to measure up, or pretending like it's a possibility. Some people are bards rather than wedding singers. Some people have harnessed siren song, created tunes that nations will chant for generations. And I sung those songs, night after night, the well-crafted bangers that could get crowds stamping their feet. There's a magic to *Mr Brightside*, *Dancing Queen* and *Sweet Caroline*. Nothing unites quite like an earworm.

So I loved my job and I hated it too, because of how small it made me feel. There's an arrogance about every artist – don't take that personally, please –

and it was set to be the undoing of me.

We wandered a while, Florian and I, guitar swinging at his side. Then, at the end of the path, we saw Old Bill.

Of course, we didn't know he was Old Bill, then, but he soon introduced himself.

"Afternoon," he said, raising a palm that looked about as ancient as the trees. "What brings you both here? Music, I suppose?"

I was going to ask how he knew, but then he nodded to Florian's guitar case.

I smiled. "That's right. We're performing at a wedding, tomorrow night."

Old Bill did something with his face that might have involved raising his brows. But you've seen Old Bill – he's not got a single hair on him, poor love – so it was hard to tell. In any case, the spot of forehead where his brows ought to have been seemed to quiver.

"I see," he said, slowly. "Well, I'm sure the bride will find you soon enough. Have you a place you've to stay?"

Florian pulled out his phone, but Old Bill shook his head.

"You won't be able to use that, here," he said. "No one gets a signal."

Florian didn't like that – he always was attached to that phone of his, bless him – so he flicked at its

buttons anyway. But the phone wasn't just signalless: it was dead.

I pulled out mine too, and it was the same.

That should have scared me, and perhaps it did, but Old Bill flapped my fears away with that big, weathered hand of his. He's good at that.

"Common phenomenon," he said. "Don't you worry, I'll show you the way – you'll be in the guesthouse, no doubt."

So we followed him, and we didn't think about what it meant. We didn't have any sort of sinking feeling as we trekked deeper into the woods, as we left behind the shoreline. Did you? Did you have any sense of it?

"I'm Old Bill," he said, picking up a stick from the undergrowth to balance on as he hauled himself over a rocky patch. "Do you two have names?"

"I'm Florian," Florian said. "And this is Daisy."

He pointed to me and I waved. *Daisy* – that's who I was, back then.

Old Bill smiled. "Nice names. I'll remember those ones, so I will."

He had a funny sort of accent, I remember thinking. It wasn't Scottish, really – you've heard it, you know what I mean. But I supposed that not all Scottish accents sounded the same. Some of those island folk talked proper funny, so I'd heard. So I

didn't question it for long. It was easy not to – easy just to exist there, among the trees, and to do nothing else.

“I've not seen any swans about, yet,” Florian said, and Old Bill shook his head.

“That's because there aren't any.”

“Then why's it called the Isle of Swans?” I asked.

“That,” Old Bill said, “is no one's business but the trees'.”

Perhaps it was the beauty of the landscape, or the warmth of Florian's hand in mine, but that didn't feel sinister, not then. I just laughed and skipped over the rocks, feeling all frothy and full of song. I didn't know the song, yet, but I could sense it was there, just out of reach – not in an agonising sort of way, not like a cruel trick, but like a beckon. There was no rush. I could feel it leading me, oh so slowly. And I had a feeling that, this time, it would let me close enough to capture.

Funny, isn't it? How sure I was that I'd be the one to seize the melody, to bend it to my will, to lock it down. I didn't understand at all. Not then.

“Why is it so warm here?” I asked. “I always thought it was cold this far north. And it was freezing on the mainland.”

Old Bill shrugged. “Why is the grass green? Why is the sky blue?”

Both were good questions too, I thought, because the grass was so very green, here, and the sky so very blue.

We turned a corner and there it was: the guesthouse. Do you remember how you felt, when you first saw it? I loved the way it seemed to have sprung from the ground, so enrobed with moss and ivy that you could hardly see the brickwork. It was part of the forest, and the forest was part of it.

“How lovely,” I said, as Old Bill tried the handle. The door creaked open, just like that, and we stepped on through.

“Is there a key?” Florian asked.

Old Bill laughed at that. “We don’t lock the doors, on the island. It’s a thing called trust, see. None of us have secrets from each other.”

Florian frowned, running a hand through his curls, and I could see him weighing it up: he always did like to go with the flow, but he was still British. The lack of privacy horrified him.

I smiled and thanked Old Bill, leading Florian into the guesthouse with a palm on his back. “This is perfect,” I said. “Thank you so much. Do you know where the bride and groom are? We ought to find them and say hello, work out the logistics for tomorrow.”

“She’ll be here to see you soon enough,” Old Bill

said.

And then, without another word, he was gone.

We explored the guesthouse, Florian and I, peering through each doorway into charming room after charming room. His favourite thing was the skylight above our bed. My favourite thing was the record collection.

“There are so many of them,” I said, fingering my way through alphabetised rows. “Oh, look, Florian – they have Grayson Grieve.”

Grayson Grieve was my favourite singer, you see. I’d been mesmerised by his voice ever since I was a child. And he’d always fascinated me more than I could say.

I don’t know how much time has passed between our arrival on the island and yours, so it’s quite possible you’re too young to know the story of Grayson Grieve. Let me tell it to you, quickly.

Grayson was the most tortured of the tortured artists. He looked it: all hollow-eyed and gaunt, with dramatic dark hair and a permanent angst-stricken frown. The sad, bad boy of the ’90s, that sums him up, perhaps.

Grayson had a talent, I think we can all agree on that. His voice was like nothing you’ve heard before, and the way he could play the guitar was almost

revolutionary. He was all set to be the next big thing when he released his album, and what an album it was. I still think, to this day, that *Grayson Grieve* might be the best two sides of a vinyl ever to exist. But after that album, no one heard anything from Grayson. He didn't release new music. He had writer's block, some people said. After that first, perfect album, he never wrote so much as another song. Slowly, he faded from the public consciousness. By the time the news arrived in 1999 – the news that he'd disappeared, that his car had been found abandoned at the end of a pier – the world had almost forgotten about him.

I slid the vinyl from its sleeve and set it up on the record player.

"Come on, Florian," I said, as the opening chords crackled out into the air. "Dance with me."

And oh, how we danced. We wiggled our hips and threw our hands in the air, and let the music take us over. We were still dancing when *she* arrived.

One moment, the living room was empty, and then it wasn't. She appeared mid-twirl, a figure all in white beside the door.

"Sorry," she said, as we jumped. Florian had reached for his guitar case and was brandishing it, as though that would do anything to help matters. "I didn't mean to disturb you. The door was open."

Slowly, Florian lowered his guitar case. I remember it was an effort to smile at her – an effort to meet her eye, to extend a hand, to say, “Hello, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Daisy.”

She took my hand, and her fingers were cold like moonlight. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Anya.”

There was something uncanny about her. Perhaps it was her eyes – those pale, pale irises, glimmering like pearl. Or perhaps it was because I had the sense, right away, that I’d seen her face before. She tugged on the edges of my mind, tickling at a hundred half-recalled memories. But I couldn’t place her, not then.

“So is it your wedding we’re going to, tomorrow?” Florian asked.

Anya nodded: slowly, delicately, like she was being careful not to tip her head off of its neck. “Yes,” she said. “In a way, I suppose.”

I didn’t like the way she talked, back then. I didn’t like the dreamy lilt in her voice, the up-down rhythm. I remember it set my spine on edge.

“What do you mean, in a way?” I asked.

Anya tilted her head to the left, just slightly. “I mean that tomorrow will be a glorious day full of many glorious things. It isn’t about me, dear ones. It’s about the togetherness.”

I didn’t really understand her, I must confess. I’d always had rather selfish dreams of my own wedding,

one day. In my fantasies, it certainly was about me.

Anya smiled, a fragile, ghosting little smile. “We’ll be so honoured to have you join us.”

“Let’s talk logistics, quickly,” Florian said. “When and where do you want us, do you know? And when can we do a sound check?”

Anya’s smile pulled further back across her face. “Sundown, dear ones,” she said. “And there’s no need for any – what was it, you said? A check? No need for that. Just bring yourselves and your guitar. We’ll be gathering in the forest, you see: there’s the most wondrous clearing, right in the centre of the island, you won’t be able to miss it. We shall meet there, and you can treat us to your delightful music.”

We paused, and Grayson Grieve crooned away in the background. It was a song I’d heard a hundred times, but it sounded different, then. Something about his voice puckered at my arm skin.

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” Anya said. “Enjoy your night. Dream pretty dreams.”

And, without another word, she stepped through the door. She slipped away like a piece of moonbeam.

The evening wore into night, and Grayson Grieve finished his final song. Florian and I spent a while trying to find a socket for our phone chargers – at the very least, we wanted to check the Facebook message

and see if there were any more details about tomorrow's wedding – but there was no such thing.

“It's like stepping back in time,” I said. “A world without technology.”

Florian sniffed at that. “It's a right pain if you ask me.”

“Or perhaps it's romantic.”

“Perhaps it's both.”

We settled down in the bedroom, under the skylight, and Florian pulled out his guitar. He felt his way around its neck, strumming a few chords with slow fingers. I hummed and he played, and I strained to pick out a tune. We'd been trying to write for months, by then, Florian and I. It was all well and good playing covers for weddings, but we wanted to be more than that – of course we did. Sometimes, Florian came up with a lyric or two and we'd struggle to set them to music. Sometimes, I'd hear a tune in my head and think, for a moment, that it could be the start of something. But it was never *the* tune.

It was the hunt that bonded us, that night we first met. We were both drunk and talking wildly at a bar, voices loud and hearts wide open. I told him about the tune – this shadow of a song that had followed me around since birth, this melody I was forever straining to hear.

He told me that he'd always had a sense of it too:

of a song that he was supposed to write.

“Every time I come up with something, it feels hollow,” he’d said. “Not because it’s bad. But because it isn’t the song. It’s not the one that I know I was born to play.”

Back then, when we first met, we were hopeful still. We truly believed that, one day, we would find the song. But by that night, we’d become more cynical. I dared not tell him that inkling I’d had earlier – that inkling of being close to it. I didn’t want to get his hopes up.

The strumming he was doing wasn’t working in any case, and it had been a long day. So, before long, we went to bed. We lay there, gazing out through the skylight at the stars tickled by the treetops.

“The stars seem so much bigger and more beautiful here,” I said.

“I suppose that’s what happens when you get away from the city.”

It was more than that, though. I looked up and I understood, for the first time, what Van Gogh saw when he painted *Starry Night*. I was so enthralled by it all that I was sure I’d never sleep.

All the same, I was drifting off when the swans arrived.

They floated over the skylight like angels, circling low above the trees. The way they glided made the air

seem thicker and silkier than it truly was. I watched them gather, and didn't need to say anything to Florian. I just took his hand and kept on watching without releasing a single breath.

And then, for the very first time, I heard it. The song the swans sung was like nothing I'd heard before. All my blood and nerves vibrated exactly at its pitch – everything within me stood up, electrified, awakening and quickening and blossoming in a thousand directions. Hearing the song was like meeting a soulmate. Not like the way I met Florian, at the back of a bar, but a real soul-on-soul communion. It was a moment like you read about in books; like you sing about, from the stage at a wedding reception. Only it was so much deeper than that.

All the beauty of the forest and the stars was contained in that song. The notes were more than enough – holy enough and resonant enough to hold every scrap of beauty an eye could perceive. The song was in the swans, of course it was, but it was also in me. They sang only a few notes, a short refrain, but it was more beautiful than anything I could have conceived of. I wouldn't need to corner this tune in a voice note. I knew it was written in my soul.

Florian's hand in mine burned and my spirit burned too. This was it: we both knew it. When I began to sing, my voice had never sounded so clear or

so true. Florian hummed along, and there were no words to our song, not then. But we didn't need lyrics. Our voices fell together, harmonising with the swans and with each other. I'd thought, before that night, that I'd known intimacy with Florian. All at once, in a single moment, I realised I'd been wrong. This was intimacy: the melding of voice on voice, the heart song we shared blossoming in the air between us. As we sang, we both cried, and neither of us thought that was odd. Singing that night felt like a homecoming.

It's a strange feeling, when you touch greatness. When you've hunted all your life for that high – that climax, that glorious, ecstatic resolution – it's impossible to know what to do with the feeling. In one instant, every hollow within me was filled. And yet I yearned for more. A single refrain wasn't enough. I needed the rest of the song, needed more of this music that frothed up within me. I had brushed only the coat-tails of divinity, and I needed it all.

It sounds greedy, when I put it like that, but you know how it is. There's a blessing and a curse to that hunger we shared. Once you've tasted perfection, you can't help but to hunt for more. You simply can't.

Don't be ashamed, sister. You're only human.

When it was over, we didn't say a word for a moment. But Florian pulled out his guitar, and he found the chords right away, and we kept on singing

together, alone.

“It’s *the song*,” I said. “I know it.”

“But where’s the rest of it?” Florian asked. He was just like me, just like you. He couldn’t be satisfied by one mouthful of ambrosia.

We tried, all night, to work out the rest of the song. We had that one refrain the swans had sung, and we didn’t tire of it, even after humming for hours. But nothing seemed fit to come before or after. Nothing we could conjure was worthy.

All too soon, day was breaking, but we weren’t tired. We hadn’t eaten since we’d arrived, but we weren’t hungry either. It was as though we’d become elevated beyond all that – beyond the needs of our flesh. We longed only to feed our souls.

We decided to wander the village that morning. It would be good, we thought, to meet more of the islanders and to ask, perhaps, about the swans. The air was balmy that morning, like the breath of an enormous god, and I realised that my holiday wardrobe was far too woollen for weather like this. But I wasn’t hot, despite the layers. I felt just perfect.

In the village, there wasn’t much in the way of activity. How to describe it? You’ve seen it, of course – did it shock you too? It was bizarre, to me, after years spent in the city, to see them all basking about

in the sun the way they do. It was as though no one had anything to do or anywhere to be. No one was selling or buying, no one was on any sort of journey. Everyone was just sitting. Just being. Some of them had guitars, or harmonicas. One chap was even playing the lute.

We marvelled at it, for a good long while, and no one seemed perturbed by our presence. After a few minutes, a young woman wearing a shawl smiled at us.

“You like the music?” she asked.

“Oh, yes.”

She nodded, turning her smile to Florian’s guitar. “You’re the wedding singers,” she said. “You’re very welcome here.”

“Seems like there’s a lot of musicians for such a small island,” Florian said, and she laughed.

“You’re in good company. Everyone here is musical, see,” the woman said. “That’s something we all share.”

“If you live on such a musical island, why hire wedding singers from hundreds of miles away?” I asked.

The woman shrugged. “Well, that’s no business of mine.” She smiled once more and – although perhaps my fancy has coloured the memory in wrong – I felt, I’m sure, that there was something else she wanted to

say. But then she turned away. “Good to meet you both.”

We stood there as she walked off, listening to the odd notes and chords peeling out from the various instruments around us. Individually, I wasn’t sure any one of them was playing a tune. The islanders were picking random strings intermittently, making sounds rather than music. But when we stood there in the middle of it all, the effect was undeniable.

“It’s the song,” I said, grasping at Florian’s arm. “Do you hear it?”

We stayed right where we were, ears grasping at the tune. It was longer, this time, than last night’s refrain. We picked it out, found the song in our throats, felt it rise once again through us both, body and soul. And then it was over.

No one else seemed affected by the song. No one had stirred, or left their seat. It seemed impossible that, had they heard such a tune forming around them, they would seem so non-plussed.

“Excuse me,” I said, running to the nearest islander. He had his head lowered over his guitar, and his face was hidden by a great swoop of dark hair. “Excuse me – do you know what that song was?”

Slowly, the man looked up at me. “What song’s that, then?” he asked.

I would have argued with him – told him that,

surely, he must have heard the music just as we did.

But I wasn't in any sort of position to speak. Because the man looking up at me, fingers wrapped loosely around his guitar, was familiar to me. Grayson Grieve's face was just the same as it had been in 1999.

"I think we ought to go home," Florian said, as we walked from the village. He said the words quietly, pressing them into my temple, as though he was afraid we'd be overheard by the trees. On an island like this, it didn't seem beyond the realms of possibility.

"Do you think that was the real Grayson Grieve?" I asked, and he shook his head.

"He's not aged in thirty-odd years if that's him. He's got to be a fake. This – all this – it's some sort of set-up. A trap."

Somehow, the words sounded false to me, even then. I gazed up at the blue, blue sky, down at the radiant grasses. Perhaps, I thought, traps are designed to be appealing. There has to be something to lure you in. But this island seemed so tranquil – I was never afraid of it, even then. Grayson had scared me, that was true. But it seemed impossible that anything truly evil could exist among these trees.

"Where are the swans, now, do you think?" Florian asked.

“Old Bill said there were none.”

“But we saw them, Daisy.” Florian pulled his hands back through his hair, and a sweaty curl flopped back against his forehead. “I think we need to find the ferryman. We need to get back to the mainland – sod the wedding.”

I was torn, then. The air seemed too close around my head, the ceiling of the trees stretched too low. It didn’t help that, when I looked out to sea, I couldn’t see even a smudge of mainland. We were trapped, I knew, or very nearly. If we wanted to leave, the window of opportunity was slim.

But I didn’t want to leave. I remembered the way it had felt, the night before, listening to the swansong under the skylight. I remembered that moment in the village, where the song brimmed up all over again. I remembered how, for a second, I transcended my very self.

And then I heard it again. The song was echoey, this time. It sounded like a single human voice, carrying on the wind, only there was no wind to speak of. As soon as I heard it, any half-thought of finding the ferryman was dispelled. One look at Florian told me he felt the same.

“It’s different,” he said. “Is this the verse, do you think?”

We closed our eyes, strained to hear, but the tune

was faint. I clenched my palms, as though I could capture it there, press it into my skin with my nail edge. The melody was fading. It wisped through the trees, teasing, laughing, skating at the sides of my consciousness.

“We need to get closer,” I said.

And so we followed the tune through the forest. We never seemed to get closer to it, or further away. But as we walked, I felt the music inside of me. It was in my ear and in my mind, picking apart my thoughts and putting them back together again in new orders. I began to sing along, raising my voice high. I didn’t need to hear the singing to follow it, not anymore – I knew exactly where the music lived.

We’d sung the verse twenty times through by the time we reached the church. This was the source of the singing, there was no doubt about it. It didn’t sound like one voice anymore: it seemed more like the church walls themselves held the song. They were heavy with it, perfused with it. Have you heard the church walls sing? You must. It will change you forever; you’ll never once doubt again.

So there we stood, soaking up the song beside the church door. What a joy it was to be haunted by such a melody. What a privilege to be so wonderstruck, so consumed, by glory. I would have stood there for hours, and that’s quite what I intended to do. But then

the music fizzled. A beat later and the song rose again like the tide, swelled high into my ears. And then it fell again. Over and over, the pattern repeated: the song played through, shaking the ground around me as it did. But each time, before it was quite done, it faded. I'd heard enough of this song, now, to know it near enough front to back. But the ending eluded me. It was beautiful torture, straining to hear those final notes. How did the song end, precisely? I willed the tune to rise in myself, willed my bones and my blood to tell me the answer. But this song didn't come from me. It wasn't mine and it never had been.

"Let's go into the church," Florian said. "Perhaps then we'll hear it."

Before we could, the door opened and a figure stepped out. Anya. She was dressed just the same as the day before, all in white.

"What are you both doing here?" she asked. She wasn't accusing us, exactly, as far as I could tell, but she wasn't friendly either.

"We're listening to the music," Florian said. "Where does it come from, do you know?"

For a moment, Anya just stared at him, eyes pale and wide. Then she tilted her head. "There is no music," she said.

It was a lie, and all of us knew it. But I hadn't a clue why she'd say it.

“I’ll see you later,” she said. “In the clearing, remember. Just follow the path to the middle of the island.”

She walked away again – or, rather, she floated. As she went, I couldn’t help thinking how like a swan she was.

We spent the afternoon back at the guesthouse, working our way through the song. By noon, we’d figured out a basic arrangement: Florian had all sorts of ideas about synths and drum fills. By four, Florian’s fingertips were bloody. We’d planned it all out, pulled the tune into the air with us. We couldn’t record it, of course, not without our phones. But, by six, even Florian’s guitar must have remembered the song by heart.

The only thing we couldn’t agree on was the lyrics. And the ending – neither of us, however we tried it, could make the song end properly.

“Perhaps we need something to inspire us,” I said. I began flicking through the records again: from Arcade Fire to the Beatles to Bob Dylan to Fiona Apple. When my finger landed again on G for *Grieve*, I paused. There was something quite impossible, here on the shelf.

Grayson Grieve’s second record wasn’t in a nice sleeve, and it didn’t have a proper album cover. All

that was written on the front was: GRAYSON GRIEVE – SWANSONG.

I knew, even before I slipped the vinyl onto the player, what I was about to hear.

But that didn't make me tremble any less to be surrounded, once more, by that opening refrain.

Swansong was, undoubtedly, Grayson Grieve's best song. But it wasn't his song, of course. It was the song of the island: the song of the trees and of the church and of the village square. It belonged to the land and the swans. The lyrics he sang were perfect – you know them, of course. Once I'd heard them, I knew they could never have been anything else. It felt, all at once, as though I'd always known them by heart. And the ending was everything it should have been.

When it was over, we sat, just for a moment, in reverent silence.

Then Florian took the disc from the player, slipped it back into its sleeve, and slid it into the pocket of our overnight bag.

"I don't understand all this," he said. "It doesn't make sense to me. But that song's going to make us rich."

Some might call that a fanciful thought, but you and I know he was right. We've heard the song: we know it's irresistible. A song like that has power to

unite, divide, control. If we'd released *Swansong*, we'd have been – well. No use dwelling on it.

“We'd better get ready for this wedding,” Florian said. “Come on – put on something nice.”

We hadn't practiced any of our songs, but we didn't need to. We knew them back to front, inside out. So we put on our wedding clothes and set off for the forest, heading in the direction where the middle of the island must have been. And then there it was. The clearing was full of people: the islanders we'd seen earlier, Anya standing alone, Grayson Grieve smouldering in a corner, Old Bill plucking at some stringed instrument I didn't recognise. As we approached, all of them watched us, but no one moved.

It was the strangest wedding I'd ever seen, that was for sure. We set up – it didn't take long, considering that all we had was a single guitar – and then we faced our audience.

“Are you ready to party?” I called out. I wasn't used to doing this without a microphone, and my voice shook. It would have been fine if they'd whooped or cheered, if they'd stamped their feet in encouragement. But they remained silent. It was almost eerie: the sort of silence that makes you wonder if anyone's truly breathing. But then Florian began to play, and I focused on the music once more.

We started with some classics: ABBA, Oasis, Taylor Swift. But the islanders remained just as they were. No one sang along or danced, no one talked over us, no one heckled. They all just stood there, watching in silence.

It was as though they were waiting for something.

I'd say I didn't know what they were waiting for, but that would be a lie. Because, the truth is, I was waiting for it too. As the sky faded to gold, I closed my eyes. My voice was hollow, that night, and the songs were hollow too. Florian strummed out thin, repetitive chords, a cheap imitation of music. I could feel it in the trees and under my feet and on my tongue: the song rising again. Who would try to stop a thing like that?

And so I sang. Grayson Grieve's words poured from my lips, and the song sent tremors to the sky itself. I wasn't singing alone. Right there, in the middle of the clearing, a hundred voices joined me: Florian and Grayson and Anya and all the other figures gathered on the grass. And there were other voices, too – more than I could count. That night, the island itself joined the chorus.

I realised, as we sang, that nothing in this world was as I had seen it. The song wasn't mine – I was the song's. I belonged to it, and Grayson belonged to it, and every soul on this island belonged to it too. We

were bound to these notes, this chord progression, this rhythm rising from the earth and the ocean. It was foolish to even think of taking the swansong for myself. Grayson had tried, and Florian had tried, and everyone on this whole island had, I realised, tried. I'd always thought that I was hunting the song, but I had it all wrong.

The song was calling me home.

Anya spoke to us, after. She told us the truth – the same truth I'm telling you now.

"The swansong cannot leave the island," she said. "It's impossible, once you've heard it, to leave. You can't go back. You can't bring the music to other shores. It must remain here. It's safe with us."

She was right, and I knew it almost before she spoke. The song needed to be guarded, protected. This was my vocation: I would uphold the swansong, abandon myself and become a vessel for the melody.

That's why we're all here, of course. We're an island of lost bards and songstresses, tortured singers and muses and minstrels. The call of the swansong lured us here, stirred our blood like choppy seas. Not one of us was happy – not one of us could rest until that hunger was satisfied.

And now we can.

I wouldn't want to leave it, even if I could. When

you spend enough time with the swansong, it changes the way you think. It slips into your thoughts, rewires the pathways around your heart, consumes your soul. Everyone here, everyone who lives in the music, thinks the same way. It's a peaceful life we share, a life of togetherness. We want for nothing, because the swansong nourishes us entirely.

I'm scaring you, I know, and that's only natural. It's all so new for you. But you must know the truth and the truth is, sister, that there never was an Isle of Swans. Not on any human map, anyway. All of us here, we followed the music off the edge of the earth. We were like sailors of old, haunted by siren song, paddling forth to our sweet demise. You have to understand that: we're dead, already. Every one of us here is dead. Our cars are parked at the mainland – perhaps you saw mine, when you arrived – and the police will look for clues all around them. But they won't see the Isle of Swans.

There's no need to fret, though. No, don't you cry: you've made it, sister. Remember the hunger that possessed you, that gnawing hole in your heart? It's gone, now. Your striving is over. Isn't it peaceful, knowing there's nothing else to hunt down? We needn't strain anymore.

Listen, listen now: that's the swansong. You can hear it always, now you've joined us, and it will grow

louder still once your heart's stopped beating. No more will it keep you up at night. No – at night, you will become part of the chorus. Rise with the swans, sister, spread your wings into eternity. Give in to the swansong: let it fill you, breathe you, become you. You've come home. You've made it to paradise.

Zoe Shakes is a writer, runner, baker, and candle-stick-maker (yes, really) based in Norwich, England. For updates on her writing, follow her on Instagram @zoe_shakes.

Fluid Fortune

K. Malady

All humans are supposed to have magic.

I don't mean that in a "love and friendship is magical" kind of way – I mean real, tangible magic. Power.

It makes sense, seeing as we live in a world where vampires drink blood, werewolves howl at the moon, and our benevolent overlords are immortal fae. No offense.

Now, you may know, for humans, magic is a 'use it or lose it' kind of deal. If you don't train it, if you don't bind yourself to a coven and learn the craft, it withers. Dies. Most folks waste theirs before they're even old enough to understand what they had.

But me?

I never had magic to begin with. Not a spark, not a whisper, not even a flicker of something useful.

What I do have is luck.

And luck, my friend, is a lot more fun.

See, the thing about drunk folks is they don't know when to quit. That's what makes them perfect.

You get a man with just enough coin in his pocket and just enough ale in his blood, and suddenly, he's convinced luck is whispering sweet nothings in his ear. And that's when I step in – flashing a grin, flipping a coin, making them believe the night's got one more good hand left for them.

They never see the end coming.

Me? I always do.

I'm Alex Greaves – traveling bard, professional charmer, and part-time connoisseur of bargains. I move from town to town, spinning songs and stacking odds in my favor. Most people think being a bard's about the music, the artistry, the grand sweeping ballads that get sung in smoky taverns long after you're gone.

But I play for coin, not legacy. And if a few rounds of cards or dice can pad my pockets between gigs, well – that's just part of the performance, isn't it?

Don't mistake me for some half-rate swindler with a stolen lute, now. I can play. I got a voice that could make a duchess sigh and a dockhand weep. The kind that rolls over a crowd like honeyed whiskey, settling in slowly, warming them up from the inside.

And I can spin a ballad so soft and sweet you'd swear the stars dimmed just to listen. Or I can belt a drinking song loud enough to shake the rafters, get an entire tavern stomping their boots and slamming their

mugs. And if the mood calls for it, I've got stories – old legends, whispered secrets, songs passed down from bard to bard, carrying history in every note.

That's how I earn my keep.

The hustling? That's just the gravy.

See, it's easy to gamble when people already like you. When they're drunk on a good song, their wallets open just as easy as their hearts. And me?

I know exactly how to keep them listening.

Take last week. There's a greasy little joint down in Corius where the ale is strong, the dice are fast, and the patrons are exceptionally bad at math. Some farmer's son – probably barely off his family's land – figured he had what it took to out roll me in a game of bones.

A little flick of the wrist, a little well-placed confidence, and suddenly the kid's staring at snake eyes while I'm pocketing his last few silvers. He looked at me like I'd just walked off with his inheritance.

Maybe I had. Maybe he'd tell his old man he lost it in a storm or got robbed by werewolves. Either way, not my problem.

And that's just one game.

In Boulem, I convinced a whole crowd of dockworkers that I could flip a coin and land it on its edge. Two-to-one odds. Nobody thought I'd pull it off

– until I did.

And in Fuil? Let's just say a certain lord's cousin should never play cards with strangers.

Luck's a funny thing. Some people got it. Some people think they do. And some people know exactly how to fake it.

But I got it for real. And for a long time, I thought that was enough.

But here's the thing they don't tell you about always winning – you end up playing alone. Oh, people still buy you drinks, still laugh at your jokes, still throw their coin down like this time, surely, they'll come out on top. But when the night's over? When the dice are cold and the last song's been sung? They go home. And I move on to the next town, the next hand, the next bet.

Because what else is there?

And so a person can only hustle drunk farmers and overfed merchants for so long before it gets dull. There's no thrill in knowing how the story ends before the dice even roll.

I needed something bigger. Riskier. Something that felt like stepping into a game where, just once, I might not already know the outcome.

So I decided to make my way to the realm of the fae. After all, it wasn't like I had a family waiting for me back home.

And that's where this story really begins.

So there I was, lounging in an enchanted boat, strumming my lute as I glided across the lake, bound for Heroit Island – the doorstep to the fae world. The thing about these boats is that they don't need a crew. No oars, no sails, no one pushing them along. You step in, and it takes you to the Island like it's got a mind of its own. Convenient, sure, but eerie if you think about it too long.

I had bigger things to worry about than whether the boat had opinions. Big business waited for me in the fae world, the kind of deal that could change a person's fate for good, and I planned to walk into it with a song on my lips and my pockets full.

But then something sang back.

At first, I figured it was just the wind playing tricks on me. The lake's got a way of twisting sounds at night, making you hear things not there – whispers in the ripples, laughter in the foam. But this?

This was a voice.

A woman's voice, light as sea spray, perfectly matched. It slid in beside my tune like it belonged there, like it had been waiting for me to start so it could join in.

I stopped playing.

The voice kept going.

And then, like a candle snuffed out, silence.

Now, I'm not exactly known for my cautious nature, but even I know what lives in deep waters. There's only one kind of creature that sings back.

Still, I tapped my lute, thinking.

Most folks – smart folks – would ignore it. Let the boat do its job and sail on to Heroit without a second glance. But me?

I like a gamble.

So I leaned over the side and peered into the lake's inky blackness.

"Nice voice," I said.

The water didn't answer. Didn't move, didn't ripple, didn't so much as whisper. Just a dark, glassy stillness stretching out in all directions. But I wasn't fool enough to think I was alone.

So I played again. Not the same tune – something different. Something a little sharp at the edges, something that didn't drift easy like a lullaby but demanded attention.

And just like that, the lake sang back.

This time, the voice was closer.

Low. Sweet. The kind of tone that could talk a person into just about anything.

"You shouldn't stop playing," the voice said.

I grinned, still strumming. "Oh, I didn't plan to, sweetheart."

A laugh. Soft, knowing. “You’re not afraid?”

“Afraid of what?” I asked. “A duet?”

Something moved beneath the surface. Not just one thing – many.

The boat rocked slightly, but it didn’t slow on its path. The magic that guided it didn’t care about distractions.

The problem was, I was feeling distracted.

Because a shape rose from the deep.

She was beautiful, in the way all dangerous things are. Dark, slicked-back hair flecked with seashells, skin like a pearl, lips curved in a way that promised trouble. And she looked up at me with eyes too black, too deep, like she was made of the night itself.

A siren. Not to be confused with a mermaid. A mermaid would’ve tipped the boat, called in a storm, or dragged me under outright. Maybe not in that order.

Sirens played a longer game.

And I should’ve ignored her, let my fingers dance over the strings and let the boat drift on like none of this was happening.

But instead: “Got a name?” I asked, plucking a few lighthearted notes, keeping it casual. Sirens aren’t a threat to me. Most sirens lure with promises – love, dreams, whispers of everything they’ve ever wanted. But the catch? They only want the magical.

And, as previously mentioned, I wasn't.

She tilted her head. "Riona."

I smiled. "Pretty. Fitting."

Riona trailed a finger along the side of the boat, watching me like a cat watches a bird that hasn't flown away yet. "What brings you to my waters?"

"A bet," I told her. After all, one was coming. I was sure of it.

Riona lifted herself further out of the water, slow and fluid, resting her elbows against the edge of my boat. I knew better than to stare too long. Sirens were made to be looked at. Their beauty wasn't magic, not the way enchantments were, but it worked similarly. Except theirs was a suggestion more than a command, a hook that waited for you to take it yourself.

And her smile? That was bait.

"Why don't you come a little closer?" Her voice was warm, smooth as a lullaby. There was no command in it – no thrall, no force. But my fingers twitched on the strings, and that was how it started.

I knew sirens could sing people straight into the sea, but this wasn't a song. This was a conversation. A whisper curling around my thoughts, suggesting, coaxing, guiding.

Sirens don't drag you into the water. They make you want to go. And by the time you realize, it's too late.

I tilted my head. “I’m comfortable where I am, sweetheart.”

Riona’s lips curved. “You sure?”

Her fingers skimmed the water, sending out ripples, and for a moment – I felt it.

The pull.

Not sharp. Not sudden. Just... a gentle shift, a quiet unraveling, like a current slipping beneath the surface of my thoughts. Like something was nudging me forward, just a little, just enough to make me wonder – why not?

Why not lean in? Why not see what happens?

See, sirens don’t need spells or potions. They just need a reason for you to want them.

And that was the real gamble.

Because I could feel the invitation curling around my ribs, and I knew – if I leaned in, just a little, I’d want to go.

Instead, I flicked my coin into the air, let it spin once, twice, and caught it between my fingers. And just like that, the pull wavered.

Riona’s dark eyes flicked to the coin, and her head tilted ever so slightly – not quite confusion, not quite frustration. She was recalculating.

I smiled. “See, sweetheart, you made one minor mistake.”

“Oh?” She propped her chin on her hand, watching

me like I was the most fascinating thing in the world. “And what mistake is that?”

I tapped the edge of the boat, keeping my voice light. “You think you’ve found yourself a mage.”

For the first time, Riona’s expression shifted. A siren could pick out magic like a wolf scents blood. It was what drew them in, what kept them entertained.

And I had none of it.

The lake was quiet for a beat, the other sirens still lurking beneath the surface, waiting to see how this played out.

Then – she laughed. A real, warm laugh, like I’d just done something unexpected. And the pull vanished.

“Oh,” she purred, voice dripping with amusement. “Now that is interesting.”

She studied me for a moment, fingers tapping against the rim of the boat, her nails making a light, rhythmic click-click-click on the wood. I got the feeling she was taking her time, sizing me up like a card shark eyeing the deck before making her play. Then, as easy as anything, she smiled, lips curling in a way that had me momentarily reconsidering my stance on swimming.

“You say you’re not a mage. And yet... here you are, untouched, when lesser mages would tumble overboard at the bat of my eyes.” Her voice stayed

light, conversational. “So, humor me. What is it that keeps you afloat?”

I spun the coin between my fingers, let the moonlight catch on its surface, let her watch it. “Luck.”

Her smile widened, slow and knowing. “Then let’s test it. A game.”

I raised an eyebrow, tilting my head just enough to show interest, but not enough to seem too eager. “A game?”

“A chance to prove yourself, bard.”

That got a chuckle out of me, low and easy. “Prove myself how?”

Riona’s dark eyes gleamed, her expression unreadable but still interested, like maybe she’d stumbled across something worth keeping around. “By winning.”

“Sweetheart, hate to break it to you, but I’m still sitting in this boat, meaning I already won.”

“Then there’s no risk.” There was a teasing lilt in her voice, but I caught the edge beneath it, that razor-sharp curiosity that said she was thinking things over. “Why not try your luck against mine?”

I let my fingers wander along the strings of my lute, picking out a lazy little melody that didn’t mean anything, considering. “How do you propose we do that?”

She reached out, trailing her fingers along the lip of the boat again, slow and deliberate, like she had all the time in the world. “A bet. Simple rules.”

I kept my face unreadable, but my ears were open. “What do I get if I win?”

Her lips curled, her gaze holding mine. “You get a prize.”

I tapped my fingers against the wood. “And if I lose?”

Riona’s teeth flashed, a grin that let a person know exactly what they were getting themselves into. She lifted a hand, gesturing not just to herself but to the water, to the shapes lingering just beneath the surface. “You swim.”

The water lapped at the boat, just a little, like it was listening. The anticipation was thick in the air, pressing against my skin like a hand at my back urging me forward. She was enjoying this, and I—

I should’ve said no. The fae were waiting, the portal sitting pretty on Heroit, and I had plans – plans that didn’t involve seeing if sirens kept their promises.

But then again, what kind of person would I be if I passed up a bet? Especially with my luck.

I strummed a quick, playful chord, gave her my best grin, and met her gaze. “All right. Name your terms.”

“I want a song,” she said, voice as smooth as still

water. “One that I’ve never heard. One that moves me.”

“That all?” I plucked at the strings, drawing out a few idle notes, pretending the decision was already made. But she was watching me, waiting, and something about the way she smiled – like she already knew how this would go – made me pause, just for a breath. Just long enough to wonder who was playing who. But... I can’t say no to a bet.

“Sweetheart, I do that for a living,” I finished.

She doesn’t blink. “Then it should be easy.”

Now, a siren’s heard it all before. Even ones living in this fates-forsaken lake. Every sailor’s dying lament, every whispered promise meant to outlive a storm. They know every song about heartbreak, about longing, about the sea swallowing what it loves and never giving it back.

So I didn’t give her a tragedy. I didn’t give her something grand or mournful.

I gave her something new.

The first few notes came easy, rolling off my fingers like dice onto a table, slow and deliberate. I let the melody build itself, steady as the tide pulling toward the shore, patient as a gambler waiting for the right hand. I sang about the sound of a voice rising from dark waters, carrying a melody no one was

meant to hear.

More sirens peeked through the water, hair like shimmering seashells under the moonlight, all watching me play.

And so I sang about moonlight catching on pearl-pale skin, how it turned water into silver, how it hid and revealed in equal measure.

And then, like a card flicked between nimble fingers, I let the words shift, teasing at the edges of something softer, something quieter – something that didn't need to be a challenge.

“The sea may call you night and day, but does it call you home?”

Riona's lips twitched, just barely, like she wasn't expecting that.

Good.

“The tide may rise, the tide may fall, yet still you stand alone.”

I saw it then, the shift in her eyes. The look a player has when they realize the game wasn't what they thought it was.

And then I sang about a siren who watches from the water, alone and never chosen. A story for her and, if I'm honest, one that hit home for me, too. The gift of someone remaining, someone not playing a game, but playing for keeps.

The music settled like mist over the lake, holding

onto the space between us. It should have been over. I should have strummed the last note and let it drift away, let the night swallow it up like every other song sung to the water. But something in my chest told me the song wasn't done yet.

My luck's always guided me, always nudged me toward the right card, the right move. But now?

The melody hung there, waiting for an ending I didn't have.

So I bet on her.

I let the music stretch, just long enough for the moment to breathe, to end abruptly, unfinished and waiting for completion. Then – I stopped playing.

For a long moment, there was nothing.

No laughter. No clever words. Just the soft sound of the water lapping against the boat, a faint breeze stirring the lake's surface. My hands rested still against the strings, waiting. The sirens floated, watching us, silent spectators to this wager.

And then – Riona sang the final lines.

It was quiet, unguarded. Not something stolen from a drowning man, not a song of seduction meant to drag someone under.

It was hers, pulled from within, a lamentation of what was missing.

The moment she heard herself, I saw it – that flicker of realization, the way her fingers curled just

slightly against the boat's rim, like she hadn't meant to let that happen.

She stared at me, her lips parted just enough that I knew she wanted to speak.

But she didn't.

And we both knew: I'd won.

The sirens didn't linger. One by one, they slipped beneath the surface, swallowed by the water as easily as they had risen from it. No grand farewell, no final parting words, just the soft ripple of the lake settling in their absence, like they had never been there at all.

And Riona? She was the last to go, her gaze lingering on me for just a moment longer than the others. A beat, a pause, a thought left unspoken before she too disappeared into the dark.

I exhaled, stretching my fingers idly over the strings of my lute, not playing so much as feeling the weight of the night in my hands.

I had won, hadn't I? She had set the terms, and I had met them. The bargain was settled, and yet something about it didn't seem like a victory.

Maybe because I was left at the end, without my prize. Maybe because I thought the prize might be something I'd always missed. Maybe because, for a fleeting second, I thought she might say something after.

Maybe because I thought I might want to hear it.

But the game was over. And so, like always, I moved on.

The boat carried me forward, gliding through the lake's shining expanse, steady as ever. Heroit Island loomed ahead, a silhouette against the mist, its presence pressing against the world like something waiting to wake.

My boots hit the damp earth with a solid thud, and I took a moment to steady myself, rolling my shoulders before setting my sights on the cave ahead. I could feel it before I even stepped inside – the portal. Magic pooled thick in the air, the space around it bending in ways my mind couldn't quite hold onto. The cave swallowed me whole as I stepped forward, the light from the lake vanishing behind me. The air shifted, thickened, tightened, and then—

I was somewhere else.

Now, you may know this already, but magic has a way of twisting time between worlds, and stepping through the portal was like flipping a coin that had already landed on the other side. Night in the Aboveground meant daylight in Avalaruin. And not just daylight – something sharper, deeper, more alive than anything the Aboveground had to offer.

I blinked hard against the sun, stepping out of the cavern and into the open air. The sky overhead was a

shade of blue so rich it felt like a painting, a color that shouldn't exist in nature. The air smelled different too, thick with something wild and untamed, the scent of magic woven into every breath. The land stretched before me in rolling hills and sharp cliffs, golden light casting long shadows over the landscape.

And there, waiting for me like a challenge laid out in plain sight, was the bridge. It stretched impossibly far across the pitch-black lake, woven from roots and old magic, swaying slightly even though the air was still. There were no boats here, no easy way across. You know it: if you want to leave the Island, this is the only path forward.

I took a step forward, but before my boot could even press into the first twisted length of the bridge, something called out.

“Going somewhere, bard?”

The voice was smooth, slipping through the air like a trick played with a loaded deck. I turned, my gaze shifting toward the lake, my steps slow. The water here wasn't just dark – it was black, the kind of black that didn't reflect the sky above, didn't shimmer with light, just stretched endlessly, swallowing everything that came near.

And then, breaking through that perfect stillness, she rose.

Riona floated in the water as though she had

always been there, as though this world belonged to her just as easily as the last. Her dark hair shining under the sunlight, her arms draped over the water's surface, she studied me with that same amused tilt to her lips, something lazy, unreadable in her expression.

I let out a slow breath, smirking despite myself. "I thought I left you behind, sweetheart."

She tipped her head just slightly, studying me like she was considering a hand that had just been dealt, weighing the odds, seeing where the game would take her next. Then, in a voice that was pure mischief, she asked, "Tell me, bard – have you given any thought to a duet?"

The lake lapped at the shore, the water darker than ink, waiting, watching. I considered that for a moment, rolling my coin between my fingers.

And I placed another bet.

I lean against the wooden counter, flicking my coin in the air. "So that's why I need the giant tub. Sirens don't do all too well outside the water. And me without magic to speak of, I can't exactly give her legs."

The fae storekeeper who has been diligently listening to my tale blinks at me, expression caught somewhere between confusion and vague irritation. He glances down at the ledger in front of him, then

back at me, then at the very large brass tub currently sitting behind the counter, waiting to be transported. “I just wanted to know where you wanted the tub,” he repeats. “Like where I’m to take it. Not why you wanted it.”

I straighten, flashing my best smile, the kind that usually convinces merchants to offer me an extra drink on the house. “Well, then. To the lake, my good man.”

The storekeeper exhales heavily, rubbing a hand over his face like he’s already regretting doing business with me. “I’m not delivering something that far,” he says. “So you’d best come up with something else.”

I turn the coin over in my palm, letting it glint in the light. Luck, I’ve found, has a way of working itself out when you trust it enough.

“Well,” I say, grinning. “Let’s wager on it, shall we?”

K., also known as Kay, has roots in the Midwest, splitting her time between Oklahoma and Arkansas. Kay is known in her family as someone who never sits still, as she is happiest when she is busy (particularly when she is writing multiple romantic fantasy stories). Kay works full-time as an attorney and writes on her off hours. When she’s not spending time with her

family or writing, she indulges in way too many hobbies. If you enjoyed this story, check out her novel, [Threaded Secrets](#).

Courtship and Kulning

Arden Powell

“Pippin Pettiroso,” the chairman read.

Pip’s heart drummed in anticipation. The throng of graduating students stood gathered in the stone courtyard, attention fixed on the Chair of the Bardic Department as he read their pre-graduate placements. The season’s last snow was melting underfoot, and the students’ breath fanned in damp blooms with every excited exhalation. The weather was still objectively chilly, but mild enough in comparison to winter’s grasp that many had shed their coats and scarves as if it felt far warmer than it really was. They were all hoping for a respectable appointment to finish out their training: a royal court, an esteemed theatre, or a lavish private club. Even the local entertainment district boasted some coveted positions any student would be thrilled to land.

“To the hamlet of Anghelm.”

Pip's heart stuttered.

Where the hell was Anghelm?

"If you wanted a better placement, you shouldn't have slept with his wife," his friend said cheerfully. He had been granted an assignment in the Lodestone Theatre, the preferred venue of the extended royal family and visiting aristocracy. Pip would have killed a man to secure such a placement. Luckily for the other students, no violence, threats, or bribery could sway the chair's decision.

"I didn't," Pip seethed. "It's not my fault her eyes wander. If he wants her to stay close, he should give her a better reason not to stray. I'm guilty of nothing but a pretty face."

He hadn't slept with the chair's wife. He had, however, slept with his son, but he didn't think that morsel of gossip had reached the old man's ears.

Despite Pip's frustration, the spring solstice found him at the train station buying a one-way ticket to the hamlet of Anghelm, which, it turned out, lay far to the north, where green hills gave way to blue mountains. He spent the sixteen-hour train ride sulking, then napping, before giving up and admiring the scenery. He was excellent at pitching fits and acting stroppy, but he quickly tired of such tantrums without an appreciative audience. His default state was a little needy, a little dramatic, but overall good-natured, with

his spirits easily lifted by compliments and positive attention. Or, in more desperate times, any attention at all.

Being an artist, and a fairly shallow one, at that, he found it difficult to keep a bad temper in the face of abject beauty, and the landscape rolling by out the train window was indisputably beautiful. The trees were only just beginning to consider turning green, but the earliest among them stood regaled in blooms of purple, pink, and white, dotting the countryside along the winding stone walls separating fields and properties. When Pip made his return trip in the fall, the landscape would be painted fiery gold.

But first, he had to survive the summer.

He was predisposed to dislike the countryside. He had been born and raised in the city and had lived there all his life, not only accustomed to its smells and crowdedness and fast-paced bustle, but also to its amenities. When he had previously been forced to visit the countryside, he'd hated everything about it, from the quiet to the solitude to how bloody far away everything was from everything else, and how it was absolutely impossible to indulge any passing whim or craving without having to travel so far out of his way that it was generally easier to just wait for the urge to pass. Pip wasn't looking forward to an entire summer

of inconvenience and self-denial.

But he couldn't graduate without completing his assignment, vindictive as it was, much less graduate top of his class. So, as the train rolled in to Anghelm, Pip dragged his overstuffed suitcase and myriad instrument cases to the platform with the grim, hardheaded determination to get through it by whatever means necessary. He wasn't here to enjoy himself. He didn't have to like anything about it. He just had to complete his assignment, and do it so well that no one could possibly find a single reason to mark him poorly.

When he arrived in town – it was too small to be called a town, really, but there he was; he could see from one end of Anghelm's singular street all the way to the other – he was directed to a farm in the north end. And yes, he would have to walk the distance, but he needn't worry about missing the place, as it could be recognized by the two tall cypress trees on either side of the drive.

Resentfully, Pip and his luggage headed north. The road was hard-packed red dirt, and the houses were square structures of white stone with red-tiled roofs and garden plots that were just beginning to wake up. It was a pretty place, but not pretty enough to make him forget the inconveniences he was sure to face within it, or the indignity of being sent into the middle

of nowhere to prove himself worthy of graduation as if he had only been passing his courses by the skin of his teeth rather than being one of the most accomplished students of his year. He should have been sent to play at the National Theatre. He should be entertaining the royal court. Instead, he had been sent to some insignificant little backwater hamlet as an indentured servant to a family of nobody farmers to sing to their cows.

He glowered at the house's distinctive cypresses as he turned onto the long drive. In the front garden was a young woman surrounded by colourful chickens – a girl, really, ankle-deep in snowdrops and crocuses – who straightened to watch his approach. She looked equal parts suspicious and unimpressed. Based on her expression of annoyed hostility, he deemed her to be vaguely adolescent.

“Hello,” Pip called, none too enthusiastically from where he halted at the garden's edge. “My name is Pippin Pettiroso, from Sainseton University. Are your parents expecting me?” He desperately hoped they were not, and that something had been mixed up between his receiving the assignment and arriving on location.

No such luck.

Coming over, she held out one hand for his papers. When she had determined to her satisfaction that Pip

was who he said he was, she introduced herself as Mansikka Karjadottir. She had big brown eyes with long lashes, light brown hair in a ribbon-bound plait, and boots suited for springtime mud under the heavy, patterned skirts of her dress.

“You’re replacing me in the fields this summer,” she told him. “Drop your bags on the step, and I’ll show you around.” If he were a prince in lavish finery turned up at her gate, she couldn’t have looked more misgiving.

Affronted, Pip smoothed one hand down the front of his velvet doublet, flicking away the dust of his travels. He wasn’t exactly a metropolitan dandy, if only because he lacked the coin for such fashion, but compared to the peasants he’d met on the train, it was possible his outfit cost more than Anghelm was worth, to say nothing of the additional clothes in his case. That wasn’t his fault. Apart from his instruments, his clothes were the nicest things he owned. If he didn’t graduate, his family would disown him, and then they would be the nicest things he would *ever* own.

“Unless you need to refresh yourself first,” she continued, looking doubtful that he and his nice clothes were at all suited to her family’s stead. Which they weren’t, but he damn well wasn’t going to admit defeat now, having come all this way.

The tour of the house took less than five minutes; presumably touring the acreage would take somewhat longer.

“You’ll have my room once I leave,” Mansikka said, gesturing to a space even smaller than Pip’s side of his dorm room. “But you’ll be in the barn until then.”

“The *barn*! I’m to sleep with the livestock?”

“The university said you wouldn’t mind.”

“The university,” Pip said with scathing heat, “is full of vindictive, nasty old men determined to take their frustrations out on anyone younger, prettier, and more talented than they are.”

“So you don’t want to sleep in the barn.”

He didn’t want to sleep in the barn, just like he hadn’t wanted to come to Anghelm at all, and didn’t want to meet his graduating requirements by singing to a bunch of silly cows in a field while his peers went to study in far more distinguished and reputable locations almost certain to result in paid job offers. In places with actual beds.

But he did sleep in the barn, because there was nowhere else for him to go, and he couldn’t very well refuse his placement; that was tantamount to dropping out of university and abandoning his degree with a single credit left to earn. A disgrace and an embarrassment.

The barn had a cot, at least, though it was a far cry from even the shabbiest tavern in which he'd ever had the misfortune of bedding down. Mansikka's parents were appropriately apologetic about it, but the nearest inn was too far for him to reach the field at the unfairly early hour expected of him, and it was yet too chilly overnight to sleep outdoors. So, he would have to swallow his pride and suffer.

"Where are you going, anyway, that's so important you have to leave your parents in such a lurch that they need a student to fill in for you?" Pip asked Mansikka the morning after his arrival, following her along the meandering dirt path through the vegetable gardens to the pastures beyond. Dawn painted the scene buttercup yellow, and finches and thrushes sang from every tree and bush, overly enthusiastic for such an hour when Pip should have still been in bed.

"I'm making my pilgrimage to Whitestone this summer," she replied, "so my parents arranged to have someone brought in for the season rather than try to manage the extra work themselves."

"I'm just hired help?" he asked indignantly. "You could have plucked any half-wit from the village to sing to your cows. You didn't need a professionally trained bard. A university graduate, no less."

"The village half-wit is busy shepherding his parents' flock in the mountains," she replied flatly,

shooting him an unimpressed look from over her shoulder. "And the only other locals with a knack for kulning have their own herds to manage. If you're so offended, you should have refused the offer."

"I couldn't," he grumbled. "It was the only offer I got."

She eyed him with no small degree of scepticism. "Well, then."

The Whitestone pilgrimage put her at a fresh fifteen: still baby-faced, but old enough to go backpacking across the continent with a troop of others her age to visit the holy standing stones. Pip had never been, so he couldn't say whether it was worth the effort, and he didn't care.

Mansikka came to a stop at the edge of a stone wall, waist-high, before turning to look back at Pip. Obediently, he stopped in turn, hands shoved in his pockets.

"Go on, then," he said. "Show me what's so special about your cow-singing that your parents had to drag me all the way out here."

"You have a terrible attitude," she informed him. "Animals respond to things like that, you know. Haven't you ever worked with livestock before?"

Pip bit his tongue and reminded himself it was that flabby, beady-eyed chairman of the music department who deserved his ire, not his host family. Or their

cows. He couldn't bring himself to apologize, but he would try to keep a more civil tongue in his head.

"Call your cows," he said, in a tone approaching the vicinity of contrition. "I admit, I really am curious to see what all the fuss is about."

Satisfied, Mansikka turned to face the field beyond the wall. When she opened her mouth, the sound that came out of her was so hauntingly beautiful that Pip's knees wavered and he had to sit down, his arse hitting the nearest tuft of spring grass. Her voice was a keening, piercing thing that rose and fell in unearthly melody, like the cry of some ancient seabird whose call rose and fell with the shape of the mountains, clear and pure enough to pierce the veil of heaven itself. The nearest Pip had ever heard were the operetta sopranos trained to sing in the old language. But those operas were so rigid, whereas Mansikka sounded fey and ghostly, singing something so lovely it couldn't possibly be meant for human ears. Tears sprang to his eyes, unbidden, and his heart soared with her voice.

When she was done, the last note lingered, hanging in the air before finally fading on the breeze. She turned to him expectantly.

"Like that," she said. "Every morning. For milking, and to refresh their talismans."

He pulled himself together, getting unsteadily to

his feet. "Talismans for what?"

"Protection," she replied, like that wasn't ominous. "Our neighbours have already lost lambs this season, and folks in the next town have lost some of their cows. We're not taking any chances."

"Lost how?"

"We don't know. One of the cattle was found dragged up a tree. What was left of it, anyway. None of the lambs were ever found at all."

"Am I in danger of being spirited away by some leopard or mountain lion?" Pip demanded, crossing his arms. "You haven't got dragons in these hills, have you?"

Mansikka rolled her eyes. "You'll be fine, so long as you keep the talismans fresh. They'll work as well on you as on the cattle."

"I really didn't sign up for any of this," Pip protested. "Did the university know your placement was expected to fend off wild beasts in addition to their bardic duties?"

"Do you want to go back?" Mansikka asked evenly.

Pip glowered. He didn't want to go back if it meant failure. He just very much wanted to be elsewhere.

"Well then." She dipped her head in a short nod. "Sing. Show me whether you can do it like I did."

“And if I do it wrong, they’ll ignore me?”

“They’re cows. They’re not testing you. As long as you get the pitch right so they can hear you over the hills, and as long as they recognize their names and the tune, they’ll come. Anyway,” she added, “they’re on their way already. You’re singing for me right now, not them.”

Pip took a swig of tea from the flask on his belt. He shoved aside all thoughts of deadly predators and of cattle, focussing entirely on the job he’d been sent to do, no matter how reluctantly.

“Can I hear it again?” he requested.

He watched her closely, the shape of her mouth and the set of her shoulders, as the song keened out of her. Then he shut his eyes, letting it fold over him, and hummed along before testing a few notes of his own. The long, high notes required his voice to come not from his chest but his throat, creating a piercing, heady pitch. He was a natural tenor, not a soprano, but a soprano’s voice wasn’t required. While he couldn’t reach quite as high as the girl – he doubted he could have even if he were still a waifish fifteen-year-old himself – he didn’t strictly need to. When she finished for the second time, he didn’t open his eyes, though he could feel the expectant weight of her gaze on him all the same, and attempted to repeat the kulning in a perfect echo.

He knew he was a damn fine singer, so when he judged that he came close, that was the truth of it. It was a perfectly respectable first go of things, even if it wasn't *actually* perfect.

"Not bad," Mansikka allowed. "We have a week. By the time I set off, you'll be perfectly adequate." The rolling rumble of hooves trundled over the hill. "For now, I'll introduce you and show you the talismans."

When the cows appeared, Pip took a nervous step away from the wall. He had seen cows before, of course – they could scarcely be avoided – but never in any personal capacity. They were quite large, and very solid, and if it weren't for the wall between them, he worried he might find himself at the mercy of their trampling hooves.

Mansikka looked at him like he was being ridiculous. "They're perfectly docile. They're just curious about you."

"Even the bull?"

The bull was an enormous black animal with white speckles and great curving horns that probably each weighed as much as Pip.

"Yes, even Bergamot. Stop flinching and pay attention. If we lose any of our cows in your care, my parents will have your head. And probably mine, too, once I get back."

Hopping nimbly over the wall, Mansikka lit down amid the herd like she hadn't a care or concern for her own safety. "The mark is on the left side of the rump," she told him, fishing a soft piece of paper from her skirt pocket. "Put this over it, ink-side down, and hold it there for the count of three." She demonstrated. "There. That's the talisman refreshed for another day and night. Got it?"

"Simple enough," he agreed, edging closer. "It's not really a job for a bard, though, is it? Why can't your parents deal with the actual handling of the animals?"

"Ma will be up shortly for the milking, but kulning and doing the talismans saves her time. She and Da have a hundred other things to tend on the farm and at the market; there's no sense in them coming to sing and wait around for the herd. And they couldn't just hire an extra farmhand," she added, pre-empting his next protest, "because they can't afford the wages. They applied to the university program and got you. Now, get over here and show me you can do this. They're just cows."

Just cows, as if each beast wasn't a thousand-and-some pounds, heavy-boned and fit from wandering the hilly fields day and night. There were a dozen of them, not including the knobbly-kneed calves, largely in an array of red and black with speckled patterns of

white up their legs and along their throats and bellies, with fewer white and grey cattle freckled darker over their faces and along their backs and ribs. Bergamot the bull was the largest and most densely muscled, with the greatest horns, but many of the cows sported horns as well, in varying degrees of deadliness. The calves, at least, looked sweet, though Pip didn't trust them, either. They had the same heavy-lashed, liquid brown eyes as their mistress.

Following introductions, Pip had no choice but to clamber over the wall and convince Mansikka he could confidently refresh the cows' talismans, and not fail out of his placement and get sent back to Sainseton without earning his final credit.

Repeating that threat of failure, the waste of four years and the judgement of his peers, family, and every prospective employer he'd ever dared imagine, he got the job done. And he hated every minute of it. The cows were huge, and they smelled, and their noses were wet and slimy, and flies buzzed around them incessantly. Pip was made for urban life, preferably indoors, dressed in perfumed silks and brocade, with his shoes polished to a shine and his hair combed and curling. He wasn't an outdoorsman, he didn't like animals bigger than he was, or the smell of compost or manure, and the only calluses he sported were on his fingers, courtesy of musical

instruments worth more than his life. And yet, here he was, with no way out but through.

His week of training passed slower than he would have liked, likely because sleeping in the barn was hardly conducive to a healthy rest. But he proved himself competent, and by the time he had successfully called the cows home for three consecutive days, Mansikka deemed him a worthy successor, and assured her parents that their herd would be in good hands for the duration of her pilgrimage.

“You have one more thing to learn,” she told him on the last day, “in case of emergency. Since I know you worry about some wild animal coming out of the mountains to devour you. Should you ever feel you need the herd’s protection, my mother taught me this call, when I first began tending the cattle.” They were in the front garden with the chickens, far enough from the fields that her voice wouldn’t carry to the distant cows. “Listen closely.”

The kulning was similar to the call he had already learned, but Bergamot’s name was woven through it more frequently, and the cadence was more aggressive, almost like a battle cry.

“They’ll protect me?” he asked doubtfully.

“As if you were one of their own calves. They like you well enough, by now,” she added. “Pet them

when they want attention and speak to them kindly, and you'll stay on their good side. It has more benefits than you think."

Besides calling the cows every morning, there wasn't much else for Pip to do. He certainly wasn't going to volunteer for manual labour on the farm; everything else aside, it went against the placement's contract. Apart from the early morning when he called the cows, their arrival and his work on their talismans while his host-mother milked them, his days were entirely his own. For a lazier student, such a placement might have been ideal. The weather was pleasant and the scenery downright idyllic, if one enjoyed such bucolic settings compared to the dazzling extravagances of the metropolis.

But Pip was given to awful boredom if he didn't have enough to occupy his time. Determined to take advantage of his open schedule, he put himself to work writing and composing. He had brought his beloved lute, a silver flute, and his prized violin to Anghelm, and on clear-skied days, he took them with him to the field. His instruments didn't exactly make for scintillating conversationalists, and their music wasn't enough to shake the solitude, but they occupied his restless hands and roving mind such that he could occasionally forget his increasing longing for human companionship. He didn't mind being alone –

he needed to be, if he wanted to get his songs written – but he was accustomed to stepping out of his dorm room and being in arm's reach of whatever company he sought, whether that was a drinking partner, a creative collaborator, an academic rival, or a handsome face with whom to tumble into bed. Or, depending on his mood, some combination thereof.

He stayed in the field more often than not. His alternatives were the barn, which, no; the town, which was too small to host anything like a tavern or even a courtyard where he could play; or the house, which made him feel like he was getting underfoot any time before evening tea. His hosts were busy from dawn to dusk with their chickens, vegetable gardening, and milking of the cows, as well as taking their wares to their neighbour-village's market for sale and trade. Mealtimes, at least, he did help with, and with the cleaning up. It was far from the life he'd envisioned for himself, but he had suffered through dull coursework before, and been subjected to dry, crusty old lecturers far past their prime. Anghelm was simply one more trial standing between him and his graduation.

The days passed. The sun grew stronger, wildflowers bloomed, and the rain only fell at night. He found he could lure wild rabbits to his side by playing lullabies on his lute, but that the jays and

songbirds preferred woodwinds. One afternoon, while practising a different kulning call to sharpen his skills without distracting the cows, he attracted a herd of fallow deer, their auburn coats dappled with delicate white spots. He'd been so intent on his practice that he hadn't noticed them drawing close, necks stretched long as they crept closer, curious as to the interloper in their fields. They stared at each other, mutually startled, before the deer turned tail and darted away again. He noticed them often after that, lingering at the edges of the field or sheltering behind the trunk of the fat apple tree, listening to his kulning.

And then, one day, after waking from what had become his customary nap following afternoon tea, he found a man leaning on the other side of the wall, watching him. He had short, dark hair that ruffled up at all angles in the lilting breeze, and a great cloak of feathers and golden fur over his shoulders. His features were leonine: tanned skin, tawny eyes, a straight nose, and a curling mouth, and his posture was relaxed and confident. He didn't look necessarily unfriendly, and he wasn't obviously armed, so Pip allowed himself to appreciate the stranger's looks as he sat up, getting his bearings and the measure of the man.

"Hello," Pip said groggily, reaching for the flask of honeyed tea he kept on hand for his voice. "Can I help

you?”

“No need,” said the stranger in a pleasingly smooth tenor.

Pip waited. No additional information seemed forthcoming. “Well?” he prompted. “What are you doing? I know you haven’t got any business here,” he added. “No one has any business here. It’s a field. There’s nothing to do or anyone to meet.”

“You’re here,” the stranger pointed out, as if Pip himself was worth a trek into the foothills.

It was a flattering thought. Pip studied him through coyly lowered lashes.

“Yes, I’m here. To my great misfortune,” he agreed, then added hopefully, “Unless you’ve come from the university to beg forgiveness on the chair’s behalf and rescue me from such a forlorn fate?”

“No. I don’t know what any of that is.”

Pip slouched, disappointed even though he hadn’t believed it in the first place. “Very well. What do you want?”

“To see the face attached to such a voice.”

Pip sniffed, somewhat mollified, and stretched his back in what he’d been told was a teasingly attractive manner. “Sorry, I’m only accepting compliments by mail. On prayer days.”

“By next prayer day, I’ll be high in the mountains. They have few messengers up there.”

“Are you a pilgrim?”

“No. I have no destination. I follow the winds and roam where my hunger leads me.”

Pip scrunched up his nose at the seeming riddle. “A knight errant?” he guessed. “I suppose you could pass as one.”

“That depends. What’s your opinion of knights?”

“They’re loud,” Pip offered. “Boisterous, and boasting. Which isn’t necessarily a bad thing; they generally make for a good lay. But they’re given to coming over all lovestruck after a single night, keen to pledge undying loyalty and threatening all sorts of heartbreak and despair if you don’t let them fawn on you for eternity. So, I’ve sworn off them. I’ve had enough.”

“I’m not a knight.”

Pip made a show of letting his gaze linger. “Good.”

“I don’t much like knights either. Though, in my experience, they’re more likely to swing their swords around than their dicks.”

“Do you often find yourself caught at swordpoint by a knight?”

“Sometimes.”

“That must make you some manner of vagabond,” Pip surmised. “A thief? A bandit?”

“No, neither.”

“That’s a shame. Bandits have the potential to be quite dashing.”

“Not the ones I’ve met. Anyway, you have nothing worth stealing.”

“There are the cows,” Pip pointed out. “Admittedly, I have no idea what they’re worth, but you do hear about people stealing animals.”

“I imagine you’re worth more than any number of cattle.”

Pip preened. “A kidnapper, then? I must warn you, neither my family nor the university will be keen to pay any ransom, no matter how paltry.”

“I don’t care for coin or jewels. Will you sing again?”

“Not without compensation.”

“Like what?” the stranger asked. “I don’t carry currency.”

“I want a kiss,” Pip said, leaning back on his elbows with a daring smile. “And I like my payments upfront, if you please.”

The stranger stared at him for a heartbeat, a lazy smile spreading over his lips, before vaulting the wall. Pip didn’t move, encouraging the stranger to prowl right up on top of him, straddling Pip’s hips then leaning down to catch his chin against one finger, tip his face up, and capture his mouth in a slow, biting kiss that Pip enjoyed immensely.

“Request your song, brigand,” Pip breathed, dark-eyed and hungry when the stranger withdrew.

“What you were singing before I came. More of that.”

Wetting his throat with a swig of tea, Pip got up from under the stranger with some reluctance and stood with his back to the wall, humming to warm up his voice. When he sang, it was a wordless melody, highs chasing lows like a hawk in flight. The stranger watched him from the ground, rapt, and when Pip finished a moment later, not wanting to overuse his voice, the stranger sat spellbound for another moment before looking disappointed at the kulning’s end.

“You get what you pay for,” Pip told him, “and your kiss didn’t pay for more than that.”

“It’s what you asked for.”

“I should have asked for more.” Pip winked. “Next time, you’ll have to try harder to impress me.”

The next morning, Pip found a dead rabbit laid out atop the wall when he arrived. When the cows came, they seemed more restless than usual. When his host mother arrived a minute later to start the milking, she clucked at the rabbit and instructed Pip to clean it up; it was perfectly fresh, so she would take it back to the house for a stew. Pip, who had never trapped or butchered his own meat, didn’t want to look at the

poor thing, never mind touch it until it was made edible, and said so.

“How do you think any of your meat starts off, boy?” she asked, exasperated, setting up beside the first cow. “And stop looking so nervous. Sometimes an eagle drops its prey, that’s all. There aren’t any big enough around here to carry you off.”

Pip pressed a talisman over his shirt once he was done with the cows anyway, just in case.

The stranger returned two days later. “Your voice is enchanting,” he told Pip as bluntly as if commenting on the weather. “I hear kulning all through the hills and across the fields, but never a voice like yours before.”

“I’ll tell the cows you said so. Frankly, I’m not convinced they appreciate my talents.”

“Will you sing for me again, if I kiss you to your liking?”

That inspired a delightful blush and a tingle, but Pip held out. “A kiss, and an answer to my questions. Who are you, and what are you doing in these parts? Besides listening to strangers sing and watching them sleep.”

“I live in the mountains.”

“Like a hermit? I imagined all hermits to be wizened old men with long beards and strange

magic.”

“I’m a hunter,” the stranger said.

“Oh? Then you might be of some use after all. I’m told there’s something fearsome in these hills, picking off livestock from other farms. It hasn’t hit this one yet, and I shouldn’t want it to.”

The hunter swung one long, booted leg over the wall to straddle the top. Pip watched the shape of his thighs in his buckskin breeches.

“You do have some very nice fatted calves in the pasture that make for a tempting mark,” he said, before swinging his other leg over, his elbows resting on his knees.

“They’re under my protection,” Pip said archly, one hand on his cocked hip to show off his own assets, in case the hunter might enjoy more than a kiss. “I’ll fight off any lion or dragon that tries to get its claws in them.”

The former was true enough, but the latter was an absolute lie. Pip had no experience fighting anything. The closest he’d come was slapping another student across the face with his gloves after having his poetry insulted, and they were both drunk enough that there was a mutual agreement the next day not to follow up with a duel about it. Mountain lions and dragons were quite out of the question.

“Brave. I thought that’s what the magic was for.”

Pip paused in the process of artfully raking his fingers through his hair. “You seem to know an awful lot about my cows.”

“I know they’re not actually yours.”

“They’re mine at the moment. I’m safe-keeping them.”

“You’re doing well. Can I kiss you now?”

“I *suppose*...”

The hunter was on him before Pip got the end of the word out, and the kiss was even better than the first, if only because now it had expectations to live up to. Pip had to tip onto his toes for the best angle, and relished the thought that the hunter could literally sweep him off his feet if he so chose.

Like most bards, Pip was a romantic, yearning for adventure – or at least a good retelling of one – and the sort of burning passion that could fuel his penning of lusty love songs and heartbroken ballads for the rest of his career. Being caught in the embrace of a mysterious hunter out of the hinterlands who was intent only on bartering for the talent of Pip’s voice was easily the most romantic encounter of his life thus far, and Pip was confident after a mere two kisses that this deer-skinned hunter could put the bedroom talents of every knight he’d ever had to shame.

“Was that worth a song?” the hunter murmured against his lips.

His earlier suspicion of the hunter's knowledge concerning his cattle altogether forgotten, Pip had to catch his breath and pull himself together before giving the hunter exactly what he wanted.

The next morning found a fat young ram awaiting him, dead of a cleanly snapped neck.

"There aren't any eagles large enough to carry an animal this size across the fields," Pip said, wringing his hands as his host-mother took in the scene with a frown. "Is it a lion or a leopard after all?"

"It could be," she said slowly, "though there's no reason for it to be left uneaten."

"The rabbit wasn't eaten, either," Pip pointed out.

Approaching the sheep, his host-mother quickly located the stamp of colour on its flank identifying its flock of origin. Her frown grew deeper. "This one should be in pasture west of the mountains right now, not local at all. I'll have to send word that he ended up all the way over here."

"Can a big cat drag its prey so far?" Pip asked nervously.

"More likely, the ram wandered and got himself lost before something picked him off." But she sounded doubtful. "I'll draw up some stronger talismans, anyway. No beast will be able to so much as scuff their hides by the time I've worked my magic

on them.”

Looking at the dead sheep lying in the same spot as the unfortunate rabbit earlier, Pip was uncomfortably reminded of the macabre gifts that housecats liked to leave their masters.

“I’ve raised my price again,” Pip announced, when the hunter next appeared. “I’m afraid I’m simply swamped with offers and demands from admirers.”

“What other admirers have you got?” the hunter asked curiously.

“Well, the cows have grown quite fond of me, for one thing, and obviously, I have to save my voice for them, first and foremost. One of those knights I was telling you about still sends me love letters, although I never write back unless I’m wine-drunk. And some awful beast keeps leaving me dead animals every morning, which, I can’t say I’m fond of at all, but it does catch my attention in a threatening way. So, it’s going to take more than a kiss and a secret if you want me to prioritize you over all these other pressures on my time.”

The hunter slunk closer, close enough to put his hands on Pip’s waist. “Are you going to name your price, or are you leaving me to guess what you want next?”

“I would be very interested in hearing your guess.”

The hunter kissed him again, with tongue, and at great length, though not on the mouth this time. It was a fantastic guess, Pip had to admit. Top marks and an excellent performance.

“Are your people not obligate carnivores?” the hunter asked afterwards, as they both sprawled lazy-boned against the blanket.

“My people? What, university students?”

The hunter shrugged, the golden fur and dark feathers of his cloak glinting in the sun. “You complained of the animals left for you. Do you not eat them?”

“Not when they look like that, I don’t. Do you take me for a barbarian? I buy my meat butchered, from a shop.”

The hunter looked at him queerly. When the light glanced across his eyes, they turned honey gold, the colour of good whiskey. “I don’t know what that is.”

Pip could very much go for a spot of honey whiskey, or something stronger, and not just because he enjoyed a drink as he basked in the afterglow. He was reminded of the wild animals his music attracted. The hunter was shaped and dressed like a man, but there was something of the woods in his eyes. When the breeze ruffled the fur and feathers of his cloak, it carried a musky scent to Pip’s nose that conjured images of a predator between the trees, with long

claws and flashing gold eyes.

“Where did you get your cloak? Is it a trophy from some beast you slew?”

“It’s mine,” the hunter replied, which wasn’t an answer. “Do you like it?”

Pip did, very much, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it any more than he could bring himself to touch the garment, afraid that it would feel like a living, breathing thing. Unease stirred in his stomach, like he had inadvertently bit off more than he could chew and now had to extricate himself without biting off any more and making it worse. He had nothing more than a suspicion. Perhaps continuing to flirt was harmless, but after tangling with so many knights, he had learned to trust his intuition when it came to potentially dangerous paramours.

Abruptly, he stood. “Let me give you that song I owe you. You paid for it handsomely, after all. I’d hate to keep you waiting.”

Climbing the wall, he dropped into the cattle’s side of the field, his knees weak from nervousness as much from pleasurable exhaustion from his earlier activities. With his hands flat against his chest, he sang the second kulning Mansikka had taught him.

The hunter sat on top of the wall to watch him as Pip had hoped he would, looking for all the world like a fearsome raptor graced with the regal confidence of

a great cat.

When the cattle arrived, it was not at their usual amble, but in a furious charge. Bergamot raced up, two tonnes of thick bone and muscle intent on protecting the honorary member of his herd calling for help. He did not slow one iota as he thundered up to the wall, capable of ramming straight through the stones like they were little more than pebbles to be scattered. At the last second, the hunter took to the air in a rush of fur and feathers, shedding his human form. Bergamot crashed through the stones not a second later with a mighty bellow and a shower of rock dust as the cows encircled Pip, protecting him alongside their calves.

Above, an enormous gryphon wheeled against the clouds, looking more frustrated than threatened, before a wingbeat took it west towards the mountains. Pip watched it go, magnificently gold in the sun, until it was no more than a dark shape against the sky that could have passed as any bird of prey. He didn't breathe until it was out of sight.

When he was convinced it wouldn't be returning, he clapped the cows' shoulders as he squeezed out from in between them to approach the bull. "Thank you," he said earnestly. "I didn't mean to use you as a battering ram, and to be honest, I'm not sure whether I was in any danger at all, but I do appreciate the

rescue.”

There wasn't a single dead animal left on any of the remaining mornings of Pip's summer in Anghelm, nor any further reports of livestock missing or slaughtered from neighbouring farms. Pip didn't sing another kulning except to call the cows at dawn, though he did continue working on his music, attracting the deer, rabbits, and songbirds for company. Sometimes he thought he saw a great shadow pass overhead, but when he looked, he could never catch sight of that which cast it.

But there were other little gifts left on the wall sometimes, after it had been rebuilt. A stalk of sun-warmed blueberries, a tuft of wildflowers, a perfectly smooth river stone. They weren't the treasures he would have expected from admirers in the city, but they made his heart flutter on the days they were waiting for him.

The day after Mansikka's return from her pilgrimage and the day before Pip was to return home, a glossy chestnut brown feather as long as his forearm greeted him. Pip stared at it for a second before picking it up to twirl between his thumb and forefinger, finer and more luxurious than the finest quill he'd ever held. The herd milled close to the wall as he said his goodbyes to them, rubbing his knuckles against the lead cow's forehead before giving her calf

a friendly pat. Behind them, Bergamot conversed with the others in low voices, their tails swishing lazily at flies.

“I can’t say I was ever really thriving here,” Pip said thoughtfully, tracing the feather’s edge along his jaw. “But I’ll admit, this place does have a certain charm. And I did rather enjoy your company, apart from the corpses.”

A shadow against the sun shifted in the corner of his eye.

“I can’t see myself ever living in the countryside, not for good,” he continued, “but I could be persuaded to visit, I suppose. My host-parents said they’d welcome me back me back anytime, which is gratifying. I’m sure to graduate with flying colours on their recommendation, and then I’ll be free to go anywhere I like and do whatever I please.”

A soft rustle like the folding of wings.

“Anyway. I know your home is in the mountains, and your knowledge of local customs leaves something to be desired. But if you promise not to massacre any more livestock or eat anyone’s pets, I thought...” He cleared his throat. “Sainseton has a music hall with the finest cathedral ceiling in the country. The acoustics are unparalleled. And I thought, if you wanted to hear me properly...”

There was a rush of gold and chestnut from the

upper boughs of the apple tree, and the gryphon lit down, ruffling his cloak into place behind his shoulders. "Hearing you sing in the cathedral. Is there a price to pay for that?"

Pip wet his lips. The gryphon looked as enticing as he had when Pip first laid eyes on him. Better, even, like Pip's attraction to him had aged like fine wine in his absence. The gryphon stepped closer, carefully, like he thought Pip might turn tail and flee. Or call down a herd of enraged cattle to trample him.

Just as carefully, Pip took his hands, leaning up to press a chaste kiss to the gryphon's cheek. "No price. And I'm sorry for asking my cows to run you over. I was feeling slightly threatened. I thought you might be trying to eat me."

"Not in any way you wouldn't like," the gryphon replied, sounding put-upon. "I was trying to court you."

"Yes, I figured that out after the fact. I quite liked your later courtship gifts, the ones that didn't involve any corpses." Stepping back, Pip held the gryphon at arm's length, their fingers laced. "Come to the city for a few weeks, and I'll show you how my people court each other, instead?"

"And singing?"

"And other things less suited for public performance, if you fancy. In an actual bed this time. I

don't suppose you know what beds are? Well, they're brilliant; you'll love them."

"If you say so," the gryphon replied, bemused, but he seemed willing.

Pip closed the gap between them with a smiling kiss, wrapping both arms around the gryphon's neck and shoulders as the gryphon caught him solidly around the waist, pulling their bodies close.

Altogether, Pip decided that his season in Anghelm hadn't been as terrible as he'd feared. While he wasn't romantic enough to uproot his entire life and all his dreams to live in the countryside based on one brief liaison, no matter how pleasurable, the thought of periodically stealing away from the city to visit a secret lover hidden in the wildflower-dotted, sun-kissed foothills of the north sounded entirely fitting for a bard. And if it gave him an excuse to come back to the farm once in a while without having to admit that either the place or the cows had grown on him, all the better.

Arden Powell (they/them) is a queer Canadian SFF author and illustrator whose books include The Faerie Hounds of York, the Flos Magicae series, and their short story collection, [The Carnelian King and Other Stories](#). A nebulous entity, they live with a senior rescue hound and an exorbitant number of

*houseplants, and enjoy the company of both.
Everything they write is queer.*

Shoot the Messenger

Katharine Kapodistria

Nazira isn't escorted into the Khan's hall in chains, but she might as well be. Every soldier and courtier regards her like a convicted criminal. They mistrust her, but she's here at the Khan's request because there's no one better than her for this job; Nazira is the fastest messenger in the four kingdoms.

The kingdoms encircle the steppe, but the Khan of Rusakhstan is the most powerful ruler of them all. His kingdom is the largest and most populous, his palace the most opulent, his soldiers the most well-trained. Nazira can see him now, sprawled on his throne up on the dais, but he won't deign to look down. It is his Chief Advisor – Azat? Azamat? – who distributes the letters. One for red-haired Cillian, addressed to the King of Uskhame. One for dark-eyed Farah, for the eyes of the Sultan of Anzai. And for Nazira, a letter for the Queen of Svelgard, who dwells in the most distant citadel from the Khan's halls. The road will take Nazira through forests and over mountain passes and, most importantly, across the steppe. That is why

this message has been assigned to her: Nazira is Raourç.

The Raourç are an ancient, nomadic people. Once, so their folklore said, they had roamed over all these lands, from the Karstlec Mountains to the sea, but now they are confined to the steppe, outcasts who move only in their own circles. Their clothes set them apart, their pointed ears and... other things. People whisper that the Raourç are inhuman, and they aren't wrong. They have strange abilities and live for an unnatural length of time, but no one knows much more than that. The rulers of the kingdoms have systematically ostracised the Raourç from society, and so the Raourç have turned their backs on the kingdoms. Humans aren't welcome on the steppe.

People fear the Raourç, and with good reason. They have a reputation for brutality. They are reportedly barbaric and backward, but they are also the most skilled hunters and the finest horsemen in the world. That is why, despite her heritage, Nazira is here, running messages for the most powerful people in the four kingdoms: there is no one faster than her.

Nazira rides bareback, not like the other messengers with their saddles and bridles and stirrups. She has a way with horses, too – she can ride on any terrain almost like it's a road, beat any other rider to their destination, even if it seems like she has the

weaker horse. *The Bareback Rider. The Horse Whisperer*. But she knows that isn't what they call her. 'That Raourç bitch,' more like – and that's if they're being polite.

Nazira takes the letter in her gloved hand, but as soon as she leaves the hall, she removes her glove and holds the thick parchment between her fingers so it touches her skin. You don't read the messages – that's the Golden Rule. That's why they're sealed with wax. But Nazira doesn't have to open them to know what's inside.

Do all Raourç have this ability? Nazira doesn't know. Her people have no written language, so it isn't something that was ever mentioned. Usually, the messages don't interest her much – she isn't invested in human politics – but this one makes her blood run cold.

They are planning a massacre. A massacre of her people.

She runs her fingers over the parchment, sweat prickling her skin. The Khan wants to join forces with the other kingdoms and attack at the Games at Midsummer – the only time of year when all the disparate clans gather together in one place at the edge of the steppe.

Nazira collapses back against the cool marble of the wall.

Why? The humans hate her people, it's true, but the Raourç live on the edge, in wilderness that is neither hospitable nor fertile. What could the humans gain by killing them all? Surely they are not enough of an inconvenience to bother exterminating. But clearly the Khan thinks they are.

Nazira left the steppe long ago, and she knows she is no longer welcome there. The only time she ever returned to her clan, one Midwinter, an old childhood friend spat at her. And her parents – they had told her that she was dead to them. They hadn't even let her sleep in their yurt – just left her out on the snow-covered steppe to freeze.

She had known, deep down, how it would go right from the start. The Raourç live by strict rules, and the most important of these is that the clan always has your back, no matter what. Unless you betray them, and taking work from the humans is the deepest betrayal of all.

Why had she done it? Now, she can hardly remember her reasons: something romantic about wanting to change her story, having more than the life she was destined for. Has she achieved it? She isn't sure about that either. Her own people regard her as an outcast, and the humans will never accept her as one of their own. When you look at it, she thinks wryly, she's probably worse off now than she would

have been if she'd stayed with the clan.

But the Raourç are still her people – her blood. She knows she cannot protect them against the will of the Khan, but she has to try. She has to warn them. But before that, she must buy time and stop the other messages from being delivered. She has to catch up to Cillian and Farah.

As far as Nazira can see, she has two options. She can dispatch Cillian and Farah – it would be quick, and she wouldn't be culpable, because there would be no witnesses left to tell a tale. Definitely the best option; the least dangerous for her. Or she could threaten them, relieve them of their messages, and leave them alive to scamper back to the Khan and drag her name along with them. The worst option, but the one that doesn't involve killing anyone. Not that Nazira can't do it. But it seems somehow wrong to attempt to prevent death by causing more of it.

Cillian is the faster rider, so Nazira targets him first. She knows which road he will take to Uskhame, and how to deal with him too. Cillian is easy. He's a young man, and it's lonely on the road. Nazira might be Raourç, a savage, but she isn't so unsavoury that Cillian won't share his bed with her. After all, he's done it before.

She catches up with him at the Pendulum Inn. He doesn't take much convincing to relocate from the bar

to an upstairs room and then, once Nazira's knife is at his throat, he doesn't take much convincing to hand over the letter.

"What are you doing, Nazira?" he asks, sounding more exasperated than afraid. "You're signing your own death warrant here. How long have you been doing this gig? You know better than this."

"You don't know what's at stake," she mutters.

"Enlighten me."

"No."

That's when she forces him to drink the henbane-based sedative she always keeps in her bag, just in case. With the dose she gives him, he'll sleep for a night and a day, and by then she'll be far, far away.

Still, the whole charade has wasted valuable time. It would have been much more practical to shoot him in the back, but Nazira has made her choice: humane, and quite possibly suicidal. Even if Cillian doesn't betray her to the Khan – and she's certain he will, without hesitation – there were plenty of witnesses at the inn who will describe a Raourç woman in travelling clothes with a clan tattoo on her neck. She is, regrettably, quite distinctive.

Wasting no more time, she leaves the inn, vaults to the back of her horse and sets off for the Geshbey Road. She cuts through the Kryst Forest. It's a risky thing to do at night, but she's always had an infallible

sense of direction, and whatever creatures live inside it sense her otherness and leave her alone. On the other side, she switches horses at another inn and splashes some water on her face, but she doesn't stop.

Farah has an enormous head start on her, but she knows how Farah rides, always sticking to the major thoroughfares. She had a nasty run-in with some highwaymen when she was younger, and it spooked her. The Geshbey Road will take her on a wide sweep, but there are faster ways to get to Anzai. Nazira points her horse's head towards the mountains, and urges him into a gallop.

There are no more inns, not out here, and Nazira doesn't have enough money to strike a bargain with one of the homesteaders, so she steals a mount – not a swift horse, but a mountain pony, surefooted and sturdy. *Thieving Raourç. Scumbag.* At least she leaves the horse as compensation.

Nazira heads up into the passes. She is tired, but she cannot stop. Farah would have slept last night, if only in the darkest hours, and she will rest again tonight. Nazira's only chance to outstrip her is to keep going.

She finds some larsiba berries. They can give a person energy, but eat too many and you'll start to see things that aren't there. Nazira fills her pockets and rations the berries out through the night, as the

gibbous moon traverses the sky. By dawn, she has made it through the passes and can see the Geshbey Road again – a white line cutting through the green. Her pony plods to the edge and she dismounts. She is sure she has made it in time.

She climbs a tree and waits, hidden, until she sees Farah approaching, a little before midday. There is no one else around. Nazira steps out on the road in front of her, her bowstring taut.

“Halt!” she screams at the top of her lungs and, because Farah knows her, she reins in her horse. “Hand over the message you received from the Khan, and you can go,” Nazira yells.

“Forget it!” Farah shouts back across the distance between them. “I have a job to do, and so do you. Svelgard’s that way.” She gestures back towards the mountains.

“I need that message. It’s not worth dying for, Farah!”

“You’ve read it?” she asks in disbelief.

“I didn’t have to. I know what it says, and that’s why I need you to give it to me. Now.”

“Piss off!” Farah begins to advance, her eyes on Nazira.

“Don’t do this. Hand it over!”

“No!”

“Farah, don’t be fucking stupid! Give me the letter,

or I will shoot you in the heart – and I never miss.”

In answer, Farah digs her heels into the sides of her horse. She heads straight for Nazira.

“Farah – no!” But Nazira doesn’t have time to say more. She lets her arrow fly.

Farah only has time to look bewildered before she falls, stone dead, out of her saddle. Clearly she didn’t believe that Nazira would actually shoot her, but it’s too late now. Her foot catches in the stirrup and her horse rears, but Nazira grabs the reins before he takes flight and leads him off the road as quickly as possible, dragging Farah alongside.

She buries Farah first – a hot and unpleasant task. Then she takes the letter out of the horse’s saddlebag. She puts it with the others. One, two, three – she stacks them up and watches them burn. But this is only the beginning. She has only delayed the message, not the attack. There will be other letters, other riders. No one ever sends just one message, not for something like this.

Nazira lets herself sleep for a while. In the blackest hour of the night, she rises and cuts the pony loose. Then, she wakes Farah’s stallion and climbs onto his back, turning his head back down the Geshbey Road, towards the steppe.

Nazira knows where her clan will be at this time of the year; the old ways are ingrained in her mind, even

decades after she last lived among them. She cannot guarantee the clan lord will hear her out, she can't even be sure they won't shoot her on sight, but she has to try.

Nazira rides into the camp on the second day. She looks neither to the right nor the left, though she can hear muttering and the occasional shout. She holds her head up and makes for the clan lord's yurt: Rustabem, the man who told her to leave without his blessing and not return.

He is waiting for her, of course. The Raourç have eyes across the steppe – they would have seen her coming since yesterday.

"What business have you here, traitor?" he asks. Not a good start.

"I come with a warning, Rustabem Khar. Even though the Raourç have disowned me, you are still my people, and it is my duty to tell you that war is coming to you."

"Then let it come!" he roars. "We have the finest horses and the finest riders in the land. We have archers with eyes like eagles. What army can stand against us?"

"You misunderstand me, Rustabem Khar. This is not an army – this is *all* the armies. The Khan plans to massacre our people at the Games, with the help of

Anzai, Uskhame and Svelgard. There are too few of us to stand against them, and they do not fight like the folk of the steppe. They have cannons and muskets.”

“Muskets?” He pronounces the word in his thick Raourç accent. Then, he spits on the ground. “That is what I think of their muskets.”

Nazira isn’t sure he knows what a musket is, but she presses on. “And there are so many more of them. They can afford to spend soldiers on advance after advance. We will not be able to hold out against them. No matter how fierce we are, how well we fight, in the end, we will all die.”

“Then what do you propose we do, traitor?”

“We need to make an alliance.”

“With who? Who would ever ride to the aid of the Raourç?”

“It doesn't have to be like that. They don't think like us.” Nazira struggles to describe the politicking she has witnessed in a way Rustabem will understand. “They are not ruled by actions but words – deals and bargains. If we ally ourselves with one of the kingdoms, it will offer us protection. But we will have to offer them something too.”

Rustabem snorts. “And there is the hole in your plan, traitor. What do the Raourç have to offer khans and queens?”

“You said it yourself; we are the finest riders and

archers in the world,” Nazira says, throwing her head back. “Our warriors are legendary.”

“So you would have the clan lords swear fealty to some king or queen? Become sworn swords? Human lackeys?”

“At least our people would have a chance to live! If you do nothing, every last one of them will die, from the babe that was born yesterday to the great clan lords like you. They don’t mean to scare us or subdue us – they mean to wipe us out!”

Rustabem closes his eyes, holding up his palms. “I will think on this,” he says. “Wait here.”

He goes inside his yurt and leaves Nazira outside. She sits there, to the left of the entrance, for hours. People jeer at her. A few throw stones. She sits erect, although she is beyond tired, and doesn’t engage with them. She tries not to flinch when the stones make contact with her body. Throughout the day, other clan lords arrive and enter the yurt, but none come out again. Twice she is called inside – once to repeat the message, and once to describe what a musket is – but she is quickly dismissed. At sunset, a woman brings Nazira a pile of blankets, some flatbread and a beaker of milk. From this, she understands that she is to sleep outside on the ground. She is being punished.

A few hours after dawn, Rustabem reappears to give his answer. Nazira is so stiff with cold and from

sitting and sleeping on the ground that she doesn't attempt to stand. She pushes herself onto her knees, head bowed at his feet: the penitent, the vanquished traitor. She doesn't care how it looks, how it hurts her pride; she has come here for one reason only, and that is to save her people, no matter the cost.

"Nazira Kharz," Rustabem booms, his voice loud enough for half the camp to hear. Nazira starts at the use of her real name – she hadn't expected to be called anything but 'traitor', especially by him. "The clan lords have heard your counsel and we give you leave to attempt to broker an alliance with the humans, but you will do this task alone. You speak their words, and you understand their politics. You go, and if you do this, if you find a way to save the Raourç, I, Rustabem Khar, will make you clan again."

Nazira rides, making for her original destination: Svelgard. She figures Queen Kaiah is her best bet. She may have no ties to the Raourç, and no sympathy for them, but she knows what it is like to survive in a cold, hard place. The land connects them, and she hopes this connection will be worth at least something.

The clan gave her several hot meals and let her sleep inside a yurt until dawn. She doesn't exactly feel refreshed, but at least the aching in her joints has

eased and hunger isn't gnawing at her insides any longer. They gave her supplies too, and a purebred Raourç horse in exchange for Farah's. That, if nothing else, was worth her painful humiliation outside Rustabem's yurt. It has been a long time since she rode one of the half-wild horses of the steppe, and it is exhilarating. The miles fall away beneath the stallion's pounding hooves. They are like the wind; they will make good time to Svelgard.

Nazira stops that night at an inn in the foothills of the Kolsë Mountains – the range that separates the steppe from the fertile lands of Svelgard. But she is up again before first light and riding through the pass. There is still snow on the peaks. There is always snow on the peaks here.

It takes her until evening the next day to reach the castle. She has been here before, and accepts the taking of her horse and weapons without complaint. The guards lead her directly to Queen Kaiah's halls – strange, but fortuitous. Nazira stands before her throne, her eyes lowered.

"So you are the Raourç traitor?" Queen Kaiah asks. "You have a message for me?"

The tone of her voice alerts Nazira to the fact that the queen already knows something, but it's too late to worry about what that is. Nazira raises her head and her voice.

“Yes, I have a message for you, Queen Kaiah of Svelgard, from the heads of all the clans of the Raourç. They wish to swear fealty to you, and offer you their swords and bows.”

The queen laughs. Despite her dainty appearance, it is a harsh, barking laugh that makes Nazira flinch.

“The Raourç wish to swear fealty – to me?” She abruptly extinguishes her smile, like blowing out a candle, and leans forward on her throne, eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“We feel an alliance between us would strengthen both Svelgard and the Raourç. The time has come to unite the peoples of the south. We may not be bound by blood, but we are bound by the land and the wide southern sky. If you agree, your people would have the protection of the finest horsemen in the four kingdoms.”

“Oh, so you want to protect us, is that it? How kind. Or perhaps you make this generous offer because of this.” She holds up a letter – a letter from the Khan; the sister of the three Nazira burnt on the road.

“How—?” Nazira bites back the rest of her question, and Queen Kaiah gestures to the back of the room. Nazira turns. There, in the corner by the door where she had not bothered to look when she entered, is Cillian.

It's all Nazira can do not to bare her teeth like the savage they believe she is. He must have gone straight back to the king and told him everything, and then set out for Svelgard himself. Shit. Nazira has walked right into a trap. Well, that serves her right for sparing Cillian's life. She needs to get out of here before she loses hers.

She bows and starts to back away, but the queen holds up her hand.

"Not so fast, my Raourç friend," she says. She beckons to Nazira and she shuffles towards the throne. The queen, in her turn, descends from the dais. "I didn't say no, did I?" asks the queen, her voice low now, not loud enough for anyone else in the hall to hear. "In fact, I'm very interested in your audacious offer of making an alliance – on my terms, of course. I will offer your people protection if" – and here she leans close and whispers in Nazira's ear – "if you agree to help me to take down the Khan."

She doesn't wait for Nazira to answer. Instead, she calls to her guards, "Take that messenger to the gaol." She gestures to Cillian. "And find this one somewhere to sleep, some hot food, and a bath."

The Svelgard food is warm and hearty, and the bath even better. Until the door of Nazira's chamber swings open and one of the most handsome men Nazira has ever seen strides in. He looks her up and

down as she reclines in her bathtub, and she makes no move to cover herself. It's nothing he hasn't seen before.

"I didn't think Raourç bathed," he says.

"Piss off, Sacha."

He makes himself comfortable, sinking into an armchair across the room and pouring himself a cup of wine from the decanter on the side table.

"What are you doing here?" Nazira demands.

"I was invited to play at court."

"Really?" Her voice is sarcastic. "I meant what are you doing here, in my room, bothering me?"

"I hear you're to take a message to the Sultan of Anzai. I came to offer my services."

"And how did you come to hear of my private business?"

He smirks.

"You're screwing the Queen of Svelgard?"

"Must you be so crass? It's in the job description."

"You're a minstrel, not a courtesan."

"I'm the whole package." He winks at her and she stands suddenly, sending water splashing in all directions. "And *that's* the whole package," Sacha says, staring at her unabashed.

Nazira snatches up her towel. "You're wasting my time," she snaps. "I'm not here to listen to your so-called witty banter. I have to get some sleep and leave

at first light.”

“I’ll join you.”

“Why are you so keen to come with me?”

“Two reasons. First, you won’t even get inside the Sultan’s palace on your own. With me, you’re guaranteed to get an audience.”

“Because you’re a famous bard?”

“Because I’m an infamous lover.”

Nazira snorts. “I don’t believe it. The Sultan too?”

Sacha executes an elaborate bow from the armchair.

“What’s the second reason?”

“Material. At some point on this insane quest, someone is going to shoot you, Nazira, and the punters love a song where the hero dies.”

“Even if the hero is Raourç?”

“You don’t understand the way we humans feel about your people.”

“Sure I do. You think we’re dirty, dishonest and stupid: backward because we don’t read or write, and barbaric because we can hold our own on the steppe, where any of you would perish.”

“That’s succinct. But, seriously, that’s only what they say out loud. Underneath, they have a yearning to be like you.”

“What? Persecuted?”

“Free.”

Queen Kaiah is there to meet them in the stableyard at dawn. She gives Nazira the message, sealed with wax and stamped with her royal seal. Through the parchment, Nazira divines the words; the message does indeed say what the queen said it would – it is an invitation to the Sultan to join forces, with the Raourç, against the Khan. But Nazira still feels it is too good to be true; it has all been far too easy.

“How can I be sure that you won’t double-cross us and side with the Khan anyway?” she asks.

The queen is not offended. “A fair question,” she concedes. Then, she draws the knife she carries around her waist and cuts her palm. She lets the blood run down to her fingertips, then steps forward and smears it across Nazira’s face.

“Take that to your clan lord,” she says.

Nazira mounts her horse and, side by side, she and Sacha ride out through the castle gates.

“Are you going to ride all the way across the steppe with that on your face?” he asks, faintly disgusted.

“It’s a promise – a clan promise. It seems Queen Kaiah knows a little of our ways.”

“And that’s why people call you barbarians.”

“Shut up, Sacha.”

They ride all day. Sacha is slow compared to how

quickly Nazira could move on her own, but he doesn't complain. By nightfall, they are back in the Kolsë Mountains. Nazira builds a fire and they eat some of the food they brought from the castle.

"How long has Queen Kaiah been planning this?" Nazira asks, voicing the thought that has been running through her mind all day.

"Who knows?" Sacha replies, poking the fire. "Probably for as long as she's been under the Khan's thumb, which is her entire reign to date. For her, queen is just a title. The same goes for the Sultan of Anzai and the King of Uskhome. They're not monarchs; they're puppets, and they can't stand it – Kaiah most of all. I reckon, if you hadn't come to her, she would've come to you in the end."

"To the Raourç?"

"I told you back at the castle, you don't realise what your people stand for. You are the only ones left who aren't under the rule of the Khan. Kaiah has been feeding her people whispers of repression for years. By allying herself with you, she is reminding them that she, and they, are also people of the same land – wild and free."

"And the others? The Sultan of Anzai and the King of Uskhome? Will they be so keen to side with the Raourç?"

"Perhaps not at first, but Kaiah wouldn't be

sending you to Anzai if she thought it was a fool's errand. She wouldn't risk starting a rebellion that could be easily crushed – she's cleverer than that. She's going to start a revolution, and the people are going to lap it up."

Nazira stares at him. A revolution? She had only wanted to protect her people.

"How fortunate that you fell into Kaiah's lap," Sacha continues. "You are a link between the Raourç and the humans – the repentant traitor who risked everything to save her people, the outcast who will unite the kingdoms against tyranny. Of course, that puts a target on your back, and sooner or later someone is going to hit it. But you will die for freedom, Nazira – for all the people that shunned you and put you down. *That* is why you will make a good song."

"Not if I can help it," snaps Nazira, but she has a feeling that Sacha is right. If the queen makes her into a symbol that represents revolution, how long can she expect to survive?

A few days later, they ride into the clan's camp. No one shouts at Nazira this time, or throws stones, even though she has brought a human with her. She rides straight for Rustabem's yurt, slides to the ground and shows him the promise the Queen of Svelgard

smeared on her skin. She doesn't linger in the camp, however. She and Sacha ride on towards Anzai.

It takes over a week of hard riding until the Sultan's palace is in sight. It is white marble with domed towers which sparkle in the hot sun. Thanks to Sacha, she is given a private audience with the Sultan. Once he reads Queen Kaiah's letter, he doesn't take much persuasion to write one of his own to the King of Uskhame. Nazira knows she should ride for Uskhame immediately, but she is so tired, and her stallion needs rest, so she allows herself to be led away to a chamber in one of the towers. In the soft canopied bed, she sleeps like the dead.

She is woken the next day by a servant who tells her that her presence is required in the Sultan's Great Hall. She cannot imagine why. The servant drapes a beautiful pale green gown across the bed. Nazira runs her hands over the silken cloth, but she doesn't put it on. Instead, she pulls on her travelling clothes and battered leather boots, dragging her fingers through her tousled hair. Whatever the Sultan wants of her, she will go as herself.

The servant is waiting outside her room with two armed guards. Nazira's heart sinks, but she tells herself that it is only because she is Raourç; her people's reputation precedes her. She lets herself be escorted down the wide staircase and through echoing

galleries of white stone. What else can she do? They have taken all her weapons. When they reach the Great Hall, Sacha is standing outside the towering doors. As they creak open, he leans across and murmurs in her ear, "I'll write you *such* a song..."

She doesn't even have time to give him a mystified look before the doors swing wide and the inside of the Sultan's hall takes her breath away.

It is huge and high-ceilinged, like the Khan's hall, and two sets of pillars run down either side. In front of these stand the Sultan's men, armed with bows with strings drawn taut. Behind them are other guards. Nazira recognises their uniforms, their helmets and curved swords. They are not the Sultan's men, but the Khan's.

In a second, she takes all this in. She takes in the Sultan standing to one side of the dais, his shoulders slumped, and the Khan standing in the centre of the platform, feet planted, looking down at her.

"Here she is," he says. "The Raourç traitor. That is what your people call you, is it not? But you chose them in the end. You served me well for a time, but you have betrayed my trust, and for that you must die."

Nazira raises her chin, looking the Khan in the face. "My people will avenge me!" she shoots back.

The Khan snorts. "Your people will die like

vermin trapped in the sewers when the water rises.”

“Better to die like vermin than live like them! What your people call living is no life at all. Living in captivity is only dying slowly. You, with your curfews and censorship and endless rules and regulations. You decree who is rich and who is poor, who is master and who is the slave, who will succeed and who will fail. But I am Raourç, and we are free!”

Nazira shouts the last words, and her voice echoes in the vaulted ceiling, as if she isn’t alone – as if her people are here, standing behind her.

“I am Raourç!” she shouts again. “My people know the price of life, and the penalty for taking it. Out on the steppe, our fate is in our own hands. There is only life, and what we make of it.

“The Raourç know what it is to feel the wind on our faces like a blessing, to work in harmony with nature instead of against it, to have magic flow through us instead of dragging it out of the past in stuffy rooms. To answer to no one but the earth and the sky. We are the last free people in this land, and it doesn’t matter what you do: ostracise us, enslave us, massacre us. Even if you kill every last one of us, we will still have won, because no one can conquer the Raourç. In our hearts, we will always be free.”

“Shoot her!” the Khan screeches, but Nazira has already said too much. She knows it, because there is

a pause between his command and the twang of bowstrings – a pause long enough for her to whisper the battle cry of her people: *freedom or death*.

Then the arrows fly and Nazira feels them pierce flesh and muscle, sinew and lungs and stomach. Many arrows, but not as many as there should have been. She drops to her knees, and falls forwards, her hands supporting her. She manages, somehow, to raise her head and, although everything is hazy now and speckled with black flecks and white bursts of light and pain, she sees that not all the Sultan's men fired at her. Some are standing there with their bowstrings slack, their arrows unspent. Others have loosed their arrows, but not at her. The Khan, too, is on his knees up there on the dais. She cannot count the arrows that have pierced his body, because shadows are creeping over her eyes, but it is enough that he will die here in the hall alongside her.

It is enough to hear first one voice, then two, then five repeat the battle cry of her people – not in the common tongue, but in Raourç. Sacha was right – she has become a symbol; she has started a revolution.

Still, whatever songs they might sing about her when this is over, Nazira doesn't want to die like this, betrayed, far from home. She doesn't want to take her last breath in halls of marble, and so, as the fighting breaks out around her and she slumps to the floor, she

calls up another place inside her mind: miles and miles of empty grassland, stretching to the horizon in every direction, and a Raourç stallion beneath her, her hair and his mane streaming as they gallop together under an endless sky.

Katharine is British by birth and Greek by choice. She's a full-time writer of educational books, chef wife and mother of dragons. She discovered short stories in October 2024 and has been unable to stop writing them since. She is also working on a reimaging of the myth of Persephone, which explores the themes of power, humanity and immortality, desire and death. You can find her on Instagram @katharine.kapodistria and more of her short stories on Substack at Notes from the Edge.

Only One Bard

Adie Hart

The Duskflower Tavern was as busy as it usually was on a Tuesday mid-afternoon – which was to say that the door was locked, the “closed” sign was up, and there wasn’t a soul about apart from Iris Ravenholme, the proprietor, and Aurien Giles, resident bard and constant pain in her neck. The former was wiping down tables in the bar after the lunch rush; the latter followed her about, getting entirely in her way and, as was often the case, complaining vehemently about his job.

“... and anyway, Iris, aside from the utter *monotony* of playing nothing but soppy *love ballads* every night, it’s a disaster for the tips!”

“Everyone else seems to get plenty,” Iris said conversationally, refusing to play into his histrionics. “Maybe you’re not as charming as you think you are.”

“Not *charm*—!” Aurien spluttered, clutching at his chest in shock. “That’s not the issue! In fact, I set the mood so well, half the couples in the room have disappeared upstairs by the time I play the final notes,

and then they never remember to come back down to toss me a coin or two.”

Iris smiled to herself. They did, in fact, often leave tips for Aurien in the morning when they checked out. They were in a big tankard with “Aurien’s Tips” written on it, which she kept under the bar next to the cleaning rags, and which he could access at any time – if he ever *went* behind the bar to grab a cleaning rag, that was. He was just as much of an employee as anyone else at the Duskflower, only he seemed to find himself above chipping in like the rest of them; in return, Iris seemed to find herself above going out of her way to point out his tips.

She’d tell him about the tankard one day. She just wasn’t sure if it would be because she finally felt bad enough for him, or because his whinging had made her snap.

“Did you have a point, Aurien?” she asked. “Only I’ve got a lot to do this afternoon, so if you wouldn’t mind getting to it...”

“The point is that I’m bored,” the bard declared in the exceedingly high dudgeon peculiar to bards.

Oh. It was that conversation again.

“Get a new job, then,” Iris said, following the script.

“I don’t *want* a new job. You know as well as I do this is the only decent tavern in River’s End.”

“So move somewhere else and get a new job there.” She flicked at a dried patch of something on the table. Could be gravy. Could have been blood, in one of the other taverns Aurien was disparaging; luckily the Duskflower was more respectable than that. Mostly. It was probably gravy.

Aurien sighed. “It’s not that. It’s... I’m... Oh, I don’t know.”

Wait, that wasn’t the line. It was supposed to be something self-aggrandising about how one day, he’d be the most famed bard in the realms, or some guff along those lines. And was that...? Yes, that sounded like genuine frustration in his voice. Aurien might be a pain, but he wasn’t normally serious about anything; something must be up.

Iris stopped scrubbing at the probably-gravy. “Are you okay, Aurien?”

The bard pushed his stupid floppy fringe back – gods, how she wanted to chop that thing off with the kitchen scissors – and sighed an even larger sigh than before. “I’m fine. You don’t want to know. I’m just stuck in this poxy little place.”

“My tavern is not poxy.” Iris couldn’t – and didn’t want to – hide the indignation on her face.

Aurien cracked a small smile. “Then whose tavern is this?” He didn’t even have time to flinch before the probably-gravy-covered rag whipped across his

shoulder. “Ow, okay, okay, stop. I didn’t mean the tavern, I meant the town. The tavern is just fine.”

Iris rolled her eyes and whipped the rag again. “Oh, thank you so much, ‘just fine’ is in fact what I’ve aspired to all my life.”

“Ow, no, you know what I mean. It’s a castle, a palace, a shining beacon of delights compared to most of this backwater dump. I’ll write you a song about it if you like.” He hummed a few notes, managing to sound only slightly desperate.

Iris gave in, dropping her weapon back to the table. “Stick to the romances, if you please. I’m not sure a song entitled ‘Look, Isn’t This Bar Great’ will set quite the right tone for the customers.”

“Ugh, the romances,” he groaned, picking back up the earlier thread of his complaint. “This place is romance-central, and they’re all so *fake*. Which reminds me – don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing here.”

Iris stilled, panicking slightly. “What?”

“Come on, I’ve been here what, fifteen years?”

“Hells, have I put up with you as long as all that?” she scoffed.

“I worked here six before you took over the place,” he said. “So it must be. Anyway...”

It had been, now she thought about it. Fifteen years since this floppy-haired flirt of a lutist had walked in

with his big brown eyes and his devastating grin and promptly stomped all over the finer feelings of a naive little barmaid. She gave the table an angry swipe, though the probably-gravy had already long been reduced to formerly-gravy, and tried not to think about it. She tried to avoid thinking about that year in general. At first out of pain, and more recently, out of a vague sense of embarrassment that she'd ever been so easily charmed by his scripted patter.

Fifteen years. Gods. She was a long way from that foolish eighteen-year-old now. She'd grown up here in the Duskflower Tavern, really. She'd started as a kid washing the pots, then taken on more and more responsibility from Old Barlow until she was pretty much running the place alongside him; when he'd died nine years ago, she'd discovered he'd left the deeds to her, which had been a shock, but it made sense, in a way. Still, twenty-four had felt too young to own the whole place, unnervingly so, and she'd kept the rest of the staff on – bardic bastards included – because it made everyone that little bit more comfortable not to have too much change.

Some of them were too comfortable, clearly.

Aurien snapped his fingers. “Are you listening to a word I’m saying?”

“I don’t, generally,” she said, trying to cover up how far she’d gone down memory lane. “Was there

something important in there?”

“Yes,” he hissed. “I’m saying I know about the matchmaking thing. And I want you to do it for me.”

Oh, *gods*.

The trouble was that Iris Ravenholme loved love. She couldn’t help it, and gods had she *tried* to help it, over the years. It didn’t matter whether it was a centuries-ago epic romance in a crinkle-paged novel, or two newlyweds sitting down to lunch in the bar with their rings still unscuffed and their emotions written plainly on their faces, Iris loved to see love happening. She couldn’t get enough.

That was part of what had tempted her about Aurien, of course, all those years ago – what was more romantic than a bard? It had been all too easy to be won over, to match his flirty banter for that first thrilling day and to wait, bubbling with excitement, for a kiss in the alleyway at the back of the tavern at the end of her shift. This, inexperienced Iris had thought, this was what the books were talking about, what the songs were meant to make you feel, this delightful mix of hope and terror and wanting that fluttered in your stomach like a small creature. She’d found it at last, she’d thought, that perfect shiver-giggle of a romance beginning, and as soon as Aurien – how sweet the name had sounded, that first day –

came out to meet her, she'd transform it into love with the press of his lips.

And then she'd waited, getting colder and antsier by the minute. And then she'd stuck her head back inside to see if he had been delayed playing, or was caught in conversation with an over-eager patron. And then she'd seen him disappearing up the stairs, hand-in-hand with the beautiful daughter of the mayor.

She'd taken moments to fall for him, but it took her months to stop moping every time she saw him take the stairs with a pretty girl or boy. It wasn't that she harboured any hopes for him anymore; no, it just hurt to have it rubbed in her face, how unattractive she must be. How very many spaces in his heart there were, and none of them, not even a little one, for Iris.

But love could still be true in tales, could work for other people. And so Iris threw herself into her love of romance, as long as it only involved the people around her and never endangered her own heart. Her bookshelf was the stuff of legends among her friends, and over the years of owning the Duskflower, she'd become, well, she liked to say *attuned* to the possibilities of romance. She didn't advertise her services – didn't even really think of them as services, so much as a slightly embarrassing hobby – but she worked quietly as the avatar of love for anyone who was open to the possibility. Two old friends would

find themselves always offered the table in the quiet corner by the chimney, say; their waitress never stayed to chat, only lit the candles, poured the wine, and made herself scarce. Iris dispensed advice to lonely farmers and matched it to the advice she gave lonely seamstresses; the dairymaids she coached not to be impressed by pretty words, but to look for strong, sensible partners.

Sometimes, when the right combination of adventurers came into the Duskflower – the ones who looked at each other with the perfect mix of annoyance and poorly-hidden desire – she mysteriously lost the keys to all the rooms but one. The one with the single big bed.

Those nights, she made excuses to send the other employees home early, and waited up with a glass of wine in the bar until she heard the tell-tale thud of the desire outweighing the annoyance as a back hit a wall, or the door, or the bed. She didn't listen in on the other tell-tale noises, of course; she wasn't a pervert. She just liked to know she'd got it right.

That she was capable of getting it right, sometimes.

Tonight, though, looking around at the busy room in front of her, full of couples she'd nudged together and strangers she could nudge in future, Iris didn't feel that satisfied. It had been six hours since Aurien

had revealed he knew all about her little hobby, and while at least he hadn't seemed horrified by her manipulations, she thought it might actually be *worse* that he wanted her to magic him up a true love. Him! As if there was anyone left in the country he hadn't already tried...

Apart from her, of course. And that was a memory whose lane she didn't remotely want to go back down.

"Okay, that frown just got to concerning levels of deep," said Bex, handing the tankard she'd just filled to a customer and setting her elbows on the bar next to Iris's. "What's going on?"

"Aurien's pissing me off," said Iris.

Bex laughed. "When isn't he? That man couldn't be un-annoying if I paid him."

"I *do* pay him," said Iris darkly, "and I'm wishing now I'd stopped years ago."

"Right," said Bex, "the frown's got even worse. I think your eyebrows are about to fall off. Jamie, mind the bar!" she called, then grabbed Iris by the elbow and steered her into the kitchen.

Iris was too startled to do anything but let her best friend push her onto a stool and wait for the interrogation to begin.

"Spill," said Bex. "You've been maundering all evening, and I've not seen Aurien upset you this badly for years. What did he do? Do I need to get

involved?” She reached behind her and grabbed a utensil from the pot – seemingly at random, as she came up brandishing a whisk. “I’m not afraid to use this. Confused about how, maybe, but not afraid.”

Iris smiled, pushing Bex’s hand down. “No one’s whisking anyone, Bexie. And I’m not maundering! I’m just wondering... how to get out of an awkward situation, I suppose. Aurien wants me to, and I quote, ‘do the matchmaking thing’ for him.”

Bex gasped. “He knows? Was he a dick about it?”

“No. Apparently he’s been paying attention, gods only know why. And he says he’s bored singing about true love but never experiencing it, and what would really help would be if I can find him a partner that’s worth singing about.” She grimaced. “Ugh. He’s so cheesy.”

“That’s bards for you. So, just checking, you don’t want to because...”

And *that* was what Iris had been trying to figure out all evening. She settled for the first complaint that came to mind. “He asked like we were *friends*, Bex. We’re not friends.”

“No,” said Bex with a wry smile. “You’re certainly not that.”

“What’s that look for?”

“Nothing. Just thinking about all the bickering.”

“He starts it!”

“Oh, ‘cause we’re five years old?” Bex raised an eyebrow, then put it back down quickly at a look from Iris. “Okay, okay. So I get that you don’t exactly want to give him a happily ever after, but what if you did? Wouldn’t it be a good thing if he settled down some? Maybe he’d move away! Maybe at least he wouldn’t keep getting broken up with. He’s always a misery when that happens. Honestly, between the pair of you, there’s always someone in a mood around here whether he’s starting or ending something.”

Iris huffed. “I’m not—”

“Iris,” said Bex sternly. “I picked you up those first few months, and I’m not stupid. I’ve seen how much you hate his flings. No, don’t look at me like that, I’m not for a minute suggesting you’re pining for him – I wouldn’t dare – just that he annoys you. What I don’t understand is why you didn’t fire him a long time ago, if he bothers you so much.”

“I don’t know,” groaned Iris. “He’s the only good bard in town, and he plays what I ask him to, and the punters like him. There’s no *reason* to fire him.”

“So give him another way out. Find him a boyfriend who lives in the Wildwoods. A girlfriend who’s so dreadfully rich he’ll never have to work another day in his life. Come on, you’re the queen of romance. You could do this with your eyes closed.”

Maybe she could, if it meant she wouldn’t have to

see him try on his own anymore. If even the flighty bard could find a permanent home for someone in his affections, then it might mean... it might mean there really was a true love for everyone. And *that* might mean someone had an Iris-shaped hole in their life, too.

Iris nodded slowly. "There must be someone out there for him."

Bex grinned, chucking her under the chin. "That's the spirit!"

Iris thought the spirit probably ought to feel a bit better, but she bit her tongue and went with it.

Sitting in the bar waiting for Aurien to make his final rounds of goodbyes as the patrons trickled out was *nothing* like standing in the alley waiting for him, Iris told herself as she took another sip of wine. It was entirely different. She was the strong, successful owner of the Duskflower, and he was— Good *gods*, what was taking so long about a normal goodbye?

"Goodnight, chaps," she said firmly as she crossed the room and all but pushed the gaggle of lads out into the night. "Go home now."

"Goodnight, Aurien." The one with a pink flush across the tops of his ears gave a little wave.

Iris felt the acid rise in her as she shut the door and stalked back to the table. As Aurien sat down across

from her, she snapped, “With admirers like *that*, I don’t know what you need me for.”

Aurien just smiled pleasantly, the infuriating man. “Well, for one, you just chased them off, and for two, he’s about fifteen years too young for me. He’s just a kid with a crush. I was being nice.”

She scoffed. “Oh, you’re nice, are you?”

“When people are nice to me.” This time, his voice had a hint of her venom, but it faded quickly as he slipped the mask back on. “Anyway, sorry to keep you waiting.”

“That’s... fine,” said Iris, unprepared for how unsettling it was to hear him say that so casually. She forced herself to be business-like. “So, shall we do this?”

He spread his hands. “Do what? You were the one who came and hissed at me mid-set to meet you. I don’t know what you’ve got planned.”

“You wanted me to find you a date, right? Well, I need to know what you like.”

Aurien laughed lightly. “Haven’t you been paying attention? I like a lot of things.”

“I try to avoid looking when you make your conquests, actually. It gives me a stomachache.”

His smile flickered at that. “Ouch.”

“Sorry.” The word was out before Iris realised it, and she almost wanted to snatch it back when his

smile returned.

He wielded that thing like a weapon. Did he even know he was doing it?

She shoved down the spiteful impulse to say something worse. She just needed to get through this. “I mean, it’s none of my business,” she continued. “But if I’m doing this for you, I do need to know some details of what to look for.”

“Well, I’m open to most things,” Aurien said cheerfully. “I’d rather someone around my age – let’s say down to thirty and up to forty? – and I’m only looking for one partner. For something serious, at least.” He winked, then rapidly smoothed his face at Iris’s frosty reaction. “Otherwise, I can find something to like about most people.”

“I don’t deal in ‘like’, you know. One night stands are your thing, not mine. If you’re in this, you’re in it for love.”

“Big talk from a short woman,” he teased.

Iris sighed. “As I have pointed out on many occasions, I am *one inch* shorter than you, Aurien.”

“And *I’m* not that tall,” he quipped. “There, that’s something you can put on your list – I’d like to be the taller one, even if it’s only an inch, if we’re talking lifetimes. It doesn’t make a difference in a short fling, but imagine a life where I couldn’t hold something out of my partner’s reach to angle for a kiss.”

“Ah yes, I’ve seen you use that particular flirtation many a time,” said Iris distastefully.

His mouth quirked up. “I thought you weren’t watching. Seems like you saw a bit more than you let on.”

“Unwillingly,” she said, feeling a swell of embarrassment at the accidental admission. “It’s like watching a wolf rip into game. It’s disgusting, but you have to keep your eyes open or it might be you in its jaws next.”

Aurien flinched, then scowled. “Gods. I wasn’t aware you found me *disgusting*. Though I suppose that’s better than refusing to enjoy life.”

“Excuse me?” Iris could barely believe what she was hearing.

“Well, if you’re so anti-romance, what’s with the matchmaking?” He poked a finger at her accusingly. “You want everyone else to be in love – go dreamy-eyed and soppy at the thought, in fact – but gods *forbid* a fellow flirt with you, even in a friendly way. *I* haven’t bothered in years – did you even know being glared at could get *boring*?” His volume increased and his gestures got even bigger; he was obviously warming to his theme. “I mean, the moment a punter even *mildly* indicates they might like you, you shutter up like a snatchplant poked by a kid. If it was just a preference for the platonic stuff, like Devan or Gerrie,

I wouldn't bat an eyelid, but I don't think it is, is it? You *want* romance. You *yearn* for it. You just won't let yourself have it for some reason."

Iris crossed her arms and said, more defensively than she would have liked, "I'm perfectly open to romance. I just don't get involved with customers."

"You don't get involved with *anyone*," he spat.

She'd tried, thought Iris wildly. She'd tried, and he'd rejected her – no, he hadn't even had the courtesy to do that. He'd just ignored her. She hadn't even been worth a rejection.

He wasn't ignoring her now, though. He was watching her with a face that was hard to read; part anger, certainly, but a growing shade of... was that pity? Curiosity? Whatever it was, it was unbearable.

"I'm just busy," she blurted out. "I actually work around here. I don't have time to *play* like you."

Oh, that was a direct hit; the anger was back in control of him now as he leaned forward to snap, "*Play*, as you put it, isn't a dirty word. You should let yourself have a little fun sometimes. You never know, you might enjoy it."

Iris had two options running through her mind: she could take her pen and stab it somewhere very, very painful for Aurien, or she could stop letting him needle her and get this conversation finished so she could find him a match and let everything go back to

normal.

Reluctantly, she chose the second option.

“Enough,” she said sternly, pushing him back into his seat. “We’re not here to discuss my love life, and I’ll thank you to keep your mouth shut on the subject.”

He glanced sharply down at her hand on his shoulder, then eyed her strangely for a moment. As Iris settled back into her own chair, the tension drained out of him until he looked like the languid charmer he usually was. “Fine. Sorry. Truce.” He mimed locking his lips and tossing away the key.

“Good boy,” she said patronisingly, and his eyes flashed with something else she couldn’t name. Oops. She was meant to be settling this down, not pissing him off again. “Now, tell me something else about the person you’re looking for.”

“I thought I was meant to keep my mouth shut?”

She raised an eyebrow in warning.

He huffed a half-laugh. “Okay, okay. I’m talking. I just don’t know what to tell you. I’ll know them when I see them, I guess.”

She took a deep breath and tapped her pen on her order pad, which she’d borrowed to use as, well, an order pad. “I can believe that you don’t have a fixed type, but you must have preferences, at least? Hair? Body? Sense of humour?”

“Any and all of the above. But I do have a weakness for a brunette, especially one with a viciously sharp wit and a nose for a good glass of wine.”

“Right,” said Iris, scribbling some notes. “Light brown, dark brown?”

“Hmm...” Aurien leaned over the table and lifted a lock of her hair to examine. “About this shade is my favourite.”

Iris’s eyes snapped up from her book. His face was playful, mischievous even, like this was a game to him, and that old buried hurt and fury lit up in her like it had been only moments, not years.

“No, Aurien. I don’t know what mad idea you’ve just concocted about my own lack of relationship and how you can fix it, but I’m not some idiot girl to be taken in by your patter again. I refuse to let you—” She broke off, fighting the pinprick of tears, scrabbling for the right words. “I just refuse. You were the one who asked me to do this, and if you’re not going to take it seriously, you can forget about it.” She pushed up from her chair and strode for the stairs. “You can let yourself out. Goodnight.”

As she mounted the stairs, her cheeks burning hot – how stupid she’d been, giving him the opportunity to play her like that; how infuriating he was with his inability to take anything seriously – she thought she

heard him say, “Again?”

But she was probably imagining it.

Two weeks later, Iris was frowning at Bex in the kitchen again, though this time more out of a sense of puzzlement than frustration.

“I don’t get it, Bexie,” she said as she rolled out dough for the morning’s pastries. “Last night’s adventurer ticked all the boxes. But he just kissed the guy on the cheek and said goodnight!”

“Maybe he’s taking things slow,” said Bex, dusting cinnamon over diced apples.

“Aurien?” Iris scoffed. “His idea of slow is... oh, I don’t know, a very fast thing.”

Aurien had apologised, the morning after she’d stormed off partway through their “consultation”, as he was calling it. He’d sheepishly handed her a list of qualities he’d come up with that he valued in a partner – written in his exquisitely ornate handwriting on her scruffy order pad – and promised to take the search seriously now. The earnestness in his voice had been mildly disturbing to Iris; she’d rarely heard the bard say anything without at least a little bit of tease in his tone.

And so, slightly unnerved by the glimpse of Aurien’s feelings – of Aurien *having* feelings – and heeding Bex’s words about getting him to move away,

she'd started to set him up on dates. So far, there'd been one very rich travelling merchant, one pretty bookbinder visiting her sister in River's End, and last night's adventurer, who'd seemed the likeliest yet. But none had been "the one", according to him, and he hadn't taken any out a second time. Iris hadn't tried any regulars yet, since the plan was to get him further away from her, but she was beginning to think she'd have to start scraping the town for them, since he seemed determined to reject each suitor she put in front of him for some flaw or another.

Iris was this close to telling him where he could stick his true love.

"I don't know," said Bex, after a moment's thought. "I've been thinking about it, and it's been a while since he's had a proper fling, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when was the last time he took someone upstairs from the bar?"

"I don't keep a calendar, Bex." She noticed, sure, but she *deliberately* didn't keep track.

"All right, but it's been a while," insisted Bex.

"He probably takes them home instead," Iris said.

"But Marthy hasn't complained about him in ages, and you know the walls in that terrace are so thin." Bex's cousin lived in the house next door to Aurien; Iris had forgotten that.

“Maybe she’s going deaf.”

“Or *maybe* he’s changed,” suggested Bex. “What? It’s been years. Are you the same girl you were at eighteen?”

“I’ve made a point of not being so.”

Bex shrugged. “Well, maybe Aurien has too.”

“Aurien has what?” said Aurien, striding into the kitchen and helping himself to an apple.

Iris resisted the urge to throw herself under the table and hide. “*Aurien* has been very unhelpful in getting himself a new partner,” she gritted out.

The bard looked delighted. “Is this a group effort now?” He waved his apple back and forth between Iris and Bex. “Ooh, do we get to drink and debrief on what went wrong? Because I have a lot of pointers for next time. I didn’t like *any* of them.”

“Absolutely not,” said Iris. “Go away. Your shift doesn’t start until lunchtime.”

Bex laughed. “Oh, let him tell us all the gory details. It might be helpful for the next one, you never know.”

Something in Iris’s chest seized at the thought of having to hear about Aurien’s dates. It was one thing to shove him in the general direction of likely-looking passersby, but another entirely to have to talk about it. She’d made an art of turning a blind eye to his romances in the last fifteen years; she couldn’t start

caring now. What if hearing him identify all the things he found *unattractive* opened up that old wound, the space inside her that whispered that she wasn't worth the romance she adored?

"I..." She realised she'd trailed off, but she had no idea what she'd meant to say. Quickly, she brushed her floury hands on her apron and muttered, "I just remembered I need to do something upstairs."

Bex gave her a knowing look. "Oh, yes. The very important something you were telling me about."

Iris was thirty-three years old and she was *not* going to stick her tongue out at her best friend.

So she left.

Another week later, another two failed dates later, and Iris was swiftly losing what little patience she'd ever had with Aurien.

"This is impossible." Iris groaned, sinking her head into her hands. "Save my sanity – do you want him?"

"Gods, no," laughed Bex. "Gorgeous as he is, he drives me up the wall. And I'm quite happy with Lilya, thank you. Besides, that would be no use to you – he'd be around so much you might as well date him yourself."

Iris snorted. "Oh, sure, as soon as the moon comes to dance in the town square. Aurien hates me just as

much as I hate him.”

It was a Sunday morning, the Duskflower was yet to open, and they were in the kitchen again, making pie for the lunch crowd. It was almost a routine now: Iris gave Aurien the nod when she spotted a potential stranger, Aurien gave the stranger a night’s chance, then Bex got the details from him and passed them onto Iris for deliberation the next time they were alone together.

If you could call them “details”, that was. It seemed that the bard was not as honey-tongued about his personal life as he was in his lyrics.

“Anyway, what was wrong with this one?” Iris asked as she chopped carrots.

“I don’t know,” said Bex. “It really seems like he’s searching for something he doesn’t know how to describe. He keeps talking about a spark. Says it ought to feel like fire in his soul or some bardy bullshit.”

“It’s not anything wrong with *my* skills,” Iris said. “Three sets of visitors I’ve sent up to room seven since he started trying to find someone. All of them got the thud. And I don’t even *know* them!”

“So maybe we have to stop looking at his list of what he wants, and just look for who he has that ‘spark’ with,” Bex said thoughtfully. “Who does he even talk to?”

Iris thought. “He chats to all the customers.”

“Yeah, but that’s just patter. It’s not real.”

“He’s friends with Jamie and Devan, I think, and you two seem to get on okay.”

“No sparks there, though, just his usual too-cool-for-this self. In fact,” Bex said, raising an eyebrow, “the only time I’ve ever seen anything I’d describe as ‘fire’ in him is when he talks to you.”

“What?” Iris sputtered a startled laugh. “Yeah, because he just *loves* how much I hate him.”

Bex started to laugh too, but then looked pensive. “You know... I’m having a thought.”

“Me too,” Iris said slowly. “There *are* people who are into that. Maybe he’s looking for someone who can put him in his place. What about that snooty wizard in room three? She’s haughtier than a flock of peacocks. Might work for Aurien.”

“Well,” said Bex. “We’re not having the *same* thought, obviously, but sure, give it a try. If that doesn’t work for him, we can circle back to my idea.”

The wizard did not, in fact, work for Aurien.

The next night was busier than usual, since the Riverrun Ceremonies at the weekend meant that the Duskflower would be closed for two days. The festive mood always meant a rowdy crowd, too, and after the last customer had left, there was a lot to do to set the

room right before the break. A frazzled Iris cleared tables while Bex closed down the bar; the other staff beetled about righting chairs and wiping up spills. Aurien, predictably, was polishing his lute in the corner, ignoring the chaos around him.

“Aurien,” called Bex from the bar after a while. “Can you run upstairs and see if I left my tray in room seven?”

Astonishingly, Aurien didn’t complain, just called a cheerful “Yep,” and disappeared up the stairs.

Iris stood stunned, completely disbelieving her own eyes. “Bex, *what* in all the lightlost hells just happened?”

“What?” Bex asked innocently. “I needed a spare pair of hands.”

“But... Aurien doesn’t help.” Iris frowned. “How did you get him to help?”

“I asked him nicely, instead of glowering at him and resenting the fact that he doesn’t help?”

“I do not *glower* at Aurien,” said Iris indignantly.

“Yes you do,” chorused everyone in the room.

Iris suddenly found her armful of crockery very heavy, and fled to the kitchen.

Bex followed her. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to tease,” she said, giving Iris a hug.

Iris chuckled. “Yes, you did, but you’re not wrong. I feel a little stupid, actually, for not realising I was

doing it.”

“Hey, we all have our flaws.” Bex took Iris’s pile of plates, then groaned. “Oh, gods, and I just remembered mine. He’s not going to be able to find that tray if he doesn’t know where to look. Do you mind running up to let him know, since your hands are free?”

“Why, what on earth did you do with it?” laughed Iris. “Wait – we didn’t even have anyone in there tonight, did we?”

“No, but...” Bex looked flustered. “I ate my dinner up there, sorry. I know you hate it when we do that, but it was just so noisy down here, and—”

“Don’t worry, I’d have done the same myself if I’d thought about it.” Iris waved a hand, but Bex was still talking, even as she steered Iris out of the kitchen and to the bottom of the stairs.

“—I was trying to finish quickly so I could get back down to work and I shoved it into the secret panel at the back of the wardrobe in case anyone came up before I could grab it, so you’ll have to show him how to open it. You’re the only one who knows how to jimmy it properly. Sorry!”

Iris shot her friend a look of disbelief. “I have to what?”

“It’s fine! You’ll just have to go all the way in, to the back of the room, and stay there for a second to

show him the mechanism.”

Bex was looking downright panicked now, but honestly, Iris was too tired to care. She’d just get upstairs, get the tray, and get back to work. “Fine. You’re so weird, Bexie.”

“But you love me!” A nervous giggle spilled out of Bex’s mouth. “Please remember that!”

Iris hovered awkwardly outside the door of room seven, which was ridiculous, because it was her godsdamned tavern and she had every right to go where she pleased. It was just... It was just that she hadn’t been alone with Aurien since the night they’d argued, and even though this was the most mundane task, she didn’t trust him not to start needling her again. Or herself not to needle him right back.

She took a deep breath and opened the door. “Knock knock,” she said, and instantly regretted not knocking like a normal person.

Aurien was crouched by the bed with his head half under it, and he didn’t look up as she stepped in. “Bex, I can’t find this bloody thing at all – are you sure you left it in here?”

“Uh, not Bex,” said Iris, and was rewarded by Aurien jumping so hard he hit his head on the frame. “Gods, are you okay?”

He checked with a tentative hand. “I’m fine. I’ll

probably have a nice bruise for my next date to swoon over. Got anyone lined up for me tonight?”

“Uh, no,” said Iris. “I’m not here to talk about that, anyway. Bex sent me up to show you where she put the tray.”

“That’s... weird,” said Aurien. “Couldn’t she just come and get it herself? That doesn’t need both of us.”

“You’d think,” sighed Iris, opening the wardrobe doors and feeling for the edge of the secret panel. “But I’m the only one who can get this thing open. Go on, you go back downstairs.” There was a resounding *click* as she found the trigger point for the mechanism, and she grinned to herself.

“Sure you don’t need a hand?”

“I’ll manage without you like always, Aurien.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

She didn’t reply, just reached into the revealed slot and pulled out the tray, then spun on her heel, ready to leave – only to see Aurien gape as the door slammed closed in front of them.

Then came a sound that made Iris’s heart drop: the key turning in the lock.

“What in the—”

“What’s going—”

“This is for your own good,” called Bex, somewhat muffled by the door. “You’ll stay in there

until you work this thing out!” Then, slightly more apologetically, “I left snacks in the bureau.”

“Work *what* thing out?” cried Iris, hammering on the door. “What are you on about? Open the door!”

There was no response, only the sound of Bex’s footsteps pounding down the stairs.

Iris whirled on Aurien. “Is this your doing? Is this some kind of joke?”

“Whoa whoa whoa,” said Aurien, holding up his hands. “Why would it be *my* doing? You think I *want* to spend the night in here with you sniping at me the whole time?”

“I don’t snipe at you!” she scoffed.

“You do nothing *but* snipe at me these days. In fact,” he said, narrowing his eyes at her, “you’ve been sniping at me for fifteen years!”

Iris... couldn’t actually deny that. “Well, maybe you shouldn’t be so godsdamned irritating all the time!”

“I fail to see how me being nice to people is irritating to you!”

“Oh, is that what you call the incorrigible flirting?”

Aurien threw his hands up in the air – actually threw them up, like one of the overdramatic actors in the summer farces. “So I like to flirt! What’s wrong with that?”

What was wrong with that? Only that she knew

exactly what it felt like to be bathed in the warmth of it, and exactly how it felt to have it pulled away in a moment. But she couldn't say that. She settled for a mocking tone as she said, "Oh, no, I just *love* to watch you break hearts instead of working."

"All right, that's the second time you've insulted my work ethic in the last five minutes," said Aurien indignantly. "What in the hells is wrong with how I work? I play everything you ask me to, even the boring stuff, and I *like* to think I do a good job of it."

"You spend half the time winking at customers while I'm sweating my arse off serving them, and you never chip in when it's busy."

"Because when it's busy, you make me play extra sets!"

"Oh, boohoo, did the bard boy have to play his little lute? Forgive me for finding it mildly unfair that you get to have fun all evening while I'm working. And, and..." Iris racked her brain for another argument to add to the fire. Gods, it felt good to get this out. "And you whine constantly about your tips, which you'd find right in front of you if you ever bothered to walk behind the bloody bar to give me a hand!"

Aurien laughed harshly. "If I offered you a hand, you'd bite it off. I don't come near the bar because I'm terrified of losing my life to your venom."

That hit a little too close to home. Iris blinked. “What?”

“You chose to run this tavern, Iris. You took on task after task until even Old Barlow was impressed with you – it’s *you* that you should look at if you want to know why you work so hard, not me.” Aurien stepped closer, jabbing a finger into her shoulder. “*You* could have trained as a bard, if you wanted, instead of sacrificing everything to this godsdamned place, and then you’d be living the high life too.” He laughed humourlessly again. “Except, oh, wait, it’s *also* exhausting to stand up there and sing for hours, and play till your fingers ache, and keep the smile up and the winks flowing because that’s what gets you paid.”

“Oh yes, it’s *so* hard,” said Iris, jabbing his shoulder right back, “swanning around like you’re the gods’ gift to the Duskflower, ooh, look at me, the customers love me, I’m so cool and pretty...”

Aurien grinned. “Well, excuse me for having the face I was born with. I don’t get on your case for being all... all...” He waved a hand at her face. “Looking like *that* everyday. Neither of us can help being pretty.”

Iris snorted. “Oh, shut up. It wasn’t a compliment, and you don’t need to put yourself out returning it. You’re not going to make me like you with cheap

lines.”

“What?” Aurien’s brow crinkled, and he peered more closely at her. “Iris, you’re beautiful. That’s just a fact.”

Iris felt wild – furious, wretched, avenging, full of some nameless, excruciating emotion like a bottle overfilled and threatening to spill. How dare he? How could he stand there and open up that old scar, call her beautiful when she wasn’t, couldn’t be, hadn’t been, not beautiful enough for him? “Oh, come on. ‘Beautiful’.” She snorted. “That’s exactly what you said your first day here, or have you forgotten all that, hm? How you asked me to meet you after work, and then you left me waiting while you spent the night with someone else? You didn’t even bother to tell me you’d picked her over me. You just forgot about me.” She wasn’t going to cry – she *wasn’t* – so she aimed low instead. “You probably even used the same lines on her, and everyone since. So forgive me if I can’t quite bring myself to believe your hollow flattery.”

“Because Old Barlow—” Aurien opened and closed his mouth a few times. Something in the back of Iris’s furious mind found it funny, to see the eloquent bard reduced to speechlessness. “Barlow told me if I touched you he’d kill me, and then fire me, in that order. He said he wouldn’t tolerate any *fraternisation* with his best worker, and told me to go

charm a customer like a bard was supposed to. He— He promised he'd explain to you.” Aurien grabbed Iris's shoulders, searching her gaze for recognition. “Did he *not* explain to you?”

It was Iris's turn to struggle for words; she just shook her head.

Old Barlow had given her a gruff, one-armed hug as she slunk back in that night, and nothing more had ever been said on the matter. He'd never been good at dealing with emotions. He'd probably frozen up at the tears in her eyes, and figured as long as he'd put one of them off, the matter was closed.

Aurien was still holding her by the arms, still looking at her like the world had shrunk to just the two of them. “Gods, that man is very lucky he's already dead. Have you really spent this whole time believing— What, that I *didn't* think you were beautiful, and smart, and everything else you so obviously are? That I didn't think you were good enough? Or that I hated you so much – after spending less than a day with you, to be clear, and one where I thought we got on rather well – that I'd be so cruel? Lightlost hells, no wonder you snipe at me.”

Iris blinked, hard, as if that might reset this baffling conversation back to normality. “But... but you're always arguing with me,” she said.

“*You're* always arguing with *me*, actually. I just

don't like to let you win."

She blinked again. "Because you hate me."

"Not really." He scrunched up his nose like he was thinking. "Not at all, I'm starting to realise. I think I might like you quite a lot more than either of us expected."

"But..." Iris searched his face for any sign he was lying. "But even if Old Barlow told you not to... well, get close to me... We could have still been friends, couldn't we?"

"You made it pretty clear you didn't want to hear anything friendly out of my mouth, so after a few tries, I gave up." He let a small smile cross his face. "Even *my* ego's not invincible, you know."

Iris worried at the inside of her lip. She'd spent a long time not thinking about that year, but now she made herself remember. Aurien's overtures of friendship had felt like falsehoods to her freshly bruised heart, and she'd pushed them away. And kept pushing. Gods, they'd both been idiots. "I thought you were just toying with me," she whispered, pulling out of his grasp so he couldn't look at her quite so intensely.

"I never have been, Iris. I'll admit, I might have... tried to annoy you sometimes, to keep you talking to me." He gave her a sheepish look. "I didn't know why, I just knew I didn't want you to stop entirely. It

sort of became a habit.”

“Oh, really,” Iris deadpanned. “And what about asking me to set you up? Was that all just to annoy me as well?”

“No, I really did want something more than the endless petty flirtations of my job. I still do. But the more I tried, the more I realised spending lovely evenings with all these lovely people was never as much fun as bickering with you.”

“That’s insane, Aurien.” Iris shook her head, trying to make sense of this. “What about the list of things you were looking for?”

“I only made the list at your insistence, you know. What I *actually* said first was that I’d know the right person when I saw them.” He chuckled. “Guess I was wrong about that.”

Iris groaned. “You are the *most* insufferable man I’ve ever met, Aurien.”

“And you drive me to distraction, Iris. Always have.” He poked her gently on the end of her nose. “What do you say we start again, hey? Shall we be friends?”

That formless, nameless wildness filled her again, beating at her chest as if she could wipe that gentle look off his face with only the force of her emotions.

“Gods, Aurien, after all this? I don’t want to be *friends* with you,” she blurted, louder than she’d

meant to.

Aurien stepped back in the face of her shout. Hurt crossed his face, and then anger, and he threw his hands up in the air again. “Well, *excuse* me for thinking we were making progress! What *do* you want, then, if you’re so sure you know?”

“This,” Iris said breathlessly – no space for thoughts – and kissed him.

The kiss was quick, angry and biting and full of everything Iris couldn’t say, and Aurien froze under her attack, his hands still hovering in the air. She pulled back seconds later, filled with a different kind of fire now; shame, rather than fury.

“Gods, Aurien, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

But then Aurien’s hands were flying to cup her face, and his lips were hot with wanting against hers, and the fierceness of it had them stumbling across the room until her shoulders slammed against the locked door, and Iris thought, oh.

This was what it felt like.

Downstairs, in the now-empty bar of the Duskflower Tavern, Bex paused with her wineglass halfway to her lips and smiled.

Iris was right about one thing, she thought. The sound of that *thud* from room seven was very satisfying indeed.

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 fun and fluffy queer-norm fantasy rom-coms. This story begins a new series, but if you enjoyed this and can't wait for more, why not try 'Wizards Unwelcome' in Issue 14 for another magical annoyances-to-lovers rom com? Check out Adie's website [here](#) or find her on social media as @adiehartaauthor.

A Shanty in the Key of F You

Josie Jaffrey

CONTENT WARNING

This story contains descriptions of injuries and
amputation.

Hugo had an affinity for crows.

The birds were ubiquitous in the crowded thoroughfares of the Republic of Pirates, so it was just as well that he was fond of them. How could he not be, when so much of their character reminded him of himself? Like him, they swaggered like thugs, they stuffed their beaks full of any old shit, and they were often associated with murder: both by their collective noun, and by their habit of picking the eyes out of the gibbeted corpses that hung caged in the bay.

But those weren't the only things the crows and Hugo had in common. There was this, too: the crows were mimics. They listened to a tune or a noise once

or twice, then sang it back in reflected perfection, passing themselves off as a seagull, or a cocking flintlock, or even a human voice, whatever served their purposes best at the time. Although their musical genius was wrapped in an unappealing package, it was genius nonetheless.

That same proficiency was the only card Hugo had left to play in this town and, god willing, today it was going to save his life.

Or not. Who knew? His story was a song that had yet to be sung.

“Hugo! Get your arse in here, now!”

The yell came from inside the tavern. He was out back, grabbing another barrel of the miscellaneous fermented liquid that passed for ale in these parts, but he could already hear the chaos that had ensued in his absence: glass smashing, furniture breaking, and everyone screaming bloody murder. Hugo had been a lackey at Mungo’s for months now, doing everything from barrel-rolling to gun-running in Nassau’s grubbiest bar, but his real job was to be conspicuous. With him in the room, only the stupidest and most inebriated of the bar’s patrons would dare to start trouble. When they did, Hugo ended it quickly.

When he wasn’t there? Well, the picaroons were pirates. Shit kicked off.

The first thing he saw when he pushed his way

back inside was the fire, which wasn't a good sign in a tinderbox like the Republic. At this time of year, it was hot and dry and a little spark went a long way, as evidenced by the flames that were already licking their way up the back of the bar to the top shelf, where Mungo stored the only decent liquor he sold.

Oh, hell no.

"Fuck!" Mungo yelled. Some scurvy-looking bastard that Hugo didn't recognise had the boss pinned to the bar with a forearm across this throat. "Save the rum!"

"No need," a man said.

He was tall and lithe, fair-skinned and dark-haired, with a charcoal-coloured shirt and a rakish tip to his hat. He unfurled his purple-lined cloak with a flourish and threw it across the flames, tamping them down to nothing but a wisp of smoke. Then he slipped behind the bar, pulled Mungo's best rum from the top shelf, popped out the cork with his thumb and swigged from it, fixing his shark-black eyes on the brawling drinkers as he did so.

By that point, the fighting was so out of hand that even Hugo couldn't stop it without getting his fists bloody, so he waded in and did his damned job. The first few troublemakers were easy enough to dispose of – regulars who hung around waiting for an opportunity to prove themselves, and failed thrice

weekly – but there were hardier folk in the mix too. Those took a little more beating. One was felled with a stool to the groin, another by a dish to the voice box, the third by a lit candle to the eye. In a place like Mungo's, it wasn't hard to find a makeshift weapon in the unlikely event that you had brought none of your own. Hugo worked his way through what came to hand, toppling disgruntled punters one by one until just the man strangling the boss remained. Maybe he should have dealt with the blackguard sooner, but Mungo was running behind on his wages, so Hugo had an axe of his own to grind. When he finally came to the rescue, it took only a second or two to kick the attacker to the ground and stamp him into compliance.

All the while, the man behind the bar just stood and watched, and drank his rum.

Hugo could imagine what he was thinking.

Brute.

That's what the denizens of the Republic of Pirates saw when they looked at Hugo's tall, bulky, muscular frame: a bully. An ox. They didn't see the repressed music in his soul, or the sores of venereal disease hidden under his clothes. Both were eating him alive all the same.

But hopefully not for much longer.

"I heard you were looking for me, musician," the man said, draining the rest of Mungo's rum.

He spoke too well for the person Hugo had been expecting. This man was no deckhand or lackey. Hugo blinked away the blood and smoke residue, looking more closely at the quality of the man's clothes, the confidence of his swagger and the bottomless depths of his eyes; so dark that they appeared to be all pupil, no iris.

"You're..." Hugo murmured.

Captain Drake.

Drake was a living – undying – legend. Not only did he enjoy the unnaturally-long lifespan that graced several of the Republic's most infamous buccaneers, he also had a reputation for sharing the secret of his long life with others who were in need.

And who were prepared to offer him their indentured service in return, of course. He was a pirate, not a philanthropist.

Finding Drake standing in front of him now was the culmination of Hugo's hard work over the past few years, making a name for being a stalwart crew member and bruiser, even if he would rather have been known for his musical talent. The best Hugo had hoped for was that he might receive a messenger from Drake, at best. He had not been prepared for a visit from the man himself.

"You're looking for me?" Hugo asked hesitantly.

"You are Hugo, yes?" Drake replied. "You play the

tin whistle?”

“Yes.” Hugo’s heart beat a little faster. Maybe, finally, someone wanted him for the music and not the fists. “And you’re...”

“Willem Drake,” the man said. Then he smiled a little and added, “They call me ‘Kill ‘em’, I believe. At your service. Or rather, should I say, you are at mine?”

Hugo should have said *oh god yes please* or something to that effect, but he found that he didn’t have the words.

“Come with me,” Drake said with an indulgent smile, wrapping an arm around Hugo’s back – he couldn’t reach all the way around Hugo’s shoulders – and leading him towards the door.

“Where are we going?” Hugo asked.

“To the pub,” Drake said.

“We’re already in a pub.”

“Yes, but we’re going to *my* pub. You want to see it, don’t you?”

The famous Silver Pieces o’Eight? Hugo truly did.

He looked over his shoulder at his erstwhile boss, who was still coughing on the ground. He didn’t feel guilty about that, because god knew well enough that Mungo deserved the same again three-score times over, but Mungo’s had been a home, of sorts, for a time.

That time was over now.

He let himself be led away. To adventure, and to life eternal.

The Silver Pieces o'Eight was less a pub and more a private club. Most captains in the Republic couldn't even get in the door, and those that could were just *different* from those that couldn't. The distinction wasn't one of wealth, or style, or class, but somehow transcended every other indicator that segregated life outside the Republic of Pirates to make a novel elite of its own. The elite of the Silver – as people called the place, for short – had something indefinably inhuman about them.

They moved with more strength and speed. They had sharper reflexes and keener senses. And, most importantly of all, they never aged, they never got sick, and they never died.

As evidenced by the man currently striding along beside Hugo, getting him a free pass into the Silver.

He might have introduced himself as Willem Drake, but that wasn't the man's true name. After months of poking his nose where it wasn't wanted, Hugo had learned that – contrary to popular belief – Francis Drake had not died of dysentery following his failed assault on Panama in 1596. Instead, he'd started a trend for reinvention that all the other buccaneer

captains had followed over the next century, becoming first Henry Drake, then Richard Drake, and finally Willem Drake, at least for the time being.

The dysentery hadn't been his idea, of course. That little detail had come courtesy of rival captain Bartholomew Sharp, as he most recently had been. Bartholomew himself had apparently died in debtors' prison – an end barely less ignominious than Drake's own – but that hadn't stuck, either. If Hugo had learned anything during his time eavesdropping in Nassau, it was that pirates like Drake and Bartholomew didn't stay dead for long.

He'd come to the Silver to find out how.

Now, seeing the place filled to the brim with the most imposing pirates that roamed the Spanish Main, he was questioning the wisdom of his choices. The room wasn't any bigger the other dark and pokey taverns scattered throughout the ramshackle spread of Nassau. If anything, it was darker and pokier, but it felt richer, as though the few pirates who chose to make it their haunt were all successful enough to be generous with their payment. They sat in velvet armchairs and lounged on silk chaises longues, their bored gazes casting dismissively over the congregation of entertainers that was gathering at the back of the pub, as though they knew in advance that nothing here was capable of offering them any joy.

Jaded, Hugo thought.

He had an idea that he could do something about that.

“Sit,” Drake said, pointing at a stool against the back wall, then he retreated to the comfort of a cushioned throne amongst his peers.

There were a dozen other stools lined up beside Hugo’s, all occupied by musicians of various stripes, judging by the colourful array of instruments they bore. He recognised a few of the players, the cream of the crop that Nassau had to offer. They looked at him askance, clearly struggling to imagine what business a tavern guard dog like him had in their company.

Musicians were valuable on board ship, and this group were behaving with a snobbery that reflected that value. Not only did they provide a much-needed escape from the drudgery of seafaring, they also helped the crew keep in time while rowing and hauling lines. Musicians could be assured of a warm welcome on any ship, but Hugo had too often found his captains impatient of his desire to waste his strength in music, even before they heard him play. He had muscles, and they expected him to use them.

But tonight was the Silver’s musician draft, invitation only, and Hugo had been walked through the door by Drake himself. If that wasn’t an invitation, he didn’t know what was.

The captains sat arrayed before them, each with a coloured handkerchief close by. That was how they would indicate their bids for the evening's performers: a single flourish of the 'kerchief to indicate an interest in acquiring the performer as a crew member, a 'kerchief thrown to indicate a firm offer. There were all the colours of the rainbow in the room, each chosen to match the colour of the captains' ships' sails: red for Drake, cream for Constantine, black for Bartholomew, blue for Carmen, then four more colours for captains Hugo didn't know by name. Drake sat in the centre, almost-undisputed king of all he surveyed, with Carmen and Constantine to either side of him. Bartholomew was the outlier, sitting at the back of the gathering, wreathed in shadows. His sea-grey eyes watched the other captains more than they watched the performers who were now plodding through their repertoires with varying levels of aplomb.

Some of the musical choices were... questionable at best. You didn't want to be a fiddler on board ship, however traditional it might be, because the damp played merry hell with the cow gut. You didn't want to be a concertina-player either, because once salt got into the leather the thing would start farting air out in all directions until you could replace the valves, not to mention the inconvenience of carting it around with

you in the middle of a boarding action while bullets and sabres flew. Hugo himself favoured the tin whistle. It wasn't a showy instrument. Simple and pure, it presented him with no particular environment-related issues, and it tucked neatly away into the inner pocket of his tattered waistcoat when not in use. He pulled it out now as he walked to the cleared area in the centre of the room to take his turn, then paused with his eyes closed for a moment to let the anticipated jeers wash over him.

Oh, look, the brute thinks he can carry a tune.

He'd be better off carrying lumber.

Who let the ox have a pipe?

It seems like a toothpick in his fat hand, doesn't it?

He could have taken the time to wash the blood off before he came in here to dirty our floor.

Then silence. When he opened his eyes, several people around the room had blades pressed to their throats.

Captain Drake nodded at him and said, "Play."

Hugo nodded back, lifted the whistle to his lips, then stepped out of the pub and into the space between here and there, where the notes cascaded like waterfalls in symphony and soared to the sky on gossamer wings. At some point, he must have closed his eyes again, because when he opened them there were eight coloured 'kerchiefs piled at his feet like

seaweed cast up the beach by the tide.

“Well,” said Drake with a hungry smile. “It seems you may have your choice.”

Hugo looked again at the drift of ’kerchiefs on the floor.

“Choose wisely, friend,” called a voice from the edge of the room, so far away that Hugo was left wondering how his black token had reached the pile at all.

But really, it was no choice at all.

Red ’kerchief. Red sails.

A few of the Nassau captains dyed their sails with preservatives that gave them a red hue, so the colour wasn’t entirely uncommon, but those hues were usually more ochre than crimson. None of those ships looked like an army had just bled out on their rigging, except the vessel captained by Willem Drake. Maybe that was why people had nicknamed him ‘Kill ‘em’, or maybe the moniker had a darker origin. If so, Hugo wasn’t interested in hearing it. Drake ran the only ship in the Caribbean that he was sure could give him what he wanted, so he was determined to take a place on its crew.

Whatever the cost.

He bent to retrieve the red ’kerchief from the floor, then took a knee in front of the pirate throne to return it to his new master: Captain Kill ‘em Sir Willem

Richard Henry Francis Drake.

The rest of that night was a blur. Hugo remembered retrieving his meagre belongings from Mungo's – a hat, a coat, a spare blade – then it was back to the Silver Pieces o'Eight to celebrate. A few of the other musicians were there too, selected by different captains for their crews, and merriment abounded. With so much grog on deck, lips were loosened. Hugo had struggled to learn much pertaining to the reincarnation of his new pirate captain before that night, leaving him with little but whispers and rumours to go on, but now the tales flowed as freely as the rum.

Vampires, someone vouchsafed to him, though the exact identity of the vouchsafer was hazy. *A blood exchange, a little bite, and eternal life is yours.*

Better than a slow death from syphilis, Hugo had replied.

He remembered a smile, the confidential comfort of the shadows, and a hell of a lot of booze. The next thing he knew, he was blinking awake on the deck of a rocking ship to find himself staring bleary-eyed into the face of an immortal and infamous pirate of the Caribbean.

Problem was, it was the wrong fucking one.

Arse.

He'd been press-ganged.

"Welcome aboard the *Fortune*," Bartholomew cackled. "Like your rum, don't you, boy?"

Hugo groaned and tried to sit up, holding his head. He blinked into the cloudless sky above to see a score of faces silhouetted against the sun. People crowded close, legs surrounding him like bars in a jail cell, blocking his exit. As if there was anywhere for him to go. Even with his view impeded as it was, he could still see through the legs to the open ocean beyond.

So much for his deal with Drake.

"I'm sworn to another crew," Hugo murmured groggily. "Isn't kidnapping members of other ships against the Code?"

"The code of the Republic of Pirates? Perhaps," Bartholomew said. "The code of the Silver? Well, that's a different matter entirely."

"The Silver?" Hugo asked, even more at sea than he had been a moment ago. "The pub has its own code?"

"The vampires who populate it do. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?" Bartholomew crouched down beside Hugo, tilting his head as he contemplated him, as a vulture might contemplate a piece of carrion. "Eternal life. A cure for the disease that's killing you, though no doubt a death by venereal disease is only fair punishment for the carnality of your sins."

Hugo would have laughed at that if he hadn't worried that the force of it would unseat the liquor he was still somehow retaining in his poisoned stomach. What did Bartholomew care for sin? His sails might be black instead of red, but they doubtless hid just as many bloodstains as Drake's proudly displayed.

"I'll tell you what," Bartholomew said, leaning low as he flourished a piece of parchment. "You sign *these* Articles, and I'll think about giving you what you want."

"*Think* about it?" Hugo repeated. "That doesn't sound like much of a deal."

"Maybe not, but I guarantee you that I *won't* think about it if you don't. Given that you're stuck in the middle of the Spanish Main on my ship, surrounded by my crew, I'd say that's about the best deal you're going to get."

"I'd say a deal with the devil is no deal at all," Hugo snapped back, earning himself a cuff around the ears that was so hard he started vomiting last night's rum after all. It pooled on the deck with the blood that dripped from his split lip.

"You'll come around," Bartholomew said, delicately stepping out of range.

Shame. Hugo would have enjoyed dirtying his shoes.

"This is Wolfrie," Bartholomew said, indicating a

short, barrel-chested man whose white face was so covered in hair that for a moment Hugo mistook him for a bear. “And this is Phinchas.” The second man was dark-skinned, tall and lanky, like a greyhound walking on its hind feet. Neither of them wore expressions that filled Hugo with confidence. “You’re learning the ropes with them, so pay attention and maybe they won’t throw you overboard.” Then Bartholomew held his hand down to Hugo and said, “Whistle.”

Hugo was momentarily confused. “You want me to play?”

“No,” Bartholomew said impatiently, “I *don’t* want you to play. Musicians get privileges on this crew, but you’re not *on* the crew, are you? Not until you sign the Articles.”

Then he reached into Hugo’s waistcoat pocket and snatched out the tin whistle before Hugo could object.

“If you’d ever like to see it again,” Bartholomew said, disappearing it into his coat, “then I suggest you get to work.”

Life on board ship was painful and boring.

Hugo had known this, of course. This was hardly his first foray into piracy, and he’d never been one to flinch at hard work, but the crew of the *Fortune* were unlike any crew he’d served with before. When they

slept – *if* they slept – they did so with a peace that was so still it was eerie. When they argued, each seemingly-innocuous exchange reordered their hierarchy in ways Hugo couldn't understand, and had no interest in learning. When they took a prize, they didn't look for treasure, they looked for blood.

Perhaps those raids might have been considered exciting to someone with more gruesome tastes than Hugo, but it was hard for him to be sure, since he spent each one locked up safely in the aft cabin with the rest of the human crew – just seven besides himself, less than half of the crew's full complement. Unlike his fellow humans, he never knew where the ship was, where they were sailing to, or why. That information was not entrusted to him, because although he was used by the crew, he was not part of it.

Every day, he was made to feel the inadequacy of his existence, not just by the sores that still ate at his flesh, but by the dismissal with which he was treated by the inhuman members of their company. On other ships, his status as even an occasional musician had earned him at least some respect, not to mention the fear he earned with his strength. Here, those things meant less than nothing. On a ship populated by vampires, he was suddenly weaker than half the crew. He was beneath them, but worse: he hadn't signed his

mark in blood to Bartholomew's Articles, so they didn't trust him, either. The beatings came fast, seemingly without incitement, and so forcefully that even he was not strong enough to fend them off.

But Hugo, who'd always been possessed of more rebellious spirit than common sense advised, did not go quietly into his servitude. He might not have had his instrument anymore, but he still had his voice, and it was beautiful. Not choirboy beautiful, high and keening, but low and resonant, like the mourning call of the sea itself. If he was to be allowed no other weapons – they had taken his knives – then he would sing his protest instead.

Hugo soon learned that Bartholomew did not tolerate insubordination.

"I'd set my heart on sails of red," he sang as he hauled buckets of saltwater up the side of the ship, "but got stolen away by the black instead—"

His song was stopped by a rag pushed forcibly down his throat by Wolfrie, who had been standing at the other end of the ship just moments ago, but had somehow crossed its length in less than a second to mete out Bartholomew's punishment. The man himself stood at the wheel on the quarterdeck, watching the interaction with such an expression on his face that Hugo – blinking away the tears as he choked on the rag – could not quite tell whether he

had ordered the punishment or not.

Days later, he risked a second song.

It started innocuously enough, the ballad of a man who went to sea seeking his fortune. Then came the climactic couplet of the second verse.

“I wanted to sign to a ship o’ the line,” he intoned as he swabbed the floors, shaking the deck with the timbre of his voice, “but blood-sucking Bart’s no captain of mine—”

Phinchas was the author of the interruption this time, with a punch to Hugo’s stomach that landed with such force it had him spitting up blood for a week. For days he assumed he’d suffered some internal injury that would slowly bleed him to death, but he wasn’t so lucky. Every dawn he woke up alive in the bowels of the ship, bathed in the fetid odour of twenty other damp and unwashed men. Every dawn he returned to his work on the deck, anticipating the beatings that followed as surely as the sunrise, knowing the wounds he suffered would have no chance to heal before more were layered on top of them.

Still, he couldn’t resist the urge to sing his defiance.

“Of all the vampires that hunt on the sea, my choice would be anyone else but thee—”

That one earned him a broken finger from

Bartholomew himself. A minor hurt, in the scheme of things, until it turned gangrenous.

“Sign the Articles,” Bartholomew had told him when, three days later, the thing began to reek. “Maybe then I’ll give you what you want.”

Hugo hadn’t understood at the time. His lackeys explained later.

“Vampires are able to heal themselves,” said Wolfrie.

“But if you lose that finger as a human,” Phinchas said, wrinkling his nose at the stench, “then it’ll stay lost.”

It was Hugo’s left index finger. Not the most important of digits, but without it his ability to play the music he loved would be irreparably altered. For a musician trapped in a fighter’s frame, it was exactly what he had always feared: that his body would become a cage for his soul. What was worse, then? To lose his finger, and with it part of his ability, or mortgage his entire life to a captain who would likely never grant him the eternal cure he craved?

Hugo chose to lose the finger. Eventually, it had to be amputated by the ship’s cook. Given how dirty the knife had been, Hugo had more than a fleeting concern that he might end up losing the whole hand. That wasn’t his only concern, though.

“One more song like that,” Bartholomew had

whispered as he'd bent Hugo's finger until it snapped, "and I'll cut that silver tongue right out of your mouth."

Hugo sang no more.

Until, one day, a crow came to land on the railing of the quarterdeck, beside the spot where Hugo sat fixing a hole in the ship's fishing net. They couldn't be so very far from land, he reasoned, if the bird would fly out to join him here.

He passed a crumb of biscuit to the creature, watching as it pecked the dry fare from the railing with little enthusiasm.

"You'd prefer something bloodier, I suppose," Hugo murmured.

The crow bobbed up and down in apparent agreement before kicking the remains of the biscuit to the deck in disgust.

"You'd fit in well here," Hugo commented.

"You don't, though," said Wolfrie.

The man had snuck up without Hugo noticing, which was surprising since he usually moved with such firm steps, regardless of the inhuman grace he possessed. Wolfrie was the kind of person who liked people to hear him coming, so they could tremble at the sound. With the sun setting brightly on the other side of the ship behind Wolfrie, Hugo had to squint up

at him. That was why, at first, his tread was the only thing about him that seemed amiss.

“Drink this,” Wolfrie said quietly, handing Hugo a vial.

At which point it became apparent that this wasn’t Wolfrie. He had the same barrel-like build, was roughly the same height, and bore the same hair-covered visage, but as Hugo looked closer he realised he couldn’t be sure that the figure was even a *he* at all. The beard was fake, the barrel chest padded and the bare feet altogether too devoid of hair to belong to Wolfrie himself.

Hugo pushed the vial back into the imposter’s hand. He wouldn’t have drunk a mystery substance given to him by a genuine member of Bartholomew’s crew, and he certainly wasn’t going to drink one handed to him by a complete stranger.

“From Drake,” the imposter insisted, wrapping Hugo’s fingers around the vial. “Drink it. A gift, from him to you. He said to tell you that if you still want to join his crew, he’ll give you an eternity in exchange.”

“What?” Hugo blinked. “Why?”

“Not sure if you noticed,” the imposter said quietly. “But he and your captain don’t like each other much. Drink the blood.”

“The *blood*?”

But Not-Wolfrie had already backed up to the

railing, slipped over the side of the ship and disappeared overboard with a gentle splash. That's when Hugo noticed the sails silhouetted against the setting sun, little more than dots on the horizon, so far away that the lookout in the crow's nest had not yet started screeching the alarm.

He held the vial up to the sun's dying light, tilting it this way and that to see the liquid inside. The glass was so thick and poorly-made that it was practically obscure, but not so dull as to mask the darkness of its contents.

A blood exchange, a little bite, and eternal life is yours.

Hugo popped the cork and gulped it down. The liquid was sickly and metallic, but not much worse than the slop he was forced to subsist on as part of the *Fortune's* crew. After that, he only had a fraction of a second to act, and he was going to make it count.

"Come all you seamen bold of heart," Hugo sang, standing as he threw the net aside and raised his voice into the rigging, *"all you that make frigates your homes..."*

Bartholomew's head snapped in Hugo's direction, to the east, just as Hugo had hoped it would.

"Hugo..." the captain called in a warning tone.

But Hugo wasn't so foolish as to sing of rebellion now. Instead, he held up one finger to the captain,

asking for a moment's patience as he continued, "*Let's raise a glass for Captain Bart, far on the sea he roams.*

He is the boldest pirate that ever you did hear.

There's not been such a robber found for above this hundred year."

The toadying was shameless and transparent, but in the rumbling bass notes of Hugo's voice, the lyrics felt reverent and true. He had little power with words when he spoke, but when Hugo sang he could turn preachers pirate and pirates preacher.

It helped that they'd been at sea for weeks now with little entertainment other than the murder and mayhem in which the inhuman crew revelled. Given everything Hugo had seen, they likely thought he'd had the insubordination beaten out of him. Surrounded by vampires who could end his life in a second, a little flattery was just common sense. Not only did the crew not find it suspicious, Bartholomew even seemed to find it *proper*. He smiled down on Hugo from the forecandle, fat with satisfaction.

So Hugo drew it out. He took some indulgences with the tune, stretching single syllables into cascading runs that settled in the base of his stomach like a dirge before cresting into notes so high and clear they sounded like siren song. By the time he reached the final verse, the entire crew had gathered

around him on the quarterdeck, quiet settling over his audience like the air over a becalmed sea.

“And then the Royal flagship, she fired and fired in vain,

Till six and thirty of her men all on the deck were slain;

Go home, go home, says Captain Bart and tell your king for me,

If he reigns king on all the land, Bart will reign king on sea.”

As the last note rang out across the company, the cheers poured back, and Hugo smiled into the sunset. He was going to enjoy what happened next.

“Sails!” the lookout yelled from the crow’s nest. He had been just as distracted as the rest of the crew, and had only just noticed the flotilla of ships that was bearing down on them. “Sails to the west!”

Bartholomew growled and shot a look at Hugo that promised trouble later, then demanded of the lookout, “What colour?”

“Red!” the lookout called down.

“What *colour* red?”

The lookout hesitated for a moment, by which time Bartholomew had become impatient and scrambled up the rigging himself, faster than should have been possible. He would only be able to confirm what Hugo could already see clearly for himself: they were

a red so deep that it could only have been intended to imitate blood, or perhaps been created from the real thing.

And they were very, very close.

The crew tried to turn the *Fortune*, but it was no use. They had been making a leisurely pace during Hugo's song, and now it was too late to run.

"You took something that rightfully belongs to me!" Drake yelled from the prow of his ship, his voice carrying across the scant stretch of water that now separated them.

"We're pirates!" Bartholomew yelled back. "What did you expect?"

"A little professional courtesy?" Drake suggested.

"For *you*? I suppose you want to parley."

"No," Drake yelled back. "I just want my musician."

"Then come and take him!" Bartholomew replied.

Which was rash, considering that the two ships were now within striking distance of each other.

The first cannon shot tore through the *Fortune's* mizzenmast, ripping it up from its roots and toppling it over until it loomed precariously above Hugo's head, which was as far as the ropes that held it would allow. For now. It creaked and groaned, suspended halfway on its journey to the quarterdeck. It was clear that the stays wouldn't be able to slow its descent for

long. When they inevitably gave out, it was poised to crash straight through the spot where Hugo was crouching.

Hugo leapt down to the main deck just in time, but by that point the splintering quarterdeck wasn't the only thing he had to worry about. Drake's ship was close enough that his crew was already boarding the *Fortune*, and they'd skipped straight from cannon fire to guns, blades and hand-to-hand combat. Hugo didn't have so much as a blade of his own, but he snatched a sabre from a fallen crewmate so he could at least defend himself. The problem was, he wasn't entirely certain whom he should be defending himself *from*.

For a moment, he cast around, trying to take stock, but everyone was moving so quickly that he could barely even see them, let alone work out which way the fight was going. Then someone blew a horn – an instrument that did not belong to the *Fortune* – and the battle stilled around him as the crew sought the source of the sound.

It was coming from the mainmast, barely ten paces from the spot where Hugo stood. Drake's crew were holding Bartholomew back against the spar, one wrangling each limb. They must have been as inhuman as Bartholomew was himself, or else they wouldn't have been able to restrain him.

"I'll be taking my musician now," Drake said,

calling down from the forecastle deck.

Hugo saw something familiar glinting inside Bartholomew's coat and saw his chance to change his fate. Before he could think too hard about it, he took those ten paces forward and pulled his tin whistle from Bartholomew's pocket.

"And I'll be taking this," he said.

Bartholomew laughed, surprised for a moment, then angry as he realised that he had been deceived by Hugo's song. "You can't even play it," he hissed mockingly, his voice low enough that only Hugo and the pirates holding Bartholomew could hear. "With that missing finger, what use are you as a piper?"

Hugo stared at the fury roiling in Bartholomew's ocean-grey eyes, and felt only emptiness in return. Bartholomew was right: the whistle felt foreign in his hand, now. He could retrain himself to play without the missing finger, perhaps, but when would he be afforded the time for such an endeavour?

The hopelessness of it all threatened to overwhelm him.

Then Drake pulled out his pistol and shot Bartholomew in the head. For a moment, no one moved, then in the next moment, *everyone* was moving. While Drake's crew had been holding Bartholomew captive, they'd been holding the rest of his crew captive too, but now that Bartholomew was

down, his crew was eager to retaliate in kind. Hugo was surrounded by gunfire and screaming, some of the latter of which was his own. The whole fight moved at such a pace that he couldn't follow it, with brawls rolling from one deck to another in less time than it took him to blink. Barrels were exploding, cannon were somehow firing again, and wood was splintering all around him as he ran for cover. All he could do was stick his back to the wall of the forecastle with the other humans and hope he didn't get in the way. He thought he'd been doing a pretty good job of that until someone grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him quickly and forcefully through the forecastle door and into the crew living quarters beyond.

At first, he fought, then he saw who was doing the pulling.

"Tell me you drank it," Drake demanded. "The vial."

Hugo's head was spinning, but he managed to nod.

"Good enough," Drake said, then he lunged at Hugo.

After that, there was only pain. It felt like the bite lasted forever, but Hugo couldn't be sure how long the transformation took exactly, because pain turned into cold turned into darkness, then into nothing at all.

When Hugo came to, he was lying in a hammock in an unfamiliar cabin. Night had fallen outside, and it was a quiet one. He could hear people talking out on the deck, but in the hushed tones that you only got in the predawn hours of the middle watch. Wherever he was, the fight was clearly over for him.

Hugo got to his feet more easily than he had in months, without pain or strain, and pushed his way through what turned out to be the forecastle door of an unfamiliar ship. He was on the main deck. Even in the low light, he recognised the blood-red sails.

“Ah,” Drake said quietly from his place by the wheel. “Our slumberer awakens.”

Somehow, despite the noise of the ship and the wind and the waves, Hugo could hear every word perfectly. That seemed strange, until he remembered. He remembered the vial of blood, and Drake’s teeth puncturing his skin, and felt for the bite mark he knew should be marring his neck. But there was nothing, just a bloodstain on his shirt that frankly might have come from anywhere.

Abruptly, he turned his back on the captain and opened his trousers, looking by lantern light for the evidence of the disease that had been killing him for more years than he could count.

Nothing.

No sores. No bleeding. Just clear skin and more

strength in his limbs than he had felt since he was a lad.

Behind him, Drake was laughing softly, but not unkindly. Hugo turned back to him with a sheepish grin.

“Come,” Drake said. “Join us.”

That was when Hugo noticed the person he’d been thinking of as Not-Wolfrie standing beside the stays that were anchored to the quarterdeck, the padding gone from their chest and the beard mostly-gone, with just a few spots of glue and hair to demonstrate where it had been. They remained too androgynous for Hugo to make a guess at their gender.

“Lo,” they said, nodding at Hugo as they tugged at the ropes, checking that everything was secure.

The crow was there too, watching from the rigging as though it belonged there. At first, Hugo assumed it had followed him from the *Fortune*. When it hopped up onto Not-Wolfrie’s shoulder and they petted it affectionately, Hugo was a little disappointed. It had not been there for him, after all.

“Bartholomew’s dead?” he asked Drake.

“I doubt that,” Drake replied. “But as you didn’t sign his Articles— You didn’t, did you?”

“No,” said Hugo.

“Then you’re free to crew whichever ship you should choose. May I introduce you to the *Pelican*?”

Hugo thought on the name. "Because she carries us all in her beak?"

"Because she feeds her brood with her own blood, or so they say." Drake grinned a sly grin. "You know the story? Never having observed that behaviour for myself, I cannot vouch for its accuracy, but I do enjoy the analogy."

The man captained a ship with blood-red sails. It should have come as no surprise that his tastes veered towards the macabre, but it unsettled Hugo nonetheless. He was not yet sure that he had found the safe harbour for which he had prayed.

"So," said Not-Wolfrie. "Are you staying?"

"Do I have a choice?" Hugo asked.

"Certainly," Drake said. "I have done my part, admittedly in more straitened circumstances than I might have chosen. It remains for you to decide whether you will accept your part of our bargain."

"As part of your brood?" Hugo asked, a slip he could only blame on the blood loss.

"As part of my *crew*," Drake corrected him.

Hugo shrugged with resignation. "I accepted that part back in the Silver Pieces o'Eight."

"It's not so bad," Not-Wolfrie said, pulling a small pan flute from their own pocket and wagging it at him. "Musicians get Sundays off."

Musicians.

Until he heard that acknowledgement, Hugo hadn't dared to believe that this crew might truly want him for his music rather than for his brawn. Perhaps Drake was just as unscrupulous and bloodthirsty as his reputation suggested, but he had kept his word. He'd given Hugo exactly what he'd promised, and if Hugo could finally be appreciated for his musical talent on top of that, did any of the rest of it matter? Was this not what he had always wanted?

"Yes," Hugo said quickly. "Oh god, yes, please."

"Excellent!" Drake said. "Then I must tender my apologies for the delay in coming to your rescue. But still, no harm done."

"No, I..." Hugo looked down at the stump where his finger had once been, before hastily hiding it behind his other hand and agreeing, "No harm done."

What was he going to do, complain that the man who'd just given him eternal life hadn't come quickly enough? He wasn't so ungrateful, nor so stupid.

"Well, then." Drake leaned on the wheel, the picture of satisfied control. "On to Nassau!"

It was a dismissal. Hugo hesitated, wondering what he should be doing, but his tired feet were already walking him back to his hammock. Someone fell in step beside him, then gently reached out to pull his hands away from each other.

"Ah," said Not-Wolfrie quietly, spotting the

missing digit.

Hugo shrugged, trying to pretend it didn't hurt him to have his instrument back in his pocket, but not the fingers to play it with.

"Oh, well," Not-Wolfrie said lightly. "Lucky for you, you only need six fingers to play your whistle. Just learn to use a different one instead of the one you lost."

Hugo smiled ruefully. "I'd need to practice for months and months..."

"Good thing you've probably got centuries then, eh?" Not-Wolfrie smiled. "Don't worry, musician. You'll play again. Until then, you can sing. We all know that you can; we heard you do it. I, for one, would like to hear you do it again." Then they patted him on the shoulder and leapt up and away into the rigging.

As Hugo watched, the crow flew up beside its master and into the night, circling around the *Pelican* like it was marking out its territory.

Hugo's soul flew with it.

Lyrics for Hugo's "Captain Bart" song adapted from the seventeenth-century English folk song "Ward the Pirate".

Josie Jaffrey is an indie author of queer-normative

dark fantasy and paranormal romance who lives in Oxford, England. You can find Josie on social media as @JosieJaffrey. If you enjoyed this short story, you might also enjoy the QuickSilver trilogy, a sapphic dark fantasy series featuring Bartholomew from this story. Check it out [here](#).

Fenmen on Stilts

Andrew Wickham

He had the perfect band name: Fenmen on Stilts. It would be funny, he said, to those who *got it*. And for sixteen-year-old Mackenzie Burns, who would turn seventeen by the end of the year, distinguishing between those who did and did not *get it* was of the utmost importance.

Mackenzie had the name for his band, he just required the musicians. And to get those he needed to attend college. I imagine him in that dingy cave of a bedroom, throwing on some clothes from the crumpled pile at the end of his bed. In the kitchen he would grab a scalding hot Pop-Tart from the toaster before slinging his guitar – no case, of course – and his canvas bag over his shoulder.

Mackenzie had his pick of the numerous drummers and pianists in the Music class. Bass, however, was a problem: the guitarists simply refused to switch to four strings. Mackenzie asked them, “Have you not heard McCartney’s bass line on ‘You Won’t See Me’?” He appealed, “Listen to Mani on ‘I Am the

Resurrection’...” But it was all in vain until he met the girl with the flute.

And that is where I come in.

Initially, I was of no interest to him, just a flautist progressing slowly through the ABRSM Grade exams. Then one dreary September afternoon, he overheard me among my small gaggle of similarly square classically-trained friends expressing a desire to play something “cooler than flute,” and saw his opportunity. Mackenzie Burns would create a bass player.

We met at first in college for bass tuition, where he began showing me how to position my fingers on the fretboard, naming the strings EADG, and so on. Constant disturbances from other students frustrated Mackenzie and forced us into holding lessons at his house where he had two basses: fretted and fretless and numerous other bits and pieces of instruments scattered all over. If his parents were home, I do not recall seeing them. Perhaps they simply left their son to his music.

He gave me loads of taped albums, I remember, and invested much time in producing Best of Bass mixtapes for study. And I did study them, much to my father’s bemusement. Ours was a household of *real* music appreciation where Grieg’s influence on Debussy was debated over breakfast. So, to hear

Black Sabbath's 'Iron Man' suddenly thumping from my bedroom came as something of a shock. Not a pleasant one.

Mackenzie and I quickly began to enjoy each other's company. I was impressed, no, in awe of Mackenzie's music-saturated existence, and his passion for authentic expression. I wanted to please him, of course, excited by the trust he was placing in me to be part of his band, and I would never dream of voicing my complaints about blisters and aching wrists.

Mackenzie would tell me things such as: "You don't wanna be just following the chords, we're not that kind of band. No, you're gonna be holding down riffs, playing high melody lines..." And I would snort as if it were the most obvious thing I had ever heard.

On one occasion he was explaining something or other and my fingers just would not go in the right place. He reached out to position my finger on the correct fret. A flash of electricity accompanied that first touch of skin. Our eyes met. We looked away after an instant, embarrassed. Then continued our lesson.

After that, I *might* have made more errors than previously, and he was more inclined to move my fingers than try to explain verbally. And soon enough our time was equally divided between bass and...

other things.

From the start, Mackenzie had established weekly band practices, held at a scout hut on Sunday afternoons. He always had the equipment set up and ready long before the rest of us arrived. The parents seemed happy to help with transporting equipment to see their youngsters doing something productive. Not mine, particularly, but my father would rather drive me, he said, than have me moping around the house. He was sure to play Radio 3 very loudly in the car though, on principle.

Mackenzie had selected a range of cover songs to get us started. But his real focus was on original material. I recall him saying time and again that no one ever made it playing other people's songs. It did not mean much to me, or the rest of the band, but to Mackenzie, it was a source of great disappointment in those early weeks that he lacked the necessary alchemy for composition possessed by his musical heroes.

And then, on the third or fourth practice at the scout hut, Mackenzie seemed edgy as we were plugging in, and paced the floor until finally calling time. "Stop! Everyone just stop!" He shared that he had written his first original song.

A few nights earlier, Mackenzie told us, he had

been out walking the fens alone. “I like to go at night,” he said. “The cover of darkness inspires me.” As the night drew ever closer, Mackenzie imagined he saw strange lights like blue fire moving across the fen. Just like the Lantern Men, he had thought, recalling the local legend told to him by his Grandad. “That would be a pretty cool idea for a s—” But before the words could leave his lips, he saw a blinding flash of red, and heard the song in its entirety.

Mackenzie broke off from telling the story and pressed play on the portable stereo. A punchy new-wave track came pounding out of the speakers. None of us recognised the song. Mackenzie mocked our lack of knowledge, saying it was ‘Echo Beach’ by Martha and the Muffins, and that it was the kind of feel he was going for with *his* song. We soon got the idea, and he switched it off. He strode over to his guitar, his dark hair flowing behind him like a cloak, and taught us how to play ‘Lantern Men’.

D major then C major held on the organ with some choppy guitar chords. A nice little run-up from GABCD on bass. And the lyrics:

“Lantern Men, Lantern Men
Take me by surprise in the nighttime fen
Shine and burn, Lead the way
Taking all who follow to a brighter day.”

Mackenzie boasted that the piece was clever in its

upbeat feel and quite funny *if you knew* because, so said the lore, those who saw Lantern Men out on the fens were destined to die.

“This’ll be our thing,” he said. “All our songs will have a local folklore flavour. No one else has done it.”

“But,” queried Matthew (keyboards). “It’s just one song.”

Mackenzie laughed, “Oh, there’ll be a lot more where that came from!”

We practised ‘Lantern Men,’ for an hour or more, then collapsed, exhausted and exhilarated. Ben suddenly sat up at his drum kit and said he had a performance opportunity if we were interested. New Year's Eve at his dad’s club. The whole of his village would be there, he said.

Of course, we were interested. Our first gig!

We upped our practice time to twice a week in preparation for the show. Me and Mack were still seeing each other for bass lessons almost every day after college. I had to be home strictly by seven for family dinner and flute practice, and, by that time, Mack was always itching to go out for more inspiration on the fens. His commitment to those nocturnal trips was working, the new songs just kept coming: ‘Tale of the Toadman,’ ‘Whirling Sunday,’ ‘Bulldog Bridge,’ ‘Hand of Etheldreda,’ ‘Vengeance of Hereward.’ It was

extraordinary, but it certainly did not play on my mind; I was carried on the wave of his genius.

The New Year's gig was fine. Our new songs were not exactly party favourites – “Oh my God, it's Gog Magog, the hill where giants dwell!” – but aside from a few covers, that was what we had. The crowd was pretty merry by the time we came on at eleven anyway. We saw in the new year with ‘Auld Lang Syne’ but performed in the style of ‘My Sharona’ by The Knacks with that driving octave riff and heavy drums. It would be funny, Mack had said as we prepared, for *those who got it*.

The start of the new term at college saw a buzz growing about the band. Word had spread since New Year's Eve and now, unbelievably, we had a fanbase and opportunities for performance began pouring in. Ben and Matthew were receiving female attention for the first time in their lives, and Mackenzie seemed to be all anyone could talk about. But if this was a shock for the band, it was not for our leader, who acted as though it was only what he was due. He met each development with the stoic acceptance of one who already knew what was coming.

People loved our songs. *Really* loved them, and would sing choruses back to us in the tiny venues we were playing. But one song caught the fans'

imagination. It was called ‘Black Shuck’.

Its general feel was somewhere between ‘Money (That’s What I Want)’ and ‘Come As You Are.’ The perfect E minor pentatonic guitar riff. A driving Beatles drumbeat: *buu ba-ba Ba! buu ba-ba Ba!* Fuzzy distorted bass, crunchy Hammond organ, even “oooh la-la-las” on the chorus sung by me and Matthew. The guitar dropped out in the verse leaving just crunching bass on the riff over loose, rumbling tom-centric drums. Then all back in for the chorus.

“Something creeping in the dead of night
It’s out to get to me and it don’t feel right
Rattling chains and slobbering breath
I’m running baby and I’m scared to death!
(Ooh la la la Ooh) Black Shuck.”

Things began moving very quickly, and it was not long before our Music teacher, Graham (first name terms at college, how grown up we felt), was bragging about his industry contacts and offering to make a demo at his home studio.

The recording took place during the Easter break where the song ‘Black Shuck’ was completed in two sessions in Graham’s converted barn. We recorded it live, as a group, with no overdubs, and the result was pretty special. It still is. Thirty years later, I managed to track down one of the CDs from a collector online. It was strange hearing it after so long. I had forgotten

just how good the four of us were together. But it was also unsettling. There is something about Mack's voice that draws you in. It is intoxicating, like an invitation to step into something you know nothing about, something that you are not sure you even want to know anything about.

Following the recording, Mackenzie somehow found the money to get one thousand CDs printed with the band name and song title, ready to sell. Graham made big promises. We daydreamed about having a Number One single and appearing on Top of the Pops. This, however, was where Mackenzie drew the line. "There is no way we are going on there. It's like selling your soul."

All the parents – maybe not Mack's, I don't know what they thought, but most certainly mine – instructed us, teenagers, to concentrate on our studies; there was another year of college which was not to be given up on with pipe dreams of rock n' roll. But in truth, they were just as excited as we were. A couple of the fathers offered to help with promotional material and even to drive the band further afield for performances.

Mackenzie and I had long abandoned the bass lessons. We now spent long hours draped over each other in his dingy bedroom while he monologued on the Merseybeat movement of the Sixties, the Seattle

Grunge scene, and the dangers, as he saw them, of Indie artists trading authenticity for popularity by jumping on the bandwagon of Britpop. He could have been speaking of anything really for all I listened; it was just bliss to be in his brilliant presence. The only thing he demanded was his privacy to walk the fens at night.

“I have to be free to do that alone,” he said. “Just me and the Muse.”

And I was fine with it. I was. Until one day at the start of the summer when it suddenly bothered me, I cannot exactly say why, jealousy I suppose, but I pulled away from his embrace, saying, “I wish *I* was your Muse. Why don’t *I* inspire you to write a song?”

He was quickly riled. “I thought you understood. This is how I am. If you can’t deal with that, you should get out.”

I ran from his house crying many tears. Weeks went by... Okay, it was just a few days, but they were miserable. Then late one hot July afternoon the phone rang. My mother came up to tell me it was Mackenzie. I hurried to the kitchen where the receiver was waiting, full of promise.

“I’ve got something,” he said.

Physically shaking, I played it cool. “Right...”

“Listen, *you* inspired me. I was thinking about you so much and this melody came bit by bit. Then the

chords... I've done nothing else all week. I've not eaten. Not slept. Not been out of the house. Just working on this song. *Your* song.

I was placated.

"Can you come round?" Mackenzie asked me.

"I love you," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "See you in a bit," and hung up.

I suppose that the band's success had changed things at home, so, as I went out, I casually told my mother, "No dinner for me. I'll be back late."

Mackenzie was waiting at the door, layered in a band T-shirt and oversized plaid shirt with jeans and his wrinkled DMs. He led the way straight to his room; I closed the front door behind me.

I was astounded by the song. I cried. It was the best thing he had written. I kissed him. I begged him to sing it again. I cried again. We kissed again. It was incredible; just Mack on his guitar, raw and unrefined. Unlike all his other songs that were slick and fully formed, the power of this one came through its honesty and jagged edges.

That night Mackenzie invited me to walk the fens with him. He said it would be the first time he had been out since writing *my* song.

We started upon the grassy track that ran along the river in the half-light of dusk. The close summer air clung and pasted clothes to the skin. Thick clouds in

deep pinks, blues, and greys rolled as the sun disappeared. I clasped Mack's hand tightly and allowed myself to be led as he strode his familiar path. It was awesome, that flat landscape that stretched on forever. Grasses led to corn fields which spread out to woodland flanked by distant pylons. I felt as though there was nothing and no one else in the world. Just Mack and I, immersed in endless open space.

"Thank you for sharing this with me," I whispered.

Mackenzie led us across the dark river via the railway bridge. Night had descended and I gripped Mack's arm tighter as we climbed down barely visible steps by the far bank. His hair fell over his face; I scooped it back behind his ears. Mack turned his head slightly to smile, "Almost there."

I was chilled by a breeze that brushed my body. It melted away, leaving me wondering.

Mackenzie hurried me over a cattle grid and down a steep path thick with nettles and brambles that scratched and gripped. We turned into the terrible gloom of an underpass. The shine of graffiti covered the concrete slabs. The pungent stink of urine assaulted my nostrils. Amid dotted shadows of shrubs were discarded shapes: bottles and wrappers.

Mackenzie crouched among the mess. "Come, sit next to me."

I remained on my feet, unsure, and we did not

speak. I stepped from one foot to the other, and then, stupidly, I laughed. “Mack. What is this place? Is this really where you—”

Then I saw it.

No, first I heard the sound. The rattling grating screech of heavy metal dragged along a stone surface. And breathing: horrible, coarse, forbidding breath.

It appeared suddenly at the bridge’s entrance: some nightmarish vision with glowing red eyes like the deepest blood and a growling foaming mouth. Its head almost touched the low roof of concrete beneath the railway line. Around its neck was a weighty chain that dragged along the ground.

I screamed, “Mack... Mack!” But Mackenzie was unresponsive. He simply sat, entranced as the monstrous black dog lumbered inside.

The thing’s red eyes; its murderous eyes told me it was pointless trying to run. It was all pointless. I knew I deserved to be devoured. I would not be missed by anyone. All would say my worthless life warranted this savage death.

I was still; paralysed by pathetic despair. I could make out Mackenzie’s shape; everything else was red.

Blood...

Scarlet...

Crimson...

...and the huge creature was thrashing through the

dingy tunnel.

Mackenzie took a minute to awake from his bewitchment. He jumped to his feet and dived in front of the dog knocking it clumsily off-course. Thick legs in the air, it lurched its body round and stood with head down, eyes gleaming.

The dog lunged forward. Frothing foam sprayed from its jaws stinging like the poison of wolfsbane. I ran by instinct. Desperately Mackenzie grabbed the animal's chain and held tight as it strained and barked and growled. It never once turned against Mack.

I hesitated by the nettles outside, now understanding everything. I took a single step back toward the mouth of the underpass.

"Mack? Come with me."

"No! Just go!" he said. "I should never have brought you here."

"Mack – whatever this thing is, you don't need it. This Muse. Think of that beautiful song you wrote for me. You don't need this. *You* have the talent."

"No! I don't! Shuck's given me everything... Go! I can't hold him much longer. You've gotta get out!"

I dared to take a few steps closer to the underpass. Reflected in the mad light of the thing's eyes I saw Mackenzie. I saw the childlike dependence in his face.

"So, you won't come. Even... for *me*?"

I don't think Mackenzie even heard me. He had

wound the chain around his middle and was wholly engaged in the effort of guiding the thing's huge head to face him. He spoke reassuringly to the Shuck dog that had provided all for him. The creature calmed. I left and made my way slowly home.

At the house, I found my parents deep in debate.

"Are you hearing this?" said my father as I came through the door. Then to my mother, "Tell her what you just said."

"I said, it is like Beethoven's 'Moonlight Serenade'," she confessed.

"*Serenade*?!" My father almost spat the word out.

"Yes, yes," Mum said. "I meant Sonata, didn't I?"

I laughed a little as I lowered myself on the sofa and reached for a biscuit. It was good to be home. I had been away for quite some time. My mother was studying me carefully. "You okay?"

"Yep," I said, aware of the sob rising in my throat.

"It's that Mackenzie Burns, isn't it?"

I nodded, unable to form any words. She took me in her arms, and I covered her in tears.

"Dad! Cup of tea for your daughter. Come on! She's had her heart broken."

My father grumbled as he slowly raised himself and sloped to the kitchen.

"And put some sugar in it for the shock!"

I lost track of Mackenzie Burns after that night. I told my friends I wanted to hear nothing about him or his Fenman on Stilts. My parents allowed me to drop Music for the second year of college. It was my fourth A Level anyway.

Later, I went to university and made a life for myself far from the fens. I honestly don't know if the Shuck creature took him to fame and fortune. I mean, I never saw him on Top of the Pops or heard him on the radio, but then, he would never have sold his soul to such things, would he?

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Wizard 101

Talli L. Morgan

Heaping six top-level courses onto my plate for my last semester at the magic academy had seemed like a great idea at the *beginning* of the term. Now it was the last week before graduation and I'd taken four exams in two days, with one more theory exam tomorrow and then my practical test the day after that. I was exhausted, underfed, overcaffeinated, and cursing my past self's insatiable academic appetite.

Sure, it had been a good term. I'd been studying magic for fifteen years – six of them here at Havendell Academy – and I deeply loved it. Magic and all its beautiful chaos spoke to me in a way few other things did. It let me feel everything to the magnitude my emotions wanted to reach, and my restless mind with its lightning-quick recognition of convoluted patterns was shockingly well-suited to following the formulas of the arcane arts. I truly had learned a lot during the past six years and over the course of this semester, but now that I was faced with the culmination of that knowledge, I couldn't fathom

how all of this information could fit in my brain.

I glanced at the fat notebook on the other side of my desk – filled cover to cover with the *second* half of this semester's notes from Wizards' Advanced Practicum – and felt a twist of panic in my guts. It was already getting late, and I had so much left to study. And I really ought to have dinner. And sleep. And all those other things that were good for you on the night before a big exam. My brain and my mana needed the rest, but...

My hand instinctively sought my coffee mug before I remembered it was long since empty. *No more caffeine*, I scolded myself. I stood up and stretched instead, groaning softly at the stiff pull of my muscles. I'd been in this secluded corner of the academy's library since about an hour after my exams this morning; I'd unofficially claimed it as *my* spot during exam season. Very few students wandered as far up as the twelfth floor, preferring the more social study areas of the first, second, and third levels. But I'd learned very quickly during my first year that I could not study with or around other people. For all the usual school work, my dormitory sufficed. But for these exams that would determine if I graduated and became a full-time wizard? I needed full focus, and that meant utter silence and complete isolation.

I checked the pocket watch tucked into the front

pouch of my satchel and sighed. Almost eleven. It'd take me fifteen minutes to walk back to my dormitory, perhaps another fifteen or twenty to get ready for bed... Yes, I ought to go now. It was a lost cause to hope to be asleep before midnight unless I fell asleep instantly – which was unlikely – but I needed every minute I could get.

Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

My morning was a blur of bleary-eyed breakfast followed by a grueling theory exam that I left with a nauseous feeling in my stomach. I'd thought I'd over-prepared for that one, but every single question had felt like it was purposely bending my brain. Seven a.m. was far too early for such concepts.

I just have to pass, I reminded myself as I went down to the dining hall. But I'd always been an exceptional student – not just a passing one – and the thought of anything lower than ten marks below perfect felt like a failure. And if I *actually* failed? I... I... I didn't even know what I'd do. I'd never failed an exam. Would that hold me up from graduating? And even if it didn't, who would hire a wizard who'd flunked his advanced theory class?

A sharp whistle jolted me out of my thoughts; I practically jumped out of my skin when I realized there was someone next to me. Even when I

recognized her, it took a minute for my pulse to settle. “Gods, Ash! You scared the mana right outta me!”

My friend laughed – cackled, more like – and lightly punched my arm. I couldn’t help but notice that the momentum made her stumble a little, as if aiming for the moving target of my arm was too much coordination.

“Rough morning?” I asked, ducking my head as she held the dining hall door for me.

“Rough everything.” Ash hooked her arm around mine and dragged me toward her usual spot in the corner by the dessert table. “I’m glad you’re here, actually. I have... a problem.”

She plopped into a chair, but I stayed on my feet, eyeing her skeptically. “It’s a little late for tutoring, don’t you think?”

“Aha. Definitely.” Ash rocked her head in an exaggerated nod. “Nah, my unpreparedness for exam week isn’t the problem. *A* problem, maybe, but not *the* —”

“Ash.” I was getting worried. This much stalling was never a good sign.

“Right.” She drummed her blunt nails on the table, watching me carefully. Her pointed ears twitched, then she cleared her throat. “It’s... easier to let you hear it yourself.”

Before I could ask, she opened her mouth and sang

– no, *shrieked* – an ear-splitting note. Her voice cracked halfway through, turning the sound to a hideous croak that cut off abruptly when she doubled over in a fit of coughs.

I could only stare at her. “Ash...What *happened*?” She was a bard – a really good one – and I’d always known her to have a voice like honey. This was more than tired vocal cords; I suspected some kind of hex at play.

She let out a nervous chuckle and ran her hand over the cornrow braids on her head. “Well... I don’t know, exactly. See, I was out with some pals last night—”

“During *exam week*?” I exclaimed.

“Yes, Roland Goody-brook, some of us like to have fun.” She flashed a grin. “Anyway, Max and I were sort of... showing off, as one does, and I think... er, he screwed up. Dunno how or what – neither of us could figure out what he *actually* said when he tried to cast *Amplify*. I was drunk, he was drunk, it’s all rather blurry.” Ash pressed her palms together. “Point is, I can’t sing.”

“I noticed.”

She stood and leaned over the table, brown eyes wide and pleading. “I *need* to be able to sing! Not even for the stupid exams – sorry, I know you care a lot, but I literally don’t – but my voice is my *life*,

Roland. Please. Do you know *anything* that could help?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. In truth, I could think of a few possibilities off the top of my head, but I’d need far more information – and to do some research. And until I knew what had gone wrong with that spell, I wouldn’t know whether I could fix Ash’s voice at all.

A mystery like this was my favorite sort of thing – I loved unraveling magical mishaps – but right now? I had my practical tomorrow. I didn’t have *time* to solve this problem.

I looked up at Ash to tell her as much, but the words died on my tongue. Instead of the carefree, confident bard who’d skimmed her way through our classes these past six years, I saw a terrified woman facing the very real possibility of her talent and one true joy being gone forever.

I imagined I’d look that horrified, too, if I suddenly lost my ability to cast magic.

“All right,” I heard myself say.

Ash’s eyes lit up, and there was no going back.

“I’ll try to figure it out, but I can’t guarantee anything. Magic is a wild thing, Ash. You know that as well as I do. Sometimes accidents just... happen.” I offered a faint smile when her ears drooped. “But there very well might be an easy fix. First I need to

know what exactly your friend did, though.”

“Roland, *thank you.*” Ash clambered over the table and threw her arms around me, nearly toppling me backwards. I coughed out an awkward chuckle and patted her shoulder, then she let go and sat on the edge of the table. “Seriously, you’re the best. I owe you big time for this. Actually, I’ll buy your lunch! That’s not nearly enough, but it’s a start. Be right back. No meat, right?”

She was already moving toward the buffet counters, so all I could do was nod and let her go. Buying my lunch was a nice gesture, but I really wished she could buy me more hours in the day so I could solve this problem for her *and* practice for my exam.

Maybe this puzzle should wait until after— Oh, but *all* of the practical exams were tomorrow, spread throughout the day. That meant Ash would be expected to perform, and without the ability to sing... that was a guaranteed failure.

I plopped into a chair and put my head in my hands. I had helped Ash so much over the course of our years at the academy; I knew I was the reason she had passed some of the more challenging first-level courses, allowing her to move forward. She’d been nothing but kind and grateful to me, never letting me go without some kind of gift or gesture to repay me

for helping her. She was part of the reason I had made any friends at all in my years here, and the handful of times I'd let her get me into mischief, she always knew how to get us out of real trouble. Ash might be more inclined toward adventure than academia, but that didn't mean I wanted her to fail. I'd seen her come far since our first year; I couldn't stand the thought of her being held back because of one silly mistake.

When Ash came back with two heaping plates of food, I pulled a notebook out of my satchel and wrote down what she'd told me so far. *Amplify* gone wrong. That was a low-level, straightforward spell with a clear command that would be tricky to fumble, even in a loud room, and even if the caster wasn't sober.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but your 'I'm thinking very hard' face is kinda adorable," Ash said around a mouthful of food.

I glanced up at her and my cheeks warmed. "And how *am* I meant to take that observation?"

She shrugged. "As a simple statement of fact."

"So you're not flirting with me?"

"Of course I am. It's fun. Especially that time you got really flustered about it." She flashed a grin.

I rolled my eyes, but I was smiling. Her good-natured teasing had spooked me as a shy first-year,

but I'd learned quickly that banter was her love language. While I often lacked the wit to bounce it back, she was always delighted when I managed a snarky retort.

I grabbed a bite of potatoes from my plate and then tapped the tip of my quill on the page in front of me. "So tell me how Max screwed up *Amplify*. What else was he casting? You said both of you were messing around – could his spell have hit you at the same time one of yours did? The chances of that are very slim, of course, but not impossible."

Ash shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know. I was singing and playing— Ohh, wait, I forgot to tell you. Watch this." She grabbed her lute and strummed it once, and it made a sound as if the strings had all been rearranged and thrown out of tune.

I stared at her. "So you can't sing *or* play?"

"Nope." She said it flippantly, but the glance she cast at her instrument was mournful. Her hand lingered on the strings a moment longer when she set the lute against the wall. "Which is why I came to you, because it's not just something wrong with my voice. I think it's the magic itself. It's like... coming out wrong."

This was a very different problem than I'd originally thought. If it was *just* Ash's voice, that would've suggested some kind of adverse effect of a

spell on her body, but if her instrument was affected too... I had no idea what to make of this.

Maybe I was taking the wrong angle. If Ash was right and it was the *magic*, not the *object*, that suggested a disrupted connection between Ash, her mana, and the fabric of magic.

“Let’s finish eating,” I said, “and then I want to try something outside. I think the problem lies with your mana, and I know a spell that could at least tell me if I’m on the right track.”

Ash nodded eagerly and began wolfing down her food with renewed fervor. I took my time, not wishing to give myself an upset stomach, and Ash took the opportunity to visit the dessert table three separate times while I finished my lunch. When we finally got up to leave, she practically sprinted outside.

We found an unoccupied corner of the central courtyard and dropped our things beneath a tree. I unlatched my spellbook from its holster on my waist and flipped to my shortcut table – a list of eight practiced and readied spells that I could cast at a glance. *Detect* was not one I used often, but it came in handy for scenarios like this – where there was clear magic at play, but it wasn’t outwardly obvious what it was.

I exhaled slowly, then looked directly at Ash and spoke the command. Magic surrounded me like a

summer breeze, tickling my skin as the fabric came to life before my eyes. Faint bursts flickered all over the campus, but Ash practically glowed with magic. A pulsing core of it coiled in the center of her body like a second heart, but something was indeed wrong. It looked like the magic was backed up inside her – mana refusing to flow out. It was a sickly yellow color in the center; I had no idea what that meant, but it didn't seem good.

I blinked and let the spell fade so I could see normally. “Huh. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Oh gods, what is it?”

“I think something is blocking your mana.” It sounded ridiculous even as I said it, and Ash’s incredulous expression only reinforced that. “Hear me out: There’s three parts to casting, right? The fabric, the mana, and the spell. Spells are fueled by mana, pulls on the fabric. Bard spells are activated through music – the sound waves from your voice and your lute manipulate the fabric itself. But that ability to connect to the fabric and have it flow through you still needs mana to make it work correctly. With me so far?”

Ash nodded. “Sure, this is all stuff you taught me years ago.”

“Good.” I placed my hand on the cover of my spellbook. “When I cast *Detect* just now, it showed

me a huge bundle of magic built up inside of you. Your mana is there, but it's not allowing a flow of magic *out* of you. Something is keeping it trapped, and I think it's..." I cringed. "Festering."

"*Festering?*" Ash cried. "Are you saying I have some kind of mana infection?"

"Well... Actually, yes, that is what this looks like." I held up a hand. "But don't panic! I'm sure it can be fixed. I just... need to do some research. What time is your practical tomorrow?"

"My—? Roland, I don't *care* about the exams." Ash shook her head. "I just need to know if I'm going to be able to sing again. If my mana is infected... Oh, gods." She staggered backward and leaned heavily against the tree. "How did this happen? How could a mispronounced spell lead to *this*?"

"I don't know," I said quietly. "But I'm going to find out, and I'm going to fix it. And you *are* going to perform tomorrow, and it'll be glorious." I went to her and touched her arm. "You'll sing again, Ash. I promise."

She looked up at me and blinked rapidly, clearly trying to hide the tears in her eyes. "I'm really counting on you, y'know."

I smiled and hoped it didn't look like a grimace. "I know."

Worries needled the back of my mind as I trekked across campus to the tower that housed all of the professors' offices. *I should be practicing*, was the loudest thought, alongside *I should be resting* and *I need to make sure my mana has time to replenish*. But the day was still young and I would have time to practice my routine for tomorrow *and* let my mana refresh. I just needed to be careful about how much magic I used. And after tomorrow, I could sleep for three days if I wanted.

I climbed the spiraling steps up to the fifth floor and knocked on the office door belonging to the wizard who headed the Life Magic department. I'd only taken one or two classes with her, but I knew her to be a brilliant scholar of the arcane, and if anyone would know about mana infection, it'd be her.

"Come in," she called from inside, and I opened the door and poked my head in. Professor Wolfstone sat behind her oak desk with three books and a heap of papers before her. She was one of the only human wizards at the academy, which, like the wider city of Havendell, saw an elven majority, but I had never heard anyone question Wolfstone's expertise on account of her being human.

Her blue eyes narrowed and she tilted her head. "Maplebrook, is it?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, stepping further into the

office. A pleasant aroma met my nose, and I noticed a steaming coffee mug levitating at Wolfstone's left side. A faintly glowing heat spell surrounded the airborne cup. "If you have a minute, I wonder if you could help me with a strange scenario."

"I have perhaps five minutes, and then I must finish grading yesterday's exams." Wolfstone cast a withering glance at the stack of papers before her, but then smiled when she turned her attention to me. "What sort of strange scenario?"

I pulled my eyes away from the packed bookcases that occupied every inch of wall in the room. "Have you ever heard of mana getting infected, causing a buildup of magic within a person's body?"

Wolfstone blinked and sat up a little straighter. "Well... Yes, but only in theory. It suggests a serious – and in my opinion, *severe* – problem with one's mana. Likely a deficiency of some kind." She studied me for a second. "Please, for gods' sakes, do not tell me *you* are experiencing this less than twenty-four hours before your practical."

"No!" I laughed nervously. "No, not me, thankfully. But a friend of mine—"

"Maplebrook, I'm going to stop you right there." Wolfstone held up a hand. "You are a kind, selfless, and compassionate young man, and that is by no means a bad thing on any other day of the year. But

please, for just today, think of yourself and *your* future. I have no doubts that you've prepared well for your exams, but don't take risks with the practical. That should be your focus today, not a favor for a friend. If this person is having mana troubles, I'd advise them to speak to Dr. Heatherthorn as soon as possible, and that, Maplebrook, should be the extent of your involvement."

I bit my tongue against the immediate *But* that wanted to jump out. Wolfstone was right. That was logically, rationally, precisely what I should do. Ash's mana problem wasn't *my* problem, but if I sent her to Heatherthorn – who handled magical ailments as well as physical ones – her problem wouldn't get solved by tomorrow. She wouldn't be able to pass her practical, and even if I passed mine, I'd feel awful about it.

No, I was not the type of person to solve a problem by making it someone else's problem.

I clasped my hands together. "Thank you, Professor Wolfstone. That's a good idea. I appreciate your time."

"Of course." Wolfstone nodded. "Good luck tomorrow, Maplebrook. And if I may offer one more bit of advice regarding your friend: a mana deficiency like that has no simple cure. Your friend may be looking at months, if not years, of exercises to rebuild their connection with the fabric, and that's a best-case

scenario. I've studied this topic extensively, especially in races with extraordinarily long lifespans. From what I understand, elves reach a point where their bodies simply cannot refresh mana anymore, and it atrophies. This would cause a buildup of magical energy if the person attempted to cast, because without healthy mana, there is no way for the magic to flow out. I'd advise your friend to be careful."

I bade Wolfstone goodbye with a tight-lipped smile, then careened into a spiral of panic the moment I shut the door. *Mana atrophy?! I had no idea that was possible for anyone*, let alone an elf who was...well, I didn't actually know how old Ash was, but I doubted she was far from my age, and Wolfstone had made it sound like only very *very* old elves were at risk of this condition. But maybe not exclusively? Maybe, like with any medical condition, there were outlying cases and Ash happened to be one of them? How was I supposed to tell her this?

Maybe I *should* just send her to Dr. Heatherthorn and let them give Ash the bad news.

I'm really counting on you, y'know.

I shook my head. No, no, I could not take the coward's way out of this. I'd made a promise to Ash, and I needed to keep it.

My feet brought me back toward my dormitory on their own accord, but I hesitated before going into the

building. The next time I'd reliably see Ash was at dinner, which gave me a few hours to figure out what I was going to tell her – and maybe come up with a better answer.

Research, I decided, and spun on my heel to head back to the library.

By the time my stomach started growling, I had collected six research articles written by Professor Wolfstone and her colleagues on the topic of mana atrophy, as well as three books published by an academy on the other side of the continent that expanded on the subject and explored theories as to how the atrophy occurred and if anything could be done about it. I found nothing that suggested it could be spontaneously spurred by a spell gone wrong, which gave me a flicker of hope that Wolfstone's assessment of Ash's problem was wrong, and her mana wasn't deteriorating after all.

That hope was weak, though, because everything I read about this condition aligned almost precisely with what I'd seen when I'd cast *Detect* on Ash today. The scholars who had collected this research had used the very same spell to find evidence of mana deficiency in a wide variety of people, and their descriptions of a bundle of backed-up magical energy matched exactly what I'd seen. The logic was there,

and the science to back it up, and I had nothing optimistic to report to Ash.

Worse, I had no idea if there was anything I could do. Ash *was* an outlier case, at least as far as I could tell from the available research, but this likely meant she had some kind of genetic disposition that accelerated the mana atrophy. I was no scientist, but that was the only reasonable explanation. And it meant that I couldn't fix her.

And yet...

I turned back a few pages in my notes and reread the initial facts that Ash had relayed to me. *Amplify gone wrong*.

Amplify... Atrophy... It was a long shot, but if those words were similar enough, would their corresponding spell commands be similar, too? *Was* there a spell to attack someone's mana?

I hurriedly packed up my things and raced across the library, practically leaping down each flight of stairs until I reached the main floor. There I forced myself to slow, walking as normally as possible toward the information desk.

"Hi," I said breathlessly to the librarian. "Could you please take me to the Compendium?"

Their eyebrows shot up. "Bit last minute to be learning a new spell, isn't it?"

Did I ask? I thought irritably. "Maybe, but it's

important. Please.”

The librarian shrugged and fetched a key from a board on the wall behind them, then gestured for me to follow. It took all of my self control not to surge ahead to get to the archive room as quickly as possible. They unlocked the door into the dim room, then waved a hand toward the podium that held the massive book.

“Thank you,” I said as I breezed past them and approached the podium. I glanced over the first table of contents – there were four, each one more specific than the last – and then placed my hands on the podium and said to the book, “Chapter Eighteen: Hexes.”

I stood back while the pages fanned and flipped to the spot I’d requested, then began skimming the list of spells. When nothing under *A* gave me what I wanted, I pursed my lips and tapped my fingers on the podium. How else could this strange condition be described? Deteriorate? Decay? I flipped to the *Ds* and scanned the list, and felt a swell of triumph when there was, indeed, a Hex of Deterioration.

And the command for it was *concerningly* similar to the command for *Amplify* – similar enough, yes, that a drunk person stumbling over their words could easily cast this by mistake.

I grinned to myself. Ash wasn’t losing her mana to

an incurable disease. I'd been right from the start: it was a simple hex – one with horrifying consequences – and every hex had a counterspell.

The listing for Hex of Deterioration informed me I'd find its inverse in Chapter Twenty-Five: Reversals and Counterspells. I told the Compendium to take me there, found the correct page, and nearly dropped my spellbook in my haste to open it.

There it was: *Revitalize*, counterspell to Hex of Deterioration (and several necrotic curses that I'd rather not dwell upon). My hand trembled in excitement as I copied the exercise and command into my spellbook. It seemed simple enough, although I cringed at the energy usage it boasted: a six-percent toll on mana, when most spells at this moderate level used about three percent. But what choice did I have? If this was what would help Ash, I had to try.

There's still time to refresh before my practical, I assured myself, and laid my spellbook on top of the Compendium. A bright blue light came to life beneath the Compendium, and I felt the fabric's thrumming energy around me. I placed my palms on either side of the stacked books and closed my eyes while the magic worked, and when the glow faded, I retrieved my book and snapped it safely back in its holster.

I thanked the librarian on my way out, and then didn't try to slow myself down as I ran out of the

library.

I spotted Ash at her usual table in the dining hall and wasted no time sprinting toward her. “Ash!” I nearly went somersaulting over the table in my haste to stop. “Ash, I figured it out! I think—” I struggled to catch my breath. “I think Max accidentally harmed your mana with a misspoken spell, which is bad, but—” I patted my spellbook, gasping another breath. “I found the counterspell! I think I can fix your magic!”

Ash had been staring wide-eyed at me the whole time, and now she beamed and bolted to her feet. “You’re serious? Roland! You’re a marvel! Let’s try it right now—”

“Ah, that’s the catch.” I grimaced. “I can’t cast it right away. It needs time to attune to my spellbook, but it’ll be done by morning, I promise. I can do it then.”

“Before your practical?” Ash asked.

I hesitated, then nodded. “Yes. First thing tomorrow. I’ll meet you at that old tree in the courtyard.”

A grin worked its way across Ash’s face, and then she threw her arms around me again. “I don’t know how to thank you enough! You’re a life saver, Roland.”

I couldn’t match her enthusiasm; not yet. “Don’t

get too excited; we don't know yet if this is definitely going to work."

"Well, then eat up, my friend, and make sure your mana is strong for tomorrow!" Ash grinned and took my arm, marching me toward the buffet.

It's fine, I told myself, I need to eat before I can practice anyway.

I have plenty of time.

I woke up nauseous the next morning, which was only in part because I'd managed *maybe* four hours of sleep. I chugged a big cup of water, hoping that banished the headache making it feel like my brain was stuck to the side of my skull, and tried to shake the anxious jitters as I got dressed. I double- and then triple-checked that I had everything I needed – for Ash's spell and for my practical – and then left my room.

Ash was exactly where I'd told her to be, thankfully right on time. I steadied myself as I crossed the courtyard and attempted a smile, but as usual she saw right through me.

"Whoa, are you okay?"

I frowned. "What?"

"You look like hell. Did you sleep *at all*?"

"Yes," I grumbled. "I'm fine. Let's do this so we both have time for breakfast before our practicals. Are

you ready?”

Ash nodded, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Her lute leaned against the tree a few feet away, ready and waiting.

I hoped I wasn't about to fail her.

I took a deep breath and opened my spellbook. I'd traded out a water purifying spell for the hex counterspell last night, and my newly drawn shortcut table looked strangely crisp against the weathered paper. Spells took careful study and focused meditation to truly learn; my mana – and the magic that flowed through me – needed time to connect with the spell and its fabric. Technically, a spell was nothing but words without a caster's mana and intention behind it, but words still had power; even when they were just ink on paper, spells brimmed with potential energy, and those hours of focus made sure that that energy remained within my control.

I looked up at Ash, raised my hand, and spoke the command. The fabric around me billowed, caressing my skin, and a swirl of pale pink arcane energy surrounded Ash. Her body jolted, but she didn't appear to be in pain. In seconds, the glowing energy faded, and Ash swayed on her feet.

I took a step forward to see if she was all right, and then all at once I found myself on the ground. My head spun, vision blurring, and I pressed my hand to

my mouth to stop myself from retching.

Okay, I thought wearily, six percent mana is too much on an empty stomach.

“Hey.” Ash’s voice broke through the faint ringing in my ears. Her hand gripped my shoulder and shook me lightly. “Are you okay?”

I looked at her; it took a second for me to stop seeing doubles of her features. “Did it work?”

“I... I don’t know yet.” Ash blinked. “You just collapsed, I thought—”

“Ash,” I rasped. “Try to play. Or sing. Or something. Please tell me it worked.”

Ash hesitated, but then stumbled to her feet and fetched her lute. She held it gently, as if afraid even having it in her hands would somehow break it. I watched her take a deep breath, and then she strummed the strings.

A simple scale had never sounded so beautiful.

Ash barked a laugh, turning to me with a brilliant grin. “Roland! It worked! You did it!” She punched the air and let out a whoop. “You did it!”

I let out something halfway between a laugh and a sob, collapsing onto my back in the grass. The sky tilted above me, churning my stomach, but I didn’t care. I’d rest a few minutes, eat something, and then be ready for my practical. It was all going to be fine. Ash had her music back – she launched straight into a

jaunty tune to prove it – and everything else would be okay.

She appeared above me and offered a hand. “Come on, breakfast is on me, today and maybe forever. That mana took a toll on you, so eat as much as you need to. It’s literally the least I can do.”

I took her hand and let her help me up. “Thank you, Ash.”

She brought me into a hug. “No, thank *you*, Roland.”

Despite my full stomach, I felt nauseous again as I trekked up the spiraling stairs to the lecture hall where my practical would be held. One glance at the team of professors who would judge my performance and decide my fate and I wanted to run from the room. *I’m not ready*, I lamented. *Please, give me just another day. I’m not ready.*

I shook the anxiety off as best I could. I was ready. One more day wouldn’t make a difference; I’d spent hours upon hours studying, practicing, and rehearsing the demonstration I’d show today. I was as ready as I possibly could be.

“Roland Maplebrook,” greeted Professor Goldleaf, my advisor. “Good afternoon. Welcome to your final exam for Wizards’ Advanced Practicum. I expect you’ve got an impressive demonstration for us today,

so let's not delay. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

I swallowed, my mouth dry as sand. "No, sir."

"Let's get to it then." Goldleaf smiled warmly, but it did nothing for my nerves. "Good luck, Roland."

The exam passed in a blur. I shoved my anxiety and my exhaustion to the back of my mind and let the familiar feeling of the fabric ground me in its warmth. For thirty minutes, I was nothing but an extension of the magic around me, and I knew nothing but the ebb and flow of mana as it fueled my spells. I felt every rush of power – and every hiccup when my strength gave out. But this wasn't the time to let the mistakes trip me; I pushed through, and when I had finished the demonstration, the room came back into focus with hazy edges.

I became conscious of my pulse first, thundering in my chest and throbbing in my head. Then my vision snapped into focus on my professors' faces; their expressions betrayed nothing as they finished their notes and exchanged quiet murmurs.

Finally Professor Goldleaf stood, set down his quill, and descended the three steps from the seating area and approached me. His face remained blank, impassive. Was this normal? Or was it a bad sign that he was coming to personally give me my result?

"Roland," he started, meeting my eyes. "You are a

bright, hard-working student. I believe you have the potential to be a brilliant wizard.”

I dared to start to smile.

“But...” He sighed, and my heart plummeted through the floor. “I’m afraid we can’t pass you today.”

I stared at him, feeling like I was coming apart at the seams. The throbbing in my head worsened and I barely heard myself when I said, “What?”

“You showed strong control over your magic, but inefficient use of mana,” Goldleaf went on. “It was clear to all of us the moment you walked into the room that your mana was already depleted – whether from lack of rest or over-exerting yourself while practicing, it does not matter. If you are to succeed as a wizard, taking care of yourself and your mana must be your utmost priority. We did not feel that you demonstrated that today.”

I opened my mouth, only to close it again. What was there to say? That was a perfectly rational explanation, and Goldleaf was right. I’d neglected my own wellbeing and preparation for this exam, and these were the consequences, slapping me squarely in the face.

I’d failed. I wasn’t going to graduate.

I took a deep breath and nodded once, then offered my hand to Professor Goldleaf. “Thank you for the

feedback. I will... I will do better next time.”

Goldleaf squeezed my hand and shook it firmly. “I believe in you, lad. Truly, I do. It pains me to give you this result; it’s not the one either of us wanted. But you’ll have another chance to redo your practical at the end of the autumn term. Maybe another semester will be just what you need to truly be ready.”

My gaze fell to the floor. “Yeah,” I whispered. “Maybe it will.”

He gave me the paper with the official report of my failure, documenting his and the others’ recommendation to keep me at the academy for another term, and I left the lecture hall in a daze. This didn’t feel real. Just yesterday I’d been anxiously wondering what I’d do if I ever failed an exam, and now here I was: a failure. I moved across campus as if wading through molasses.

Stupid, I scolded myself. Of all the times to let myself get distracted, it had to be the day before my practical. I couldn’t believe I’d sabotaged myself like this. When would I learn to just say *no* to people? If I hadn’t caved in to Ash’s pleas, I wouldn’t have failed, because I would’ve spent yesterday practicing and resting instead of running around the library researching something that didn’t actually affect me. So what if it meant Ash would’ve failed? Maybe she deserved to. She’d skated through her classes every

semester, doing the bare minimum and passing by the skin of her teeth – primarily because of *me* – and I had never missed a single assignment or test. I passed everything with flying colors, surging to the top of my class. *The top of my class*, out of nearly three thousand students.

But when all of them – save for perhaps a handful of careless slackers – crossed the stage in their gowns and got their sashes and badges from the headmaster, I wouldn't be with them. Ash would be, but not me.

It wasn't fair.

"Hey! There you are! How'd it go?"

I looked up and found Ash jogging up to me. In my dazed stupor, I'd apparently made my way back to the old tree in the courtyard. I didn't remember walking here, nor did I remember sitting down, but here I was.

And there Ash was.

A thousand nasty things perched on the tip of my tongue, threatening to spill out in a deluge of blame. Logically, I knew it wasn't Ash's fault that I hadn't passed. Somewhere deep down, I didn't regret helping her. But that part of me was far from the surface at the moment, and I was afraid that if I opened my mouth, I'd say something I'd regret.

Ash was smiling as she plopped down next to me, but she instantly wiped the expression from her face

when she saw mine. “Oh my god. You didn’t pass?”

Somehow, hearing her say it made it worse. Made it *real*. I brought my knees to my chest and buried my face in my arms. Suddenly I couldn’t stop shaking.

“Roland...” Ash set her hand on my shoulder. “Hey... Uh... Gods, I’m bad at this. It’s all right, friend. It’s not the end of the world. I... don’t really know what to say to make you feel better, but... You know, you can try again. You’ve got another chance. Not everyone gets it the first time around.”

No, but *I* was supposed to. Other people were allowed to try again and make up for poor marks and failed tests, but I was never supposed to *need* that because I was meant to do everything perfectly the first time. Every school, every year, no matter what class or subject or level, it was all the same expectation: *Do your best, and if your best is perfect, then be perfect.*

There were times I wished I wasn’t quite so good at school. Maybe if I was known to struggle and fall behind, no one would bat an eye at a failure, and then succeeding would be a big deal rather than the baseline expectation.

Ash stepped back from me. “You know what? I’ll be right back. Stay here.”

A faint sense of alarm rippled through me, but I didn’t care enough to question her. She didn’t wait for

my reply, and I drifted back into my foggy, stunned stupor.

I didn't know how much time had passed before Ash returned, startling me out of my daze by plunking down on the ground next to me.

"Welp, I flunked it, too."

At that, I jerked my head up. "*What?*"

For some reason, Ash grinned. "Did you really think I'd leave you behind? You *should* have passed, Roland. It's absurd that they failed you when you're the most brilliant wizard in this place, and we both know it. Goldleaf probably knows it too, but he didn't love hearing it from me."

My blood ran cold. "You *talked* to him?"

"I... sort of yelled at him?" Ash ducked her head guiltily. "I didn't mean to! It all spilled out. I was pissed. I'm *still* pissed. But if they won't let you graduate, then I won't graduate, either. We'll finish out another semester together, and then we'll go out into the world and be a badass wizard-bard duo." She bumped my shoulder. "Just like we planned, right?"

"Ash..." I didn't know what to say. The implication hung heavy in the air: Ash *had* passed, had been slated to graduate, but she'd given it up. For me.

It felt wrong. Would I have done the same for her? Would I have turned down the honors I would've

been awarded and my pride in them and chosen failure in solidarity with my friend?

I didn't know. I didn't even know if the thought would've crossed my mind.

A storm of conflicting emotions ravaged me; I felt terrible for every ounce of blame I'd mentally pinned to Ash. I knew better than anyone that Ash *did* work hard, and I realized now that what seemed to me like skating by was her version of keeping her head above water. She did only as much as she needed in order to pass, and spent the rest of her time enjoying her life and seizing each moment. To her, there was far more to life than classes and grades.

Maybe I could learn a thing or two from her.

"Also," Ash went on, "I've been thinking. Being friends with you and seeing how hard you work and how put-together you are...I guess it's rubbed off on me. I've come a long way since our first year, but I also know there's things I could've done better. So I want to try harder. I want to be better than I was when I started. This next term is a perfect chance to do that, to really go out with a bang."

"Perfect chance to get me into more trouble, too." I glanced at her with a smirk.

She laughed and lightly punched my arm. "Damn right!"

Ash brought out her lute and plucked a few strings.

She settled back against the tree and crossed her leg over her knee, foot bouncing in lazy time with the tune she teased out of the lute. I sat back on my hands and tipped my face up to the sun, breathing in the early summer air and relishing the faint, ever-present heartbeat of magic.

No, it wasn't the end of the world. And if the worst consequence I got for helping my friend was a tranquil song and another few months of mastering my skills, who was I to complain? Who was I to call that a failure?

Ash started to sing, and I found myself smiling.

Talli L. Morgan is an indie author and librarian from upstate New York. When they're not writing, Talli enjoys drawing, playing D&D, and thinking about writing. Their latest book, Silver Blood (February 2025) is a gothic vampire romance that blends elements of mystery and intrigue. Check it out [here](#).

The Wedding Heist of Ellen o' the Dale

Lila Gwynn

If you knew the legends of Robin Hood, you might assume he would drop everything to rescue a young damsel in distress.

Unfortunately, Ellen was getting to know the *real* Robin Hood, and he was a bit of an ass.

She'd brought her harp with her to Robin's favorite clearing in the greenwood, clutched it to her chest, and shed a tear. "O Merry Men!" she'd called. "I have heard news in Papplewick of a fair young maiden to be wed to a cruel, much older knight two days hence at midday. We must make haste."

Robin Hood was busy digging in his nose. "And why would we do that, Ellen o' the Dale?"

A sea of Lincoln green-clad men awaited her response. "Have you no heart?" she implored.

This kind of plea, she was learning, did not particularly work on Robin Hood, despite what

Ellen's very own songs about him proclaimed.

"Is there to be any financial benefit to this arrangement?" asked Robin Hood.

"The maiden is poor," said Ellen, shaking her harp, "and the knight is rich. May I remind you of the premise on which you base your reputation?"

"Eh," said Robin Hood. He flicked whatever he had found in his nose at Little John, who smacked him. "The knight would not cart his money with him to the church to be wed. I say nay."

And that was that: when Robin Hood said no, the answer was no.

A few of the Merry Men approached Ellen after her spectacle, claiming they *would* have helped her, if only Robin Hood gave his blessing, but he had not, and he would not. Then the men drank merrily and feasted aplenty, and Ellen was no closer to convincing them to save the damsel.

And so, the next morning, Ellen embarked upon one of her favorite pastimes – annoying the shit out of Robin Hood until he gave in to what she wanted.

Perched in a tree, as the Merry Men so often did, Ellen strummed at her harp. The sun was just rising, and the men were still hungover.

"Maid Marian, O that Maiden Fair, / Fantasy of many, in her—"

An arrow smacked into the tree behind her.

“That’s enough of that,” said Robin Hood.

“The men like it,” said Ellen.

“‘Tis true,” piped in Friar Tuck, hiccupping. He rubbed the shiny top of his tonsure. “I had never heard *bosom* rhymed with *wooden*.”

Ellen cleared her throat. “*Light of heart, but heavy of—*”

Another arrow thunked into the wood inches from Ellen’s head. She smiled mischievously at Robin Hood, who pulled his hat over his eyes and said, “Next time, I will not miss.”

The aborted ballad had the intended effect. As the men went about their morning routines, they hummed and murmured the offensive lyrics under their breaths, and Robin Hood was red of face and foul of mood all day.

This was the same song Ellen had first captured their notice with. She had set herself up in the greenwood and sang of Robin Hood’s legacy, hoping that her stories would catch his attention. It wasn’t until, frustrated, hours of strumming later, sporting aching fingers and a parched throat, that Ellen had begun in on a bawdy ballad about Maid Marian. In no time at all, Robin Hood had burst through the trees with a fiery vengeance.

The next time a rich traveler had come along, Ellen had proven the real power of her music – she could

convince rich men to drop their purses without a single drop of blood shed, and all she had to do was sing about it happening.

Back then, Ellen still thought that being one of the Merry Men was honorable, like an informal knighthood of vigilante justice-seekers. She'd been quickly disillusioned.

She'd suggested, upon hearing that they also planned on having Maid Marian join one of these days, that they change their name from Merry Men to something more inclusive.

Robin wouldn't change it. At first, Ellen thought the reasoning behind this was that he wanted to portray the image of a group of manly archers, under the impression that having women in the group would make them appear weaker. She later realized that the reason was almost worse than this. Robin Hood had an annoyingly persistent penchant for alliteration.

The other shocking thing was that the money they stole did not actually make it to the poor until after the bulk of it had been spent on ale and exquisite food. Whatever alms were left over were haphazardly given to any random person of questionable financial background or a nearby church, and who knew what the churches really did with it.

Ellen had an entire list of complaints.

When the men drank, they turned into little boys,

and Ellen had littler patience with them. They placed bets with each other about who could increase their bounty, and they drew crude pictures of the Sheriff of Nottingham on tree trunks and then littered the drawings with arrows. Ellen would come back in from town, where she sang false tales of Robin Hood's glory, with a fistful of reward posters so that the men could see if their tricks had done anything to the prices on their heads.

Ellen's least favorite part of joining the Merry Men, however, was their clothing. The dyed Lincoln green wool looked impressive and uniform to anyone they ambushed, presenting a united front, but something about the dyeing process made the fabric unbearably itchy. Everyone wore clothes underneath so the wool would not scratch at their skin all day, and as a result, they were always too damn hot, and the greenwood smelled of sweat at all times.

The smell was revolting. Ellen almost yearned for the persistent scent of manure back home. The pungency of body odor did not bother Robin Hood, however – but Ellen did.

"Make them stop," he begged after half a day of men singing about Maid Marian's endowments. "Sing them something else, something catchy."

"Agree to rescue the poor damsel tomorrow," countered Ellen.

“I don’t want anything to do with it. I don’t need a knight’s anger directed at me. Not if he was one of Richard’s.”

Ah, King Richard. That was another thing. The men all thought that when King Richard returned from the Crusades, the tax problems that inspired a group like the Merry Men to form would magically go away.

Ellen shared their distaste for Prince John, but she cared little whether King Richard lived or died, and for that matter, she did not support the Crusades. Why English knights needed to go somewhere else and take land that belonged to someone else was beyond her reasoning.

“Even if he is a very cruel knight? Surely, you know how even those who support good causes can be unjust in other ways.”

It was a personal jab, and Robin took it as such. “A different song,” he ordered. “Or you’re out.”

“You wouldn’t,” said Ellen.

She knew this to be true. With Ellen there, the men did not need to actually hurt anyone, and Robin Hood, despite all his misgivings, liked this the most – enough to forgive the quirks of Ellen’s that drove him half-mad. Ellen was doing the heavy lifting for the group, and he knew it.

She had made herself indispensable.

“Marian wants to join us someday,” argued Robin. “I cannot have the men disrespecting her and thinking of her as the object of a sexual fantasy. How will they treat her as an equal with all these terrible phrases in their heads?”

Ellen sighed. Robin Hood knew how to persuade her just as well as she knew how to get to him. “Very well,” she said. “Another song tonight.”

“Thank you,” he said, and this was rare enough that Ellen did not press him further.

When the men were well into their cups, Ellen pulled out her harp to great cheer. She closed her eyes, felt the first chords. The magic was there in the strings, right under her fingers, and there was always part of her that was tempted to use it on them. She could magically persuade them do what she wanted and just be done with it.

But anyone who was compelled to do something by her magic knew they had been persuaded. They would not trust her anymore. And besides, it would not be right.

She started on a tale that she knew they would like—a tale about the Merry Men, reputed to assist those in need. By chance, the tale started tomorrow, and the Merry Men tricked their way into a wedding between an innocent young maiden and a cruel, old knight who cared for nobody but himself—

“Ellen,” Robin shouted. “Anything but this.”

The merriment stopped. The clearing fell silent. Ellen sat on a large rock with her harp against her knees. “That is a shame,” she said. “Don’t you want to know how it ends?”

The challenge rung in the air. Cheekily, Ellen strummed one resonant note of her harp.

“I should like to know how it ends, Robin,” said Little John, and the men murmured agreement.

Robin Hood sighed. “It is just a song, I suppose.”

With Robin’s blessing, Ellen resumed the song. She watched Robin Hood, how his inattention and his half-drunken demeanor gave way to leaning forward, intently listening to her tale, and by the time she’d ended it to cheers aplenty, a deep furrow had formed between his brows.

That night, Ellen had trouble falling asleep. It wasn’t that she was sleeping in a tree – she’d gotten used to that by now. She had played her cards too soon, perhaps, or not soon enough. She had misjudged. The damsel would not be saved.

And then the tree began to shake.

Ellen’s eyes jolted open. She clung to her harp, ready to frantically sing someone a song about how they chose to climb back down the tree and leave her alone – she was no fighter, and could not defend herself well.

Someone plunked onto the sturdy branch across from her. Her eyes adjusted to the sight of Robin Hood.

“The wedding is at midday?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Ellen, bewildered.

“Is it far?”

“Five miles hence. We can get there easily.”

He nodded, rubbing his chin. “Very well. I will tell the men to be ready.”

“What convinced you?” Ellen asked, unable to help herself.

“You tell a good tale,” he said. “I quite liked it. You’ll tell it in town?”

“Of course.”

“Wonderful,” he said. “And Ellen o’ the Dale, I will need your harp.”

As in the case of any good wedding-crash-slash-rescue, the day started with a kidnapping.

The Merry Men waited at a stone wall near the church where the wedding would take place. A bishop had gone in first, and then a smattering of villagers, and finally, they spotted a flautist, who they promptly whisked away against his will.

“Who hires only a flautist for a wedding?” Robin remarked as they dragged the musician to their hiding place. They’d bagged his head and thought to tie him

up, but he was just a boy. The moment he'd been unbagged and seen all the Merry Men, he'd run off into the woods, swearing off the flute for life.

Meanwhile, Robin Hood was adorned in a coat he'd somehow obtained that utilized every color of the rainbow and perhaps several not visible to the human eye. Long tassels hung from the coat, snagging in tall grass and rock and giving the sense of constant movement. Looking upon him—even peripherally—was painful and, in Ellen's experience, headache-inducing.

"You look ridiculous," said Ellen, not for the first time.

"I am dashing," said Robin Hood, also not for the first time.

It was not long before the sound of horses captured their attention; that would be the procession with the bride and groom in their carriages. With great reluctance, Ellen handed over her beloved harp to Robin Hood.

"Do not, under any circumstances, actually play this," she warned.

"Aha! So it is the instrument itself that contains magic and not the bard," he said.

"No, you fool," said Ellen. "But your lack of skill will give us away immediately."

Sourly, Robin Hood turned the other way and

marched toward the church, muttering about the similarities between harp strings and arrow strings. Little John thrust a bullhorn into Ellen's hands, and she scampered after Robin.

The doors to the church were propped open. As though he belonged there, Robin entered and forcefully shook the hand of a man standing near the door. "Thank you for being here," he said.

"Ah," said the man. "What?"

But Robin was already onto the next person with a rigorous handshake: "Any day true love finds home is a good day."

Ellen followed behind him, awkwardly grabbing hands thrust in her direction. Robin moved fast, and Ellen, flustered, struggled to keep up, and soon they were at the front of the church, standing before the bishop.

"Good day! Where does the harpist go?" asked Robin. "My assistant and I are hoping to set up before the wedding."

The bishop's mouth fell open. Ellen suspected this was due to Robin's offensive raiment and not the sudden appearance of a harpist. "And here I'd thought Sir Stephen only recognized the flute as a worthy instrument," the bishop said. "Thank goodness someone has talked some sense into him."

"Yes, thank goodness," agreed Robin.

“I quite like the harp,” said the bishop. “Perhaps you could set up to the left of the altar and play for the villagers while we wait for the ceremony to begin.”

Protectively, Robin Hood clutched Ellen’s harp to his side. Ellen winced at how he held it like a dirty handkerchief.

“My good, holy sir,” said Robin, “I simply cannot play until I see the bride and groom.”

The bishop squinted at him. “Surely there will be music as they approach, as is tradition.”

“Tradition?” Robin Hood looked out at the villagers, aghast. He did indeed have their attention, once again, Ellen thought, because of his hideous coat. “I will have you know, I have played for hundreds – nay, thousands – of weddings, and ’tis bad luck for the harpist to begin before the bride and groom have entered the building.”

The villagers muttered their responses to this. He must have convinced some of them, because several glared at the bishop like he was somehow in the wrong.

A sheen of sweat formed on the bishop’s forehead. He dabbed at it with his sleeve. “I have seen over many weddings myself. The music is played for the duration.”

“How many weddings?” Robin demanded to know.

“Pardon me?” the bishop asked, reddening.

“How many?”

“At least... Well, at least five-score,” the bishop said.

“Does that compare to *thousands*?” Robin asked his captive audience.

They booed.

The bishop’s sweat was coming down in rivulets now. He wiped it out of his bleary eyes. “Ah, well, to the left, then, and play whenever you feel is right.”

“Whenever I *know* is right,” corrected Robin Hood, and meandered over to the left side of the altar. The bishop was almost in tears.

“You are laying it on a little thick,” Ellen said between clenched teeth.

But Robin just waved her off. The villagers regarded him with interest, which is what Ellen suspected he really wanted.

They stood at the front, facing the crowd. Ellen’s fingers itched to steal her harp back. The horses they’d heard had been close – they should have been here by now. Ellen frowned at Robin, who shrugged nonchalantly.

She could have strangled him. It had been a mistake to leave the logistics up to Robin Hood. He relied so heavily upon cultivating his image that he hardly cared to properly execute a plot.

Someone entered the church and whispered to the gentleman at the door. The gentleman's expression turned sour. Briskly, he made his way to the bishop and said something too quiet for Ellen to hear.

"Something's gone wrong," said Ellen to Robin Hood.

"The groom," said Robin. He picked at his ear, wiped the wax on his stupid coat. "He has locked himself in the crypt."

"Locked himself in the—" Ellen huffed. "Let us go find him."

"Oh, no thank you," said Robin. "I mislike dead people."

Ellen tugged one of his dangling tassels and did not give him a choice.

The door to the crypt was surrounded by several bickering, finely dressed servants.

Robin Hood stepped up to them with authority, brandishing the harp like a royal scroll from the King himself. The servants, unnerved by Robin's undue confidence, stepped aside as Robin thrust open the doors.

"I'd hardly call it 'locking oneself in' if the doors can be opened," he remarked, and Ellen considered shoving him as he descended the stone steps.

The crypt, like most crypts, was cold and dark.

Only the light from above illuminated the man sitting mournfully at the bottom of the steps.

What little was left of his hair was white as snow. He lifted his face from his hands when he heard them approach and watched, stunned. His eyes were red and puffy. There was no doubt of his status as the groom – he was dressed in rich red velvet from head to toe.

Ellen held out her hand for her harp, but Robin did not give it to her.

“Why is a great knight hiding in a crypt from his own wedding?” Robin asked, and Ellen half-thought he was asking her and not the groom.

“I miss my first wife,” said the old knight. “It feels like a betrayal to marry again, but we never bore children, and I need an heir.” He sniffled. “She was the love of my life, you know. I do not think anyone could compare, and I worry about giving this new bride a comfortable life.”

Accusingly, Robin Hood turned to Ellen. “What a sad tale that is.”

“Sadder still for the bride,” argued Ellen. She grabbed for her harp, but Robin held it out of her reach.

“Do you really think so?” the knight asked, sobbing.

After some smacking of wrists and one timely bite

to Robin Hood's thumb, Ellen succeeded in stealing back her harp. She plucked one string, and then another, and the magic came through her fingers and traveled to her throat.

"Old, sad groom in the crypt, / It's time that off to bed you've slipped..."

A loud snore signaled that Ellen's magic had worked. The knight was slumped over, still sitting up, a snot bubble expanding and contracting from one nostril.

"Ellen o' the Dale, what in the name of God have you—"

"Enough chatting," Ellen snapped. She was already unbuttoning the knight's fine velvet vest. "We have a wedding to attend."

Robin Hood responded by taking the bullhorn and blowing it three times.

At the entrance to the crypt, the servants had multiplied, but now, men clad in Lincoln green surrounded the church.

Ellen pushed through the servants toward the unattended carriage. She slicked back her hair with one hand and then bowed grandly.

The fabric flap of the carriage parted, and out stepped a woman dressed in extravagant white and gold. Her hair was a deep shade of crimson, and her skin was freckled and sun-kissed.

The bride squealed, threw herself into Ellen's arms, and planted a wet kiss right on her mouth.

Long ago, an adolescent known as Ellen o' the Dale lived in a village next door to a farm inhabited by a girl named Scarlet Williams.

They'd known of each other—it was a small village, and just about everyone knew each other—but they'd never shared a meaningful moment until Scarlet caught Ellen hiding in her bushes.

Ellen had been chopping wood when she'd heard a melodious voice singing a common lullaby. Around the village, Ellen had a reputation for her musical inclinations, but she had not known anyone shared her talent. She was drawn to it like a siren's song.

She followed the dulcet tones and located their owner. Over the fence and through a copse of trees, Scarlet Williams stood hunched over a cow.

She milked as she sang in the loveliest voice Ellen had ever heard.

Ellen stayed quiet, not wanting to alert Scarlet to her presence lest the lullaby end. She hunched in some shrubbery a short distance away and closed her eyes to better appreciate every word.

She did not notice, at first, the singing growing louder, but she did notice when it suddenly ceased.

When she opened her eyes, Scarlet was just inches

from Ellen's face.

"Ellen o' the Dale," Scarlet said. "What are you doing in my bushes?"

Ellen's first instinct, to her dismay, was to make a crude joke, and when she realized it would not land, she instead turned a shade of red more common to tomatoes than humans.

"Just listening," she choked out.

"You could have said hello, like a normal person," Scarlet chastised.

"Am I a normal person?" asked Ellen.

Scarlet smirked. She had one dimple, only on the left side, and Ellen had never noticed it before. She had never been close enough to admire the smattering of freckles across Scarlet's nose and cheeks, or the way she had been filling out her dresses as she grew, or how soft her skin looked.

Ellen was not so comely. Earlier that year, she had gotten her hair stuck full of burrs and chopped it all off. She was also awkward, broad-shouldered, square-shaped, and abnormally tall for a girl, though she was thankfully done growing.

"You may continue to listen," said Scarlet, "if you wish."

"I would like that," said Ellen.

"Not in my bushes, though."

Ellen's face warmed again. "Never. I promise."

And Ellen sat and she listened, and Scarlet watched Ellen curiously as she sang.

The next time Ellen visited, she brought her harp. She played it alongside Scarlet's singing, and when Scarlet demanded Ellen show off her voice in exchange, Ellen shyly sang along. They sang of adventures they would never go on, knights and heroes and princesses and their lovers.

After a while, Ellen grew the courage to perform her magic in front of Scarlet. With her harp, Ellen persuaded the birds to chirp along with them, and the chickens to lay more eggs, and the rabbits to leave the crops alone. Every day, she was drawn back, and every day, she helped or sang as Scarlet worked.

And then, one day, Scarlet was waiting for her. Usually, she was in the middle of some farming chore that Ellen would seamlessly join. This time, Scarlet was clean, the grime gone from under her nails, her hair plaited prettily. Ellen liked her just as much grimy, too, she realized.

Actually, she liked Scarlet a lot.

Ellen set down her harp against one of the trees in the copse dividing their homes. "Are you courting someone?" she asked.

"If I didn't know any better, Ellen o' the Dale," said Scarlet in that assured way of hers, "I would think *you* were courting *me*."

Luckily for the both of them, some of Scarlet's boldness had rubbed off on Ellen. "I have been in love with you since the moment I first heard you sing."

"I thought so," said Scarlet, and that was that.

They disappeared into the copse together for a time, awkward, young, fumbling, and having a great deal of fun. By the time they left, they would be inseparable for life.

Over the next years, Ellen and Scarlet did everything together, from errands in neighboring towns to splitting the farmwork to raising a herd of unmanageable cats. The two of them saw the years unfolding ahead of them, content with their work and with their love, but nothing good lasts forever in exactly the form you want it to.

One day, Scarlet's father suddenly became very sick and passed away. Scarlet, wrought with grief, allowed Ellen to move into her home. Ellen had many siblings, all getting married or doing their own work at her family's house; Scarlet was an only child, and she had nobody.

The visitor came at suppertime some months later at the start of spring. Taxes would be higher, the man said. They did not own the land, and there was no man of the house, and they could not keep the farm unless they were willing to pay the price.

"Let's walk around the square," Ellen said when

the man had left. "Being outside always does us good."

Scarlet put on a shawl to join her.

They walked through their familiar little village. A somber mood permeated the air. All of the houses here had been visited, all of the families threatened with the reclaiming of their land and the surrender of their livelihoods if they were unwilling to pay prices that none of them could pay.

Ellen led Scarlet to a bench in the village square, and the two sat next to each other. Scarlet held Ellen's hands in hers. She looked very close to tears.

"When my father died, a man came to the house." Scarlet took a deep breath. "He was a retired knight. He had seen me in Nottingham when we visited the market last."

"What did he want?" Ellen said, squeezing Scarlet's hands. She had a feeling she was not going to like the answer.

"He said that I would do for a wife." Scarlet swallowed. "And that I would live very comfortably, and not want for anything ever again, so long as I had his children."

Ellen dropped Scarlet's hands.

"I said no," Scarlet said. "But, El... I am reconsidering."

"It's not like the Sheriff can evict all of us," argued

Ellen. "Nobody can pay these ridiculous prices."

"Can't he?" Scarlet's shoulders slouched. This was not the beautiful, confident woman that Ellen was used to. This was someone defeated by a corrupt system. And Ellen would have taken on the King himself if that was what it took to make it right.

"What happens if you marry him?" Ellen asked quietly.

"If I marry him... I'll have some of his babies, I suppose. And then I'll come back to you when that's all done and he will pay for the farm."

Ellen tried to wrap her head around this. This was so far from the future she'd had in mind for the two of them. "How many heirs would he want? You could die in childbirth. And you would have to warm his bed."

"I know, El. I know. I just don't see an alternative." Scarlet sighed. "He seemed nice, at least. I do not think he would hurt me."

"We have to be smart about this. Could there be another way to get the knight's money?"

"Oh, El. You want to rob him?"

"You know how he got that money just as well as I do. Besides, we wouldn't take *all* of his riches. Just enough to keep the Sheriff off of our backs."

Scarlet looked dubious. "How would we go about that? We're just two women. Neither of us can fight.

You can't sing the money out of him. He'd have you arrested the second the enchantment ended."

"You're right," Ellen said sadly. "To rob him and get away with it, we would need an entire group of warriors."

"Tell me when you can find a group of warriors to do all of that work for us," Scarlet said. It was light-hearted enough that it felt like her old self, and Ellen smiled.

The sky grew dark, and the night became cold, and the two stood to leave. There was a noticeboard in the middle of the square, and as Ellen passed it, she stopped in her tracks.

On the board was a drawing of a man's face. He looked menacing, haughty, and dangerous. REWARD, the sign read, FOR THE CAPTURE OF ROBIN HOOD.

"Scarlet?"

"That reward is pitiful. Oh, come now. Please tell me you aren't planning on capturing the great Robin Hood."

"Much worse than that."

"What is it, El?"

"What if I told you I had a very foolish plan to get us that group of warriors?"

On a beautiful summer day, in a little church in a little

village, Ellen o' the Dale stood at the altar with Scarlet Williams.

Inspired by Ellen robbing the knight of his clothes, Robin Hood had chosen to rob the bishop of his. This may have had something to do with the bishop objecting to marrying a different couple than they'd started with. It may also have had to do with Robin Hood liking the blue sheen of the bishop's unusually fine dress.

Whatever the reason, Friar Tuck was brought in to perform the ceremony.

The villagers, though confused by the spectacle, were also intrigued by it. The dozen green-clad men pointing arrows at anyone who might dare to intervene with the wedding may also have helped.

Friar Tuck, perhaps wanting to be thorough, or perhaps thoroughly drunk, asked the women seven times over if they would take the other as their lawfully wedded wife, by the power vested in him, and seven times, Ellen and Scarlet said yes.

The moment of their first wedded kiss was only slightly ruined by Robin discordantly yanking the strings on Ellen's harp.

"This is going to be one hell of a ballad," said Robin Hood.

For once, he was right.

When the ceremony was over, Ellen and Scarlet filled each other in on what they'd missed. Ellen told her about the Merry Men; Scarlet expressed interest in joining them. They could get Ellen's youngest brother to take care of their farm if they wanted. They could do, really, *anything* they wanted.

The Merry Men returned to the clearing, cheering on the newlyweds and pouring each other casks of ale. The cook rolled out steaming game pies and an entire roasted pig. The men sat and ate and laughed, and Ellen basked in the fact that her plan had worked, and worked well.

She played several versions of the ballad she'd promised Robin Hood, first painting herself as the hero and then slowly rewriting it until Robin Hood took the starring role, as he wished. The men shouted their opinions of the new verses until Ellen had it just right, and by then, her wrists were aching and her throat was dry.

When she was done playing for the night, Robin Hood approached her and gestured for her to follow him into the woods. Ellen trailed him to the creek where they bathed.

"You're upset with me," she said.

"Not a drop of blood shed. What's to be upset about?"

"I undermined you."

Robin Hood huffed. "You must think me a proud fool."

"Sometimes, yes."

"If the knight was not evil," said Robin, "and we were not there to redistribute his wealth, we should not have been saving damsels from him."

"I only did it that way because I knew you wouldn't agree otherwise. I swear that I was going to try it the honest way first."

He rubbed his chin, considering this. Thankfully, he had taken off his colorful coat and stashed it away for the next time he needed to disguise himself as an eyesore.

"You might have told me she was your lady love. I would have helped right when we first met you."

"Would you?" Ellen asked. To her surprise, she was genuinely interested in the answer. That was the way she had told it in the final version of the ballad, but only because it made Robin sound good.

"Of course I would have. I am a romantic myself."

Ellen thought of his distaste for her bawdier songs. "I suppose you are."

"There is one thing I do not understand. I can't help but think this was a very convoluted way to stop a wedding. Surely you could have intervened long before today. You could have persuaded the knight to leave his bride-to-be with your enchantments."

“I could have,” conceded Ellen. “But where is the fun in that?”

“That sounds like something I’d say,” said Robin.

“You *are* predictable...”

“I hope,” said Robin, “that wherever the money is, it is being used well.”

“What money?”

Robin scowled. “You scoundrel.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I have my new wife to get back to.”

Robin Hood let out an exasperated breath. “Enjoy your wedding night, Ellen o’ the Dale.”

Ellen and Scarlet did enjoy their wedding night very much. When they had worn each other out, they sat together against a tree and looked up at the stars.

“I buried what I could take from him in our copse,” Scarlet whispered. “It should be enough, I think.”

Ellen traced a heart in the dirt with her finger. “Maybe we don’t need the farm. We should save the money for when we become tired of this life and want to leave the Merry Men behind us.”

Scarlet gave Ellen a knowing smile. “Would you really leave them?”

“They grow on you. Like fungus on a rock.” Ellen smiled back. “And they like me, besides.”

“They seem all right. Like the adventures in your songs we’d always dream about. I never thought we would really live out those stories.”

“It has been fun,” Ellen admitted. “I think you’d like it as well.”

“Do they really rob from the rich and give to the poor?”

Ellen snorted. “They rob from the rich, anyway.”

“That’s a start,” said Scarlet.

And it was.

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A Blessing in Disguise

Ceril N. Domace

CONTENT WARNING

This story contains a cult-like setting and related family trauma.

The issue with House Talthen of the Kingdom of Hearthbreeze is that we have a divine right and duty to rule. Now, most people who say they have a divine right to a country are full of nonsense – and quite frankly are the sort of people who shouldn't be anywhere near a throne – but in Hearthbreeze, that's literal.

An ancient and forgotten god cursed one of my ancestors and our family with the throne. Sure, they called it a blessing at the time, but job security for you and your descendants isn't as much of a draw as one would think when that job has a tendency to drive you all insane and suck the soul from you if you mess

up. Instead of being able to reap the benefits of assured power and wealth, each passing century has forced the ruler of Hearthbreeze to take on more responsibilities until they can't even sleep without neglecting some duty or other.

The thing is, if it were a real curse, we probably could've broken it by now. My family has had tens of thousands of years of uninterrupted rule to research it, but whoever that god was, they *really* didn't take kindly to us trying to skive off from our duties. There's a reason none of us even knows who we have to thank for our title anymore and that reason lies in the burning hills to the northeast, which is all that was left of the original capital city and the quarter million people who lived there. Without that knowledge, we can't even ask the god to lighten our burden.

Since then, my family has been trapped in Hearthbreeze. Crossing the border is a literal death sentence, unless you're on official business, and not working to improve the kingdom is how you get your branch pruned from the family tree, courtesy of an angry god.

Of course, the family tree in our case is more literal than most might think: four stories high, made of steel, and full of the trapped souls of every one of my ancestors who'd died on the throne. The souls are supposed to offer the current ruler advice, but the

centuries of constant labor have driven the sense from most of them. It had a more cheerful name back when it was still a sapling, but everyone these days just calls it the Blood-Wrought Tree.

It doesn't help that to rule in Hearthbreeze means taking care of everything yourself to satisfy the demands of the blessing. It doesn't matter if it's something as simple as which flowers to plant in the garden, or something as complex as a peace treaty between six factions of dryads looking to lay claim to the royal forest – whoever is wearing the crown has to deal with it. Delegation is a dirty word in my family, unless the one being delegated to is next in line for the throne.

Which was how I, as heir, ended up planning all the social engagements for the high festival season when I was merely twenty-six years old. A child in human terms. By the time I organized my own coming-of-age ceremony a hundred and seven years later, I was an old hand at organizing political engagements and had a life-or-death rivalry with the predominant florist in Hearthbreeze. She knows what she did, and I will nurse that grudge until my dying day.

I'd also developed a fondness for ale that was, perhaps, unwise for one in my position. Still, there's nothing like the threat of dooming your parents and

brother to a brutal death and an eternity in a metal tree to encourage a young man to learn how to balance three dozen tasks after drinking enough to fell a giant.

Don't get me wrong – if the royal family could, we'd throw the crown at the nearest interested noble and run for the hills. The trouble is, curses in disguise as divine blessings don't just go away because the people under them don't want to bother with them anymore. They have a way of sticking around and resisting all efforts of the affected parties to break free or even to learn what was meant to come out of the whole arrangement in the first place.

Which is why, despite countless centuries and the near extinction of my line, we still find ourselves passing the crown around like a pot of raw sewage.

The fact of the matter is that no member of my family had been able to free themselves from the throne until I accidentally snuck out of the country in the back of Clarkfowler's wagon five hundred years ago. I'd been exceptionally drunk at the time, so I wasn't even sure how it had happened. Every living member of my family – and most of the dead – had been trying to figure out how to escape since the old capital city was destroyed, which made the situation as ironic as it was irritating. Still, once I crossed the border, whatever hold the god's blessing had on me broke and I was free. I'd been hiding from my family

ever since. Partially to avoid getting dragged back by the blessing, but mostly because I didn't want to admit to my loved ones that I had no idea how to free them too.

Which is where they come in.

"They" being "Professor Clarkfowler's Exterminators, Wranglers, and Travelling Librarians", and I say "they" only because I'm *technically* not an employee at the moment. They've helped the ruling families of the fifteen kingdoms break curses, interpret prophecies, and negotiate with the suddenly sentient results of magical experimentation for centuries. The library is renowned on this and several other planes, and no one has as many political connections or friends in convenient locations as they do, which is in no small part due to my own efforts.

The mobile and semi-sentient nature of the library has kept my family from tracking me down for over half a millennia and allowed me to see more of the fifteen kingdoms than any of my family had in several thousand years. The only reason my brother, King Torin, was able to find me at all was a squabble with Aleksandr's many lovers that made me lose track of time during a ball.

Despite throwing myself from a balcony to escape, then dodging any and all attempts to contact me officially – Clarkfowler had taken to using my

brother's letters as bookmarks and coasters – I'd been cornered (after Clarkfowler's sister nearly destroyed the library) and whisked away before anyone could react.

My eventual escape and reunion with my friends had been a whole thing with pirates and krakens and playing an extended game of cat and mouse across the countryside until we wound up here, in a crumbling abandoned fortress near the border of Hearthbreeze after a local bard convinced Clarkfowler to assist with a “minor” bandit issue in exchange for showing her a secret passage through the mountains.

The second the bard mentioned “hydra cults” and “lost cloning labs”, not even my family's long-forgotten patron god would've been able to pull Clarkfowler out of that fortress. I should've known better, though.

The only reason I'd agreed to come was that I'd been desperate. Short of getting myself absolutely smashed again and hoping Clarkfowler would stumble on how I'd escaped the first time, I was running out of ideas to leave Hearthbreeze and the blessing was tugging on me more each day. The idea that there was a secret way through the mountains – one that even Great-Uncle Eunace had missed during their great campaign to map the entire kingdom down to the faintest deer path – was too tempting to miss.

But no, it was all for naught. Even if such a path had existed, the bandit issue in question turned out be a *single* bandit – a human named Dave – that had accidentally rediscovered cloning magic, and what was a minor problem quickly became a threat to the nation itself when Dave’s clones numbered in the tens of thousands. By the time we’d trapped the original Dave and broken the spell on him, my brother’s guards had blocked all the exits and Torin himself was on my heels.

Really, the whole affair was the bard’s fault, but since her ballad about the situation won’t be ready to publicly debut for another month – and will likely be embellished to the moons and back, in the grand tradition of bards sniffing out someone else’s scandals – it falls to me to make sure the whole event is recorded properly. Gods know when I’ll next be able to do one of these.

Once the chaos of dealing with the bandit and my brother cornering us had died down, my brother and I ended up sitting around a long table in the remains of the fortress’s great hall. Someone had taken the initiative to light a fire in the long-abandoned hearth, which was making a valid but ultimately futile effort to ward off the cold coming through the gaping holes in the walls and ceiling. The chill was the sort to find

each hole in my garments and turn the tip of my nose an unflattering rosy red, but I was grateful for it. Warmth and comfort would only distract me, and I'd need my full focus if I wanted to get out of this with my freedom intact.

The only reason we weren't already on our way to the capital of Hearthbreeze was that Sweet Potato, a horse-sized ginger housecat and the company mouser, had gotten the jump on Torin. All the magic and armor in the world meant little when an animal capable of tearing through steel like lace was sitting on your breastplate. The desperate pleas of a long-lost brother in the face of an ancient divine blessing meant even less.

Now, I sat at one side of the table, Torin on the other, and Julianne, the orc bard who'd convinced Clarkfowler to come up here in the first place, sat on the table between us to act as arbiter. Traveling bards like her were, as a rule, neutral parties, so she felt it was her duty to keep us from getting violent with each other. Torin's guards were outside the hall with Siobhan – my fiancé and the head junior librarian – Professor Clarkfowler herself, and Aleksandr, the allegedly reformed thief who worked in the library's acquisitions department. Between the three of them and Sweet Potato, they should be able to come up with some plan to get me out of here before my

brother started making too much sense. That was always a risk with a man who'd once convinced a gnome warlord to lay down her arms and resettle her people in a valley on the opposite side of the kingdom from their hereditary enemies, *and* make her think it was all her idea.

"I still think I could've fit through that window," I muttered under my breath, glaring at Torin with as much spite as I could muster. Aleksandr had been all for it, but Siobhan had *insisted* the fall would kill me. Yes, it was half a mile to the ground, but she'd seen me thrown from the highest window in the tallest tower of a castle on our first job together. I'd landed in the rosebushes. Compared to that, a river at the bottom of a ravine was a dream.

But no, she'd insisted that my brother was a fair and reasonable man, that he wouldn't force me to take the throne if I just explained *why* I didn't want the job. By the time I'd had a half-decent argument against that pulled together, the guards had been upon us and the chase had started again.

Despite myself, I had to bite back a tide of venom toward Siobhan. She knew me well enough to understand that if it were a matter of just not *wanting* the throne, I could've resolved this centuries ago. Hells, the royal line could've been replaced a dozen times over by now if it were simply a matter of no one

in line for the throne wanting the job.

Even if I'd had the time to explain the full situation to Siobhan, I wouldn't have been able to; the blessing resisted all efforts to remove it. Trying to clue in the best cursebreaker in the fifteen kingdoms about why no one ever challenged the royal family was exactly the sort of thing to tie my tongue, even if that was all the blessing could do from this distance.

So, I ended up sitting across from my brother, not even attempting to hide my glare, as Julianne beat a steady rhythm on her hand drum and droned on about the rules of this engagement. I'd forgotten how loud bard negotiations could be. Gods, maybe I should've stuck with the pirates. At the very least I could've snuck off the ship in a distant port instead of swimming for shore the moment their backs were turned. That was how we'd ended up in Hearthbreeze to start with.

Once the last beat of the drum faded away, Julianne settled into a cross-legged position on the table and settled her blindingly yellow skirts around her. "To begin, each party shall state what their desired goals are for this negotiation." Her eyes narrowed and the look she leveled at me and Torin could've curdled milk. "Neither of you shall interrupt the other, do I make myself clear?"

Once we indicated our understanding, she nodded.

“Excellent. I shall begin, followed by King Torin and then Prince Garrett, in order of standing.” She beat on the drum again, three quick staccatos, and then she spoke. “I, the right honorable Julianna Escaranth of Lilly’s Grove, wish to lead these negotiations with an open mind, to prevent either party from cheating the other, and to seek the best solution for all involved.”

Three more staccato beats and a deep thrum settled in my chest. Bard magic. Gods, I hated that feeling. Real negotiation should use words where possible, fists when those didn’t work, and magic only as a last resort. Even if this only “smoothed the way for words” it was still an insult to negotiating as a profession.

Torin pulled himself as straight as a pin, his fancy travel clothes arranged as artfully around him as if he were in the throne room of the royal palace back home. His voice was as firm as his gaze and both sought to pin me to my seat. “I, King Torin of Hearthbreeze, wish to bring my brother home so he may take my place.”

Short. Simple. To the point. And yet it set off such a pounding in my heart that it threatened to drown out Julianne’s drum and the thrumming of her magic in the air. I didn’t want to go with my brother, not if it meant taking the throne, but I had to at least pretend to go along with the negotiations until I could figure

out how to get away.

“I, Garrett of Prof—” A sharp pain reverberated in the back of my head and I swallowed back what I’d planned to say before it got worse. That damned blessing was already trying to sink its claws into me. If I didn’t get out of Hearthbreeze soon, I’d never be able to leave. “—Prince Garrett, formerly the manager of Professor Clarkfowler’s Exterminators, Wranglers, and Travelling Librarians, wish to leave Hearthbreeze, never to return, and to be removed from the line of succession.”

A heavy order, one that made the pain in the back of my head strike me like a hammer blow. My jaw set and I pulled myself straight. Only fools spurned the will of a god, but I’d been that foolish before and it had worked. No matter what it took, I’d do it again.

Julianne nodded decisively. This time, she hit her drum once and then settled it on her lap. “Then it begins. First one, then the other, shall present their points.” She pointed at Torin and nodded. “Speak your reasons for Garrett to return.”

If we were anywhere else, I do think I would’ve admired her efficiency about this. Other bards would’ve taken the opportunity to show off their floral speech or sing a sonnet about how it was important to talk before we came to blows, but she got straight to the point.

Unfortunately, what came out of Torin's mouth next soured any positive feeling that I could've had in this situation. He started with the standard nonsense that every royal, abdicated or otherwise, had been spewing since before we forgot who our divine patron was. It was my *responsibility* to go home, to relieve Torin of the pressure, and do my duty to the people of Hearthbreeze. It was expected of me to take the throne and lead this kingdom until either one of my cousins grew up enough to take the job from me or one of the abdicated rulers agreed to take my place.

A load of hollow bollocks in my opinion, and Torin agreed, if the look in his eye was anything to go by. There wasn't a single member of our family that actually wanted the crown once they'd gotten a taste of it, and fewer still wanted to burden their children with it, which was why there were fewer Talthen children with each generation. Of my mother's two siblings and six cousins, only three had had children besides her, and all at the behest of their spouses. I was the oldest of only five surviving potential heirs to the throne.

Closing my eyes, I breathed deeply, focusing on the wood beneath me and the ever-present chill in the air. It was easier than looking at him. Easier than remembering that Torin hadn't wanted the throne either. In our wildest childhood fantasies, we'd

planned our grand escape and all the adventures we'd have in places we'd only ever heard about at boring political functions. We'd escape and we'd never come back here, no matter what the blessing did.

But eventually, we grew up, and only one of us managed to escape. No doubt he'd held off on chasing me for as long as he could, but the blessing would not be denied forever.

I tuned most of Torin's opening speech out, which was a mistake because at one point he started getting personal.

"...and really, is the work you've done with Professor Clarkfowler worthy of a prince? You were meant to lead nations, Garrett, not fight giant spiders or sort books."

Only the knowledge that Julianne's biceps were larger than my head and that she'd majored in storm giant percussion in college – which meant she was more than capable of holding Torin and I over the side of the cliff by our ankles for the rest of the negotiations if she wanted to – kept me in my seat. When the drum beat and I was able to speak, the words poured from my tongue like poison.

"My work with Professor Clarkfowler is more than worth whatever I could've done as ruler of Hearthbreeze."

Working for Clarkfowler was the first time I'd felt

like I was doing something that mattered, as opposed to simply taking some of the pressure off my mother so she didn't crack before I was old enough to take the throne myself. I'd saved whole cities from cults raising dead gods, taken the library from a handful of shelves to an interdimensional space where anyone could better themselves, and made real actual friends for the first time in my life. Nothing I had done in Hearthbreeze had even come close to that.

"I have the freedom and ability to help people how I choose and to influence the entire continent toward greater knowledge and stability," I said through gritted teeth. My hands curled into fists and only Julianne's presence kept me from throttling him. I'd thought him better than this. He'd wanted to flee when we were children just as much as I had but here he was trying to pull me back in. "Were I to return to Hearthbreeze, my ability to help not just the people of Hearthbreeze, but this world and beyond, would be severely curtailed."

Even as crown prince, I'd had enough work to kill a lesser administrator. Merely organizing the social season to relieve Mother from her burden became meetings with the high priests to plan religious festivals, having dinner with dignitaries to discuss trade agreements, hiring servants, and attending endless noble soirees to ensure that none of the nobles

were abusing their servants when the royal family wasn't looking.

All that was a mere drop in the grand ocean of things Mother had to do, but it had still threatened to crush me. I'd seen what the throne did to people, to the bright person Mother had been. How it had crushed the very life from her until the only thing left was a hollow shell that couldn't recognize my brother, our father, or me.

There'd been nothing I could do to help her but take as much from her shoulders as I could. It was the nature of the position. She was bound by blood and oath to govern until she couldn't anymore, then to force the position on the next in line.

Even with an army of assistants and councils, the poor fool on the throne was always so overworked that my family had warred with the blessing four thousand years ago just to ensure the ruler was allowed eight hours of uninterrupted sleep, a battle that had cost us over a hundred heirs. Not even regular sleep was enough to save them, though. The fact that any given ruler was one bad month away from a complete mental breakdown was just an accepted part of life in Hearthbreeze.

I'd take fighting wizards' experiments, negotiating new union contracts, *and* convincing Clarkfowler that her tea preferences were, in fact, toxic to most species

before all that. Gods, even getting dragged into bandit wars by foolhardy bards was preferable to taking up the family business.

A beat of the drum, and Torin spoke again. “Come on, are you really suggesting that running a cross-dimensional library and pest control company is easier than running one kingdom for a scant few decades?” His lips curled down in a sharp frown and for a moment he looked so much like Mother when she was arguing with insipid nobles that my breath caught in my chest. “We’re not even asking you to take a full term on the throne. Cousin Yulsfef is nearly of age and their siblings are only a few decades younger than them. Once you’ve played your part, you can abdicate. We’re asking for two hundred years, at most.”

Another beat and I shook myself. The wood grain of the table was rough against my skin, even though my clothes, and it was a welcome distraction. “It’s still two hundred years more than I want to rule.” Even two days was too much. Being in Hearthbreeze was bad enough, but even now, the blessing caressed me, just looking for the places it had been latched onto me before I’d escaped. It was like a spider crawling along my soul, weaving a web to hold me in place while it sucked the life from my bones. “Why’d you even come after me? You know the odds of me

coming back with you willingly, let alone getting on the throne, are non-existent.”

After five centuries, I thought I’d finally been free. Our cousins were almost old enough to take the throne and all Torin had to do was hold on till then. As long as I stayed out of Hearthbreeze, it would’ve been fine. The only reason I was back *at all* was that I hadn’t realized the pirates were anchored in Hearthbreeze waters when I jumped overboard and swam for shore. The only reason I hadn’t escaped was sitting right across from me.

Not even one in ten of the abdicated rulers had recovered from the physical and mental strain of running Hearthbreeze. Most of them struggled to remember to eat or sleep without being prompted, let alone when to tear themselves from whatever hobby they’d convinced themselves would change the country for the better. Yet they would still be better on the throne than someone who’d spent more of his life outside the country he was meant to rule than inside it. The job destroyed people who *wanted* it. The blessing stripped them of their vitality, their free will, and any desire they had except completing whatever task was next on their agenda. That wasn’t life, that was one step up from being an artificer’s automaton.

The drum beat and Torin shrugged. “I don’t have much choice. The time has come for me to abdicate,

but I can't do that without someone to take my place."

His eyes met mine and a lifetime's worth of silent frustration passed between us. Guilt seized my heart just as surely as if Torin had ripped it from my chest. Closing my eyes, I breathed deeply, focusing on the wood beneath me and the ever-present chill in the air. This wasn't his fault, any more than it was mine or Mother or any of our relatives that died trying to escape our fate.

When Torin spoke again, his voice was softer. Kinder. Like he was luring a wounded animal to his door. "Once our cousins come of age, you'll be free of the obligation and could do whatever you wish. You wouldn't even be the first to take up a new profession after a brief time on the throne. Hells, Mother only sat on the throne for four centuries before she abdicated to study butterflies. Grandfather barely managed *three* before he joined that siren cult in the hills and Auntie Grendel set up shop with those wizards in the market after five. You wouldn't be bound to the throne forever."

This time, the drum beat hesitated, like Julianne wasn't sure if Torin was done. I opened my eyes and sighed. "They all *wanted* to rule before they were anointed." My breath caught in my chest and I inhaled sharply. The only time I could remember Mother and Father fighting was when she'd agreed to take the

throne from Auntie Grendel. I'd never seen Father so scared, but at that point I hadn't truly understood what it meant to rule. They'd kept Torin and me as far from all that as they could, for all the good it had done us. "They thought they could manage it, to spare the rest of us from the burden. I don't. I'm quite happy running the library. What's your point?"

There was something to be said for a kingdom whose incredibly long-lived rulers kept throwing the responsibility of being in charge back and forth like a hot potato, but I wasn't going to say it, because that would imply I was still invested in that nightmare. No, I'd escaped and no amount of feeling sorry for Torin would make me come home. Heavy is the head that wears the crown, and the crown of Hearthbreeze was heavy enough to break a giant's neck, as my family's fifteen-thousand-some years on the throne could attest.

I'd stayed away for a reason. Sure, perhaps I could've reached out to my remaining family members to let them know escape was possible, but without a concrete explanation for *how* I'd managed to do that, it would've been like dangling food in front of a starving man or keys in front of a prisoner. I wasn't that cruel.

Also, I'd die before I admitted it to Clarkfowler, but I gloried in the work it took to keep the library

running in a way I never had at home despite doing the same things. Negotiations with nobles and vendors, arguing with the accounting department about interkingdom tax rates, forcing Clarkfowler to stay in her book-buying budget – that was where I belonged. At least in the library I could go stretch my legs when I wanted or grab an ale with a friend. In Hearthbreeze, every waking moment needed to be spent on the good of the kingdom or the one wearing the crown would bear the consequences.

What had started as a blessing had become a curse, and I was not afraid to admit it would break me if I had to go back to that life.

The drum beat and Torin sighed. “I’ll tell you what,” he said, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “Just come home with me. You were the best administrator Grandmama ever trained and I could use the help. You won’t even have to rule, just help me. If we’re together, I’m certain I could hold out until Yulsfef comes of age.”

A drum beat and I scoffed. “You want to abdicate,” I countered. A chill that had nothing to do with the wind screaming outside settled into my chest. We’d both heard horror stories about rulers that stayed on the throne long after they should’ve stepped down. There was a reason Grandfather had joined that siren cult and no one had seen him since. “If I come

home, I'll *have* to take the throne and we already know that's not happening."

A drum beat.

Torin stayed silent, staring at me like I was a puzzle he'd spent ages trying to crack. His fingers drummed on the table, a pattern as endless and repetitive as the cycle of rule.

"We can't do this without you, Garrett," he said finally, each word laced with a despair more suited to an innocent man at the gallows. He stood, reaching toward me like a drowning man straining for the surface. "I'm at the end of my rope. The only reason I've been *allowed* to leave Hearthbreeze at all in the past thirty years was to search for you, because the blessing requires a stable and mature person on the throne. Mother, Auntie Grendal, Uncle Pelthior, and Granna Elthin all came back to the royal palace for the first time in centuries to ensure I'd be able to travel without neglecting any of my responsibilities, but it's *killing them*. I don't think Uncle Pelthior has slept since the blessing dragged him away from his garden."

Julianne between us kept him from touching me, but I could see the desperation burning in his eyes.

"You know exactly what'll happen if I step down. None of our cousins are old enough to take the throne yet, so the abdicated rulers would have to take up the

crown again. The tree doesn't care that being forced back could be the end of them. It could make Mother take the crown again, or Uncle Pelthior, or—or—" He sucked in a deep breath. "They'd be bound to the Blood Wrought Tree forever. It wouldn't let them go again."

The ice that worked its way down my spine could've frozen a volcano.

"Please," Torin whispered. In that moment, he wasn't the person I'd forced to take the throne I didn't want. He wasn't the monarch that had been chasing me for centuries. He wasn't the man forcing me into a position that would kill me.

He was my baby brother, the one I'd huddled with under the covers, telling stories about the world outside our borders that I had no chance of ever seeing. The one I'd left behind without a second thought.

Julianne and her drum had long since fallen silent, slipping into the hypnotic back of forth of two men caught in a death spiral.

"Even if it knows you're planning to leave again, you're still the best chance the blessing has for stability. It needs one of our family on the throne, preferably sane, but it's willing to make do." His voice broke, a sharp crack that mirrored the one running through my heart.

To avert the sinking feeling in my chest, I turned my eyes to the wall instead. It was bare of all but the faintest traces of paint and coated with dust from years of abandonment. The wind outside howled and screamed as it forced its way through what was left of the walls and ceiling, a sharp angry sound that echoed the one I was holding behind my teeth with every fiber of my being.

“It’s our only chance,” Torin whispered, slumping back into his seat. In the flickering light, he looked older than his years. Worn and weighed down, like Mother had the last time I’d seen her. Like her siblings, cousins, and parents. Like every abdicated ruler I’d ever seen.

Hollowed out and reduced to a shell of who he used to be.

This was why I hadn’t wanted to speak to him at all. He’d always been the better negotiator of the two of us and I didn’t want this. It would destroy me like it had destroyed the rest of our family.

A muffled burst of laughter, both familiar and foreign to me, leaked through the door and my heart panged. I had too much to risk the possibility of getting trapped in Hearthbreeze again, but at the same time, leaving wouldn’t make anything better. The blessing still wanted me. As long as I or any of our bloodline lived, the blessing would pursue us, hunt us

down so we could bear its “gifts” into our graves. If this wasn’t dealt with, I’d just be passing the burden onto my children and my children’s children.

Even if I escaped, it wouldn’t be the end.

“We’re out of options—” Torin breathed in sharply and then released it again. If it were possible, he pulled himself up even straighter and rested his hands on the table in front of him. “Garrett, I wouldn’t ask this of you if I had any other choice. There’s a chance—” His mouth snapped shut and a murderous look flashed across his face.

Julianne blinked, exchanged a look with me, and even raised her hand to beat on the drum again, but Torin and I waved her off. I hadn’t been free for long enough to forget what it looked like when the blessing decided we’d said too much.

For the first time, I found myself wanting to hear what he had to say. It had to be something important if the blessing was that eager to keep him from saying it.

When Torin’s mouth opened again, each word came out with a deliberate ease that suggested he’d rehearsed this before, that he’d known this would happen and made contingencies so he could say it anyway. Like Mother used to do when arguing about Auntie Grendal with Uncle Pelthior when she thought we couldn’t hear. “Mother’s interested in the library.

There are books there that we can't get in Hearthbreeze and..." He paused, glancing at the door blocking the others from our sight, then slowly looked back to me. Deliberately, he leaned forward, resting his chin on his upturned hands. "She's willing to sponsor the library in Hearthbreeze if it means getting access to them. In particular, a horticulture book Grandfather wrote before he took the throne. Apparently, he had some wild theories about *pruning*."

Pruning? He didn't mean – no. He couldn't. There was no way the blessing would allow the library within a thousand feet of any potential heir. Not after *something* in the library had broken its hold on me.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Torin ploughed on, heedless of the beating of the drum. "Most of the abdicated rulers have expressed interest in getting new *reading material* and perhaps discussing their *passion projects* with your researchers. And if you don't have what they're working on, I'm sure your "acquisitions agent" can find it for us."

My breath caught in my chest and only years of political training kept me from jumping to my feet. Of course. The number of ancient texts and forgotten rituals buried away in various vaults or misshelved in the bioalchemy section of the library could – and had – made wizards weep. There were grimoires in there

that made magic itself look young and regular clients only too eager to share the contents of their shelves if it meant answers to particularly esoteric questions. If we didn't have access to it, it either didn't exist, or Aleksandr hadn't gotten around to robbing the noble that was keeping it hidden away.

This was why Torin had upped his efforts to find me after he realized I worked for Clarkfowler. Not because he wanted me to take the throne in his place, not out of duty or love for the blessing, but because through me, we might find a way to end it once and for all.

The wagon and the library it contained had been what broke my connection to the blessing in the first place. Yes, we wouldn't be able to bring it into the palace grounds itself, but the blessing couldn't protest if it were parked in the capital. Likewise, there were few heirs, but there were still enough that the blessing wouldn't keep as close an eye on the abdicated rulers. If we could get Mother, or really *any* of the mostly sane abdicated rulers, into the library and sever their connection to the blessing, then they would be able to compile the piecemeal research our ancestors had been doing for thousands of years. We might be able to find the god that had blessed my family and convince them to remove their gift.

We could – we could be free.

The thought was tempting indeed, but... Gods, the risks of it not working, of losing myself to the throne the way so many others had...

No. We would make it work. We *had* made it work before. At Clarkfowler's side, at *Siobhan's* side, I had fought off gods, broken curses, and freed magical prisoners hundreds of times before. Bards sang of the deeds of Professor Clarkfowler and her librarians, rulers begged for our help, and beings so old it defied comprehension were regular clients. That was what we did, examining magical problems, breaking them down to their base parts, and setting things to rights again.

It. Would. Work.

"Five years," I said finally.

My heart pounded in my chest and blood screamed through my ears, but I couldn't allow this to keep going. The next generation of my family would not have to bear the weight of the damned blessing that had pursued me my whole life. They would have freedom to be children, to choose their own paths in life. "If you swear to take the throne back in five years, I'll do it."

A hard deadline to show his sincerity and a promise from me. In five years or less, we would be free and I could show him all the places we'd only dreamed about as boys.

“And the library?” he asked in a hushed voice. His eyes gleamed, but whether from tears or excitement, it was impossible to tell.

“Clarkfowler’s too loyal to leave me behind if she thinks I’m in trouble, and Siobhan’s too stubborn to abandon me even if I push her away.” Which meant we’d have constant access to the library and its resources, including Siobhan’s research and development cohort in the junior librarians, who looked at magical impossibilities the same way a wolf looked at raw meat.

The blessing shouldn’t protest as long as the wagon stayed off the palace grounds and the other heirs and I stayed far away from it. That meant Mother and the other abdicated rulers could visit as they pleased. Mother was smart, almost as smart as Siobhan and Clarkfowler. Together, they’d figure out a way around the blessing. They’d free my family and Hearthbreeze from the curse that had been plaguing us since our earliest days.

Torin exhaled and then nodded. “Five years,” he agreed, “and if we don’t figure it out, I’ll hold the throne until Yulsfef comes of age.”

We had to figure it out. Five years was hardly long enough to complete the rituals of abdication. Gods, not even back when there were hundreds of people in our family able to take the throne had there been such

a short rule.

“Five years.” I turned my gaze to Julianne, who met my gaze with a steadfastness common to her profession. “The negotiations are complete. Let the others know.”

There was more drumming, a speech, and the magic binding of Torin and I to our agreement, and then it was done. As the oath settled into our bones, Julianne left to tell the others about what had happened and to begin composing whatever ditty or ballad she thought best suited the situation. Torin and I were now alone for the first time since before I left Hearthbreeze.

When the door closed behind her and the laughter beyond came to a sharp halt, I turned to Torin. “You know, five years isn’t very long at all.”

He laughed, the hysterical sound of a man on the edge. “No, it’s not.”

“We’ve waited long enough though.” Too long. Hearthbreeze was the oldest country on the continent. Old and set in its ways. It was time for a change and Siobhan, Clarkfowler, and the rest of the library would lead it.

Just five years. Then we would all be free.

Five years and I could marry Siobhan without worry, without fear, and without looking over my shoulder. I could have my family there to celebrate.

Mother, Torin, Uncle Pelthior, Auntie Grendal, Cousin Yulsfef and their siblings – anyone and everyone who'd spent their whole lives living in fear of a blessing turned curse.

Just five years.

“Come on,” I said, slinging my arm around Torin's shoulders. “Let's introduce you to the others. It's about time my fiancé met my baby brother, after all.”

Ceril N. Domace is an accountant, writer, and owner of two perfectly normal felines. If you enjoyed this story, you might enjoy Fallen Knight: to protect his adopted homeland, the last member of a mystical knighthood must confront the god killing beings that destroyed the rest of his order. Check it out [here](#).

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