

*Like
a
thorn*

BDSM
Fairy
Tales



LIKE A THORN

An Anthology of BDSM Fairy Tales

Edited by

Cecilia Tan and Sarah Desautels



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Edited by Cecilia Tan and Sarah Desautels
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INTRODUCTION

Today, the phrase “fairy tale” evokes charming, magical, and decidedly family-friendly images to most. However, like the witch who spends her days gazing at the fairest of them all, this image has often been skimmed off the top of any given fairy tale’s original story--a far more violent and sexual original. The darker side of fairy tales has always fascinated me, so coupling it with the darker side of sex--BDSM--seemed like an obvious choice. Like BDSM sex, the darker originals of fairy tales are often unpopular. They repel because they are mediums of expression that are dark and painful, often used to express darkness and pain, and they are, indeed, designed to make people uncomfortable.

However, using BDSM to complement the stories’ darker undertones wasn’t my only reason for pairing the two: BDSM sex also serves the same function as an original, somewhat disturbing fairy tale. The elements that challenge our comfort zones are what make fairy tales and BDSM complex and fascinating, and so relatable to us. These stories address much more than a taboo taste for pain: fairy tales, bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism are tools to express universally human experiences such as intimacy, anguish, forgiveness, even playfulness--and, of course, the beauty of sexuality. From an erotic beating of penance that will lift a curse to a mischievous plan to fool a queen with pea-sized bruises, BDSM takes classic fairy tales to new erotic depths.

Please enjoy this anthology, and the wide, kinky world that can only be seen by stepping away from the magic mirror.

Sarah Desautels

CINDER FEET

Mari Ness

She claimed the midnight curfew was only for my good. Otherwise, she said, smiling—her smile so brittle, so false—the dark fairies would come and get me, and pull my beauty all away. All nonsense, of course, but the message was clear: leave by midnight, or face certain shame.

I could cook and clean and sew and do my sisters' hair, dress in rags and scrub her back, kneel at her feet and polish her boots, clean her skin with my tongue, lie quivering on the floor as her hands tenderly struck me, or as she placed a firm rod across my rear, beg for mercy when she touched my breasts. But she had me there. I could not face the shame. Not public shame.

"You could make them wait," I suggested. "The dark fairies. Make them wait until dawn."

"Oh, little Cinders," she said, stroking my hair. "Now why would I want to do that?"

So as I danced, I watched the clock.

I ate with my sisters, who flirted and danced and giggled and sang with no sense of time. I smiled, and nodded, and listened to a young man of dazzling wit and average looks that she would later mockingly call a prince. I allowed him to stroke my hand. I felt the trembling in my body. I heard the clock begin to strike. I fled.

"My good little Cinders," she whispered, as she ripped my dress and jewels from me. "My good little Cinders."

When my sisters returned home, an hour or so before dawn, neither of us heard, though I later learned they had heard my unmuffled cries. The cries

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I could not stifle, even at her command, since even five hours had not been enough to stop my skin from tingling, to stop my need for touch.

The next night, the same. “Midnight, little Cinders,” she said, whispering in my ear as she stroked my hair, now turned golden under her hands. “Midnight, little Cinders, or I shall have the fairies pummel your legs and bruise your fair breasts.”

They were not fair, just then; they were covered in soot. She had not yet let me wash.

I washed and dressed and pulled up my hair for her, and squeezed my feet into those tiny shoes that made me tremble and sway as I walked, that twinkled and shone in the candlelight. I danced under the moonlight, they say. The truth is that I balanced and swayed and tried not to fall in those too tiny shoes, and to keep from falling, let the unprince hold me and joke into my ear. My sisters giggled and danced and did not look at me. I trembled in the young man’s arms, and felt his lips move down my neck.

Stroke one.

“I must leave,” I gasped. Stroke two.

“Oh no,” he said, his mouth against my neck, his body pressed into mine. “Oh no.”

Stroke three.

By midnight, my dress was halfway off, and one shoe had been left on the stone pathway.

“Oh Cinders,” she said, when I stumbled in. “My Cinders.” And she ripped the rest of the dress from me.

At least, I thought, it had not been the little fairies. And then once again, I thought of little at all.



When he came to us later, clutching my shoe, I was busy with kissing her feet and bathing them with tears. I could almost see them, the little dark fairies, sitting hunched in a corner, ready to pounce, to rip away my beauty. Not that they were needed. As she had promised, I had stopped being beautiful, and soot and cinders dripped from me. I gave him one swift glance, then kissed her feet again.

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He dropped the shoe beside me. I almost turned then, to grab him with my ash covered hands. But her hands were laced in my hair, and she was right: I could not bear that humiliation. So I kept my head down, my lips on her feet.

"I believe this is yours," he said, voice trembling.

"Indeed?" she asked, and I could hear the brittle smile in her voice.

"Indeed," he said.

"I did not think my feet so small," she said.

"Not yours," he said.

He must have made a gesture of some kind. I could not see; her foot was in my mouth.

"My Cinders?" she said, and then we both heard it, that brittle laugh. "Such a lovely thing for my lovely Cinders."

"She could try it on," he said.

"She could," she said. "But it will not fit. Even if it were her shoe—for which I have only your doubtful word—her feet are swollen too badly for shoes."

That was true. My twin nights of dancing and half falling had damaged my feet, and I was kneeling in front of her, in part, because I could hardly walk.

"She could still try," he said.

"So she could," she said, and she moved her toe in my mouth. "Would you, little Cinders?"

It would not fit, I knew. Still, I lifted my head from her feet, and gave the young man a nod. He brought the shoe towards me, trembling.

It had a crack in it, on one side, doubtless from dancing. I looked about the room, at her brittle smile, at the dark fairies I fancied beside the windows and in the corners. "Wait," I said. "Bring me that," and pointed.

He was an obedient young man, for now. He left the shoe in my hands, and brought me the knife. The knife she had so often used on me.

"What is swelling but blood?" I smiled at her. "And what can be done, other than to remove the blood?" And with that, I placed the dagger at my foot, and pushed.

Her fingers laced and tightened through my hair. Three drops ran from my foot into the shoe. The young man gulped. The dark fairies, I thought,

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seemed to clap and smile. I picked up the shoe, and pushed in my foot. Tight, so tight, and so much pain. And yet the shoe fit, quite well.

I smiled brightly up at her. "My shoe," I said.

"Indeed."

She pulled me up by my hair; I could feel my foot pulse and bleed. She pressed me closely to her chest. "Only for your good," she whispered in my ear. "Your good, my Cinders. Your good."

Years later, kissing the now old man's foot, I remembered her words. Easy enough, as the more I kissed his feet, the more my own bled. The dark fairies, I thought. But they were only a fancy, and the blood that still ran down my feet was real, quite real.

THE PRINCESS AND PEONY

Mercy Loomis

Princess Cara barely heard a word the old queen said, staring with dismay at the giant stack of mattresses that they expected her to sleep on.

“... you must be cold and weary. The maid is preparing a bath for you in the next room.”

Cara’s mind spun, but she thanked the queen graciously (with twenty years of experience, she could be gracious to anyone at any hour of the day) and walked regally toward the other room. She was good at regal too, and it gave her something to do at times when her brain failed her.

The outer door of the bedroom snicked shut as she entered the bath chamber, and Cara shuddered. Locked in, of course. The sumptuous suite was just as much of a cage as her own suite back home.

The maid, kneeling next to the copper tub, rose to her feet. “You’re pale as a sheet, Cara. Get out of those wet clothes right now!”

Thunder rumbled outside the walls, but Cara hardly gave a thought to her bedraggled state. “Peony!” she cried in relief, running across the room and throwing herself at the other girl.

“Ach!” Peony said in mock disgust. “You’re getting me all wet.” But she met Cara’s lips with a searing kiss that made the princess’s bones melt. Cara kissed her back fiercely, half afraid to let go.

Peony broke away first, chuckling. “So you did miss me,” she murmured, turning Cara around and starting to undo the long row of buttons.

“Of course I missed you!” Cara replied indignantly, still a little out of breath. “I’ve missed you every day since my father sent you away.”

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“How did you manage to get here alone?”

“Well, the new maid they gave me is an old hag, and she can’t run very fast,” Cara said. “They didn’t think of that when they decided they couldn’t chance ‘ruining’ me with another young attractive maid.” Cara gave a satisfied smile as Peony finished the last of the buttons and slipped the overdress off her shoulders. “When you sent the stable boy to let me know your plan, I just ran. Benedict showed me the way here.”

Peony chuckled. “You never were much for subtlety, pet. And Benedict’s not the stable boy—he’s Prince Rupert’s manservant.” She giggled as she stripped off Cara’s petticoats. “Ostensibly I’m supposed to be Rupert’s mistress, but I just cover for him and Benedict. Rupert needs you as much as you need him.”

“Well, that’s some comfort, anyway,” Cara said. The idea of marriage had never appealed to her, but a lot of her duties were not to her taste. She sat down on the edge of the tub and let Peony pull off her shoes and stockings. “But why in God’s name am I expected to sleep on a mountain of bedding? It looks like it might tip over and smother me in my sleep!”

“Into the tub with you, you’ll catch your death,” Peony ordered, gathering up the wet clothes. Cara slipped into the steaming water with a grateful sigh, but her worried eyes followed the maid.

“Don’t fret,” Peony said, hanging up the clothes as best she could. “Rupert cooked up a little phobia to keep his parents from marrying him off. He’s convinced his mother that only a ‘real’ princess is good enough for him, and that a real princess would be so delicate, with such tender skin, that one pea in her bedding will bruise her, even through twenty mattresses and twenty featherbeds.” She chuckled. “Supposedly he’s so terrified of getting married to an impostor he won’t even meet the prospective brides until they pass the test. Which, of course, none of them do.”

Cara covered her face with her hands, incidentally splashing water all over the floor with her dramatic gesture. “Then how am I going to pass? Peony, if I have to go back home without you I’ll just die!”

“Ugh, histrionic as ever, and look at this mess! I’m away for a few months and you start behaving like a spoiled princess again,” Peony scolded fondly. She grabbed Cara by the shoulders and dunked her under the water. When Cara resurfaced, spluttering and coughing, Peony began working shampoo through her wet hair. “None of the other princesses have passed because

they're always shut in here with me all night," she explained patiently, closing her fingers around a handful of Cara's tresses and giving a light tug, "and I certainly wasn't going to help them. Now, let's get you all cleaned up."

Cara relaxed obediently, soothed by the long-missed ritual. Peony's gentle hands worked through her tangled hair, massaging her scalp, rubbing at her temples. Then came cascade after cascade of warm water from the dipper, sluicing over her head and down her back, Peony careful as always to keep the water out of her face. Cara sighed in contentment and anticipation.

"I am not spoiled," Cara murmured as Peony finished with her hair. "And you know I never get to be anything but proper and decorous and ladylike, except with you." She lowered her voice, speaking in a rough rasp. "Now, Princess, a lady shouldn't even know that word! What would your sainted mother say? Now, Princess, don't frown at Lord Dunstable's son, you'll get wrinkles..." She left off, rolling her eyes. "Truly, if that's what I'm going back to, I'll run away and be a scullery maid."

"A scullery maid," Peony repeated with amusement, lathering up a soft washcloth.

"I could be a scullery maid," Cara pouted. "Remember?"

"I remember that you had to wear gloves for two weeks to hide the damage we did to your dainty little hands," Peony laughed. "Speaking of which..."

Cara held up her right hand. Peony began to clean it with the washcloth, rubbing each finger individually before scouring the hand with great swooping circles, the soft fabric sliding farther and farther down her arm, digging into the muscles, all the way to the shoulder, across the back of the neck, and then down the other arm. Then she returned to Cara's neck, scrubbing her shoulders and her back with long, strong sweeps, kneading the muscle knots into submission.

Cara arched her back, lifting her chest. Peony obligingly reached around her, one hand to either side, passing the cloth from hand to hand over Cara's belly as she worked, the ends swishing through the water between her legs.

"Greedy," Peony purred into Cara's ear, leaning over the back of the tub until her chin rested on the princess's shoulder. "We do have all night, you know."

"Do we?" Cara asked breathlessly as Peony's hands rose slowly up her ribcage.

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The maid took Cara's earlobe between her teeth and growled softly, making Cara moan. "Of course. I have to ensure you don't sleep somehow."

"Ah. Darn that pea," Cara replied, then her breath caught as Peony cupped her breasts, weighing them in her hands a moment before making a few desultory passes with the washcloth.

"Stand up," Peony said, and Cara stood, water running down her body. She spread her legs but the maid ignored the silent invitation, using the washcloth on every spot except the one Cara most desired. When Cara was beginning to shake from frustration, Peony helped her from the tub.

"Come." The maid led her over to a wall, stopping her just outside arm's reach of it. "Put your hands flat on the wall. Lean in. Spread those legs!" This last was accompanied by a stinging flick of the towel Peony carried.

Cara obeyed her, biting her lip. Her mind emptied of everything except the air moving over her wet skin, the burning presence of the girl behind her, and the long, long night ahead of them.

A comb began to move through her hair, starting at the ends and working toward her scalp. Tangles vanished under Peony's expert fingers, but occasionally she would tug, hard, pulling Cara's head back as far as it would go. Her hair fell down past her waist, and Peony was in no hurry, and though Cara had spent many hours like this before, it had been several months. Her shoulders were beginning to ache when finally Peony set the comb aside and arranged Cara's long, dripping tresses to fall forward over her breasts, leaving her back bare.

Peony began to flog her softly with the towel. The fluffy fabric curled around her legs, slithered over her hips, wicking the moisture off of her skin. The thwap sound it made gave her goosebumps, so similar to the sounds of Peony's favorite flogger.

The towel stopped. Peony's warm hands ran over Cara's ass, caressing, pinching. "Nice and dry," Peony murmured. "Don't move."

Cara heard her walk into the other room, the creak of a trunk lid. She stared fixedly at the wall in front of her. Peony's quiet footsteps approached. The slapping hiss of the leather tails, the ominous crackling smack of the flogger against the maid's palm. Cara sighed happily and closed her eyes.

"I'm sure you could be quite convincing," Peony murmured as the leather lightly kissed Cara's raised ass, "but I don't see any reason to fake it. I love the

way you look speckled with bruises. And you never know, someone might check.” She chuckled, and the whip began to fall faster.

Cara barely heard her, wallowing in the gentle massage. That part never lasted long. Peony slowly increased the pace, the tails hitting harder and closer together, and Cara lost track of time. She was never certain at what point the impact went from pleasant to painful—and those two feelings, once so very distinct, were now forever a little blurry at the edges, the sting of the tail’s edge only adding to the smooth, supple, butter-soft feel of the leather.

And at what point did pleasure flee completely? Because at the upper end of things there was only pain, at least as far as the physical sensations went.

The mental stimulation was what kept Cara coming back for more. She stood under Peony’s blows, her arms aching from holding her weight, struggling to keep still, to maintain the perfect tilt of her hips, all while lines of fire flashed across her skin. Her fingers clenched unconsciously against the wall, curling and uncurling in time to the strikes. And yet for all the pain her mind was delightfully free, cleansed of everything except the will of the woman behind her and her own obedience to it.

“That’s very good,” Peony purred, and Cara felt herself flush at the praise. “You’ve held up pretty well for being neglected so long I guess I don’t have to go easy on you after all.”

Cara whimpered, flinching even before the next stroke fell.

The sharp, cutting sting of it made Cara throw her head back, pulling against her own posture as if she were tied there with something physical, as opposed to the force of Peony’s command. Even as she managed to process the pain, the next blow came. Cara writhed in her invisible bonds, moaning, desperate to get ahead of it.

Peony was at her shoulder. “Open your mouth.” When Cara complied, Peony placed a rolled-up washcloth between her teeth. “Can’t have you distressing the household. Spit it out if you start to have trouble breathing.”

Cara nodded, and bit down hard as Peony resumed the session.

This was Cara’s favorite part, although she never thought of that at the time. When the blows came thick and fast, each one with the full force of Peony’s shoulder behind it, all of them strong enough that they would have left welts if she wasn’t warmed up, that was the point when Cara lost the ability to think. Her entire world narrowed down to her burning ass, her

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breathing, and the next blow. There was no thought of calling an end to it, of saying it was too much, that she couldn't take any more. It was too late for that. It wasn't even about submission now—since Peony ruled her completely, there was no need to waste what little brainpower she still had in acknowledging it. The only thing Cara could control was processing the pain. She could either do it, or not. The pain was still coming regardless.

Such was Peony's skill that Cara was able to maintain that mindset for as long as Peony wanted to continue, because of course there really was a point at which the pain would overpower Cara's blissful haze, when she would be forced to call a halt to the fun. But Peony never crossed that line, even when she called out the last ten strokes—always as hard and as fast as Peony could deliver—and Cara squirmed and shrieked into her improvised gag.

Then the cool-down, a brief but absolutely heavenly mini-session of decreasing intensity that let Cara get back in touch with the rest of her body before Peony dropped the flogger and came to stand behind her, and while Cara shook with muscle fatigue and endorphins and pure desire, Peony reached between her legs. In only a few moments Cara was screaming into the washcloth again as the orgasm rolled over her, and only many nights of practice kept her on her feet, rather than collapsing into a boneless heap on the floor as she wanted to.

When the last of the aftershocks had passed, Peony helped Cara into the other room and onto that monstrous pile of bedding. Gently the maid pushed the princess onto her back (and, consequently, her smarting ass) and knelt over her, lifting her skirts.

“Why don't you show me how much you've missed me?”

Cara smiled, and obeyed.



When Cara stepped into the dining room the next morning she did so with her chin high, but not too high, treading lightly and daintily as if walking on glass. She didn't think about the dark circles under her eyes, or the hours she had spent on her knees, or the fact that she was wearing the same clothes she had arrived in the night before. Her training as a princess had begun many years before Peony had gotten ahold of her, and a Princess,

when entering the Presence, simply does not show the strain of anything. She gave a very correct curtsy, not too low, and sat demurely in the chair that the steward held out for her. She was scarcely aware of Peony's silent presence behind her, the perfect lady's-maid-on-loan.

The king was seated at the head of the table, of course, and the queen at the foot. It was a short table, this being the informal dining room as opposed to one of the formal ones, and so it was no trouble to hear or reply to the queen's gentle inquiry about her rest.

"I slept quite well, thank you," Cara said, eyes downcast. She'd needed no coaching from Peony on this part—for all her cleverness, Peony knew when to let Cara have her head.

From the corner of her eye, Cara saw the king frown. "Are you well, child?"

"Oh, very well," she replied too fast, hunching her shoulders.

The queen pursed her lips, while Prince Rupert, seated across from Cara, raised his head and gave her a hard look. "My dear," said the queen, "please, be frank. If you lack for anything, or if there was a problem with your quarters, you must speak of it."

Cara lowered her head still further. "Your Grace, I would never wish to trouble you with such a little thing... it is only that I am not used to the... opulent... sleeping arrangements you provided me."

"Your bed was comfortable?" Rupert asked.

Cara spared him a shy glance. He was handsome enough, she supposed. His eyes had a hard glint that turned his polite question into something else, something almost threatening. Peony looked like that, sometimes, when she was in a wicked frame of mind.

"It was very generous," Cara replied doubtfully. "But there must be some trick to sleeping thusly. It seemed to me that there was a great lump in the bed. I do apologize, but I'm afraid I hardly slept a wink. I feel bruised all over."

Prince Rupert grinned, and the queen raised an eyebrow at him. "Well, she does seem delicate," the queen said to her son. "Does she please you, Rupert?"

"Oh yes," the prince answered, and again that avaricious gleam gave his words a double meaning. "I do believe she is a perfect match."

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“Then as long as you’re content, we’ll leave you to some more traditional wooing.” The queen rose, and so did the king, and so Cara and Rupert had to do so as well. The king said nothing, but nodded in a conspiratorial way as he passed his son, and Cara pretended not to notice.

The queen touched Cara’s cheek, making the princess look up from her clasped hands. “You’re a discreet girl, which will serve you well. Rupert, do keep in mind that we expect at least one grandchild, hmm?” The queen turned to leave. “Oh, and Peony, I forgot and left the pea on my dressing table last night. Be so kind as to tell the servants not to throw it out? I’m sure Cara will want to keep it.”

The three of them stared after the royal couple as they left the dining room. Cara blushed furiously, but Peony only laughed and shook her head.

“Bruised, my lady?” Rupert said, coming around the table.

He was taller than she was. Cara looked up at him through her lashes. “I’m afraid so, my lord,” she replied.

He stood next to her, and before she realized it, he reached over and pinched her ass. Cara jumped, biting back an undignified squeak. She wasn’t wearing enough petticoats for that. But her face flushed with new heat, and this time it wasn’t from embarrassment.

Rupert winked at her. Peony, still laughing, turned to the sideboard and began to serve breakfast.

Maybe marriage wouldn’t be so bad after all.

THE LAST MISTRESS OF THE CHATELAIN

KIERAN WYN DEWHURST

The carriage ride passes in silence, my fingers knotting in the lace at my lap. Hard-worn and chilblained—hardly the delicate lily paw of a nobleman’s wife, though that is their new commission. Never to scour ash and piss on the cold front stoop again, or pluck a stinking fowl? It is almost unimaginable to me, this princess’ life of feather beds and silks and servants.

Servants: The withered stick seated opposite me finally stirs from his slumber and lifts hooded lids. He regards me indifferently; I have seen the same expression on those passing the dry bones in the crows’ cages outside the city gates. A surge of indignation at being perceived thus compels me to return his gaze, steadily, though neither of us speak. A mediating rut forces a truce when we are both thrown halfway out of our seats.

Truthfully, I am not much to look at. I am old, as maidens go; two-and-twenty has come and gone for me some time past. My face is sharp; my hair is cut short and has never felt the winding caress of a curling rag or the oil of a proud braid. Much about me invites judgement, and perhaps I am deserving of such if it is true that the rich are there by the grace of God, and the poor are paying for some grievous sin in their soul’s history. For my husband’s sake, I hope it is true what the old women say, that the appetite will come with the eating.

I have my secrets, though; small treasures like birds’ eggs, hidden and shining I can read and write, and have some numbers. I am clever, and I am bold. My body is strong and healthy, if a little small. It is all these things that have put me where I am now—in a fine black coach pulled by fine black horses

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being carried off to a fine black-haired nobleman's estate.

The dowry was staggering, more money than my family would see in three generations. My brothers are soldiers; had they not been fighting the Turks in the war of white geese they would surely have prevented my marriage to the rumoured "Butcher of Belgorod", but in their absence I was able to secure freedom for my family without interference.

I can smell the cool spring night coming in the windows of the carriage as we continue north into darkness.



The walls are white and stone and cold—quite unlike the grimy plaster of my childhood. Every step echoes. I have not decided yet if the myriad retreating footfalls I create make me feel more alone, or less.

I have been here two days now, and the only other human I have seen is the Master's butler, Ivan. The idea of a single person being responsible for the stables, the coach, the kitchens and the cleaning seems preposterous to me, though I cannot complain about the state of the house or my care; Ivan brings meals to my room at extremely regular intervals, and my bedsheets are replaced daily. Even those mean linens are finer than anything I use to wear next to my skin.

My bedroom is a Queen's paradise. Gilt furniture, mirrors, wardrobes of fantastic clothing (most of which I am not even sure how to put on). I spend the first day shamelessly wallowing in luxury before curiosity finally drives me to explore; I am quickly overwhelmed by the numberless halls of identical stone, however, and I scurry back to safety. There will be time enough later to familiarize myself with the labyrinth.

Time enough, later, only perhaps. There are many uncertainties to my new situation. I have not permitted myself to linger long on the gossip surrounding my future husband, but I am his seventh wife in seven years.

We will be married tomorrow night, when my Lord returns—so Ivan informed me in as few words as possible this morning when he brought me my bread and salt. He is a husbender of the shaggy ponies my countrymen use for war; they are the same steeds that charge my brothers into bloodshed, perhaps even at this very moment. If only they knew it was their war's coin I

had been bought with! The idea makes me smile.

I will fall asleep tonight, as I do every night, without prayer to shepherd me into pious dreams. I will wash my face and hands, and undress into my sleeping flannel, and think about the swarthy face on the miniature locket resting between my breasts—the portrait of my future husband. Tomorrow night I will give myself to him with the blessing of the Church. The day after, I will be mistress of this place.



Around noon, Ivan leads me to a half-cracked door with the sounds and warmth of a fireplace behind it. He knocks, and I hear my Lord's voice for the first time:

"Come."

I square my shoulders and enter a room crammed with books, more extravagance. He is seated by the fire, a glass in his hand, boots and whip placed neatly to the side. I curtsy, though his face is still turned away, and wait to be invited forward.

"Here."

The carpet is soft under my slippers. I approach the fireplace, and the man, carefully.

"My Lord." I am acutely aware of my beggar's accent.

"Sit." I do.

Only now does he deign to look at me. This close, he is impossibly large. My hands clasp each other for comfort, fingers chill despite the fire. His eyes are dark and shining, like cherries, or coal. He makes no sign of either approval or disdain toward my appearance.

"What is your name?" the behemoth asks at last, and drinks. He speaks in quiet, uninflected tones—perhaps a habit from his time among the animals.

"Sophie, my Lord."

"You know why you are here?"

I take a deep breath before replying "To become your obedient wife and serve you in every way, under God."

He laughs suddenly, a flash of square white teeth in a black thicket. The sound is a bright spark thrown from a bed of coals. "You will not find much

of God here, girl. Ivan will bring you your wedding dress. You will dress and prepare yourself, as there are no handmaids here to help you."

This news takes me aback; a girl preparing herself for her own wedding was unorthodox, even faintly sacrilegious. I sit silently for a few moments, unsure how to react, but he reads my discomfort and skewers it swiftly.

"There are, and will be, no other women here." He turns to stare into the fire, a shadow passing over his eyes. "There is naught here but that which belongs to me."

"Like me."

"Like you."

This exchange unfolds without passion; it is as two vendors discussing the price of cheese. I am glad of it. Better, perhaps, that he sees me as no more than another mare in his stable—valuable, worthy of protection and care, simply a benign addition to his household.

With a startling intensity, he slams his empty glass down on the side table and rises to tower above me.

"You will begin your preparations—the priest arrives at sunset. I need my boots."

He stands there, expectantly. When I make no move or sound, he seizes his whip and strikes me cruelly across the hands with it. I cry out, recoiling and wringing my fingers. The expression on his face never changes.

"I need my boots, girl. You will not last long in his house if you cannot learn obedience. Do you understand?" At last, a flicker of unfathomable emotion. He holds me fast in his pitiless black eyes. "Do you understand?"

For the lump in my throat, all I can do is nod, kneel. I scramble to comply.



We are married at dusk by a jittery priest bearing the unmistakable veins and tremors of drink. He rushes through the ceremony, stumbling over words, and constantly eyes the house at our back as though it might swallow him up at any moment. As it was, he could only be coaxed by gold to come as close as the front garden. Ivan is the sole witness, and this is the first I have seen him approach a semblance of good cheer.

LIKE A THORN

My groom—while dashing in his wedding dress—does not share his servant's felicity; he is as stone-faced as ever, delivering the responses in a joyless monotone. It seems over as soon as it has begun, sealed by a chaste kiss, and the priest scuttles away with an obscenity of coin weighing his purse. As is custom, my husband pours us all spirit, and we toast to our happiness. The liquor burns my throat.

My now-husband instructs me to await him in my bedroom, and removes himself to his own chambers, taking the bottle with him. So much of this is strange, confusing... but at least now we are married. This small joy lifts my feet as I hurry to my room to prepare for my wedding night.

The night is streaming in with fresh promise when my bedchamber door opens. I pause at the vanity, setting down my comb, and turn to receive my husband.

My Lord has changed out of his wedding clothes but is still carrying the bottle—now mostly empty—and two glasses. He pours and offers me one, which I accept, and he seats himself on the bed. His frame renders it a doll's miniature in comparison.

"We are married now," he says thickly. "The wedding night must be finished. Are you... girl... wife..." He wets his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Have you lain with men before?"

"No, of course not, my Lord! I am pure of body in the eyes of Christ, virtue saved for my husband." My tone is properly righteous, I hope.

He swats my protestations away. "Bah, I know how things are in the cities for girls. It does not matter to me anyway; I am simply asking so I know how best to... never mind. Try to relax; it will be over soon. I will be as gentle as I can."

And he is; he unwraps me as though I am made of glass. The layers of wedding silk pool around my hips as he bares first one shoulder, than another. If the bashfulness of girlhood had not already left me some time ago, the vodka would surely have shown it the door—but even so, I have never felt so uncertain of myself as I do now, peeled to the waist for his perusal. My breasts prickle under his gaze and the cool air, and I wait for a reaction.

There is none, no coo of affection, no term of endearment... only hands, hard graceless hands tracing the prominence of my collarbone and the peak of my nipple before they push me back onto the bed and slide the rest of the

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fabric away from my body. I shiver violently, and he tucks the coverlet down around me so I will be warm while he undresses.

The lamp is burning high in the corner. He reaches to turn down the flame, and I hear myself: “May I not see you, husband?” I am surprised by my own impertinence, and decide to blame the vodka later. He hesitates with his hand on the knob, and then takes his fingers away.

“As you wish.”

My Lord now turns to the task of removing his own garments. He is careful, paced—even mechanical—folding his clothes neatly over the back of a chair. I barely catch a glimpse of his body before he is pulling away the coverlet and sliding in next to me; what I do see is pale and solid and carved. He is a furnace. I am not sure what to do next, so I lie still, and breathe in the heavy scent of stable and vodka sweat that clings to him.

A hand at my forehead, stroking my hair... tender. Its mate is less innocent and marches down my body, pausing at the nub of hip briefly before splaying into soft tangle. My breath comes quick and my heart feels as though it will shake free of its cage as his fingertips find wet pink flesh and curl there, splitting me. I try to still myself but I cannot help but make a small sound as he pulls and presses further, exploring the boundaries of his new domain with unrelenting insistence. He shifts, and then suddenly there is rough beard on my belly, and kisses on my skin—and then the hand between my legs is gone and is replaced by lips and tongue.

My thighs spread apart to accommodate him even as I arch upon the bed, soundless and shocked as his mouth works upon me with kisses of a nature I have never known. The room around me begins to fade to nothing, falling away, leaving only the bed and the man bent at my hips, silently speaking to my pleasure. Something coils deep within my belly and for a moment I am afraid I will have to run for a pot to pass water... but then his hand finds me again and the thought is lost to the white blindness of the fingers now suddenly driven to the knuckle inside me. God forgive me, I wanted them there. I wanted him there.

I fumble in the dark mane, trying to tug, trying to call his attention to me now that my mouth has been reduced to nonsense and noise. He lifts his head finally, and I strain to pull him up. Despite his previous stoicism, he seems bemused now, and he permits himself to be removed from his lower

attentions. His body hovers over mine, the muscles in his arms and chest snapping to attention as they support his mass, and my knees creep up to nudge his sides. The lamp gutters low.

I move to kiss him. He checks a flinch before permitting me to seal my lips to his, seeking more than we shared under the priest's blessing; the flinch stings, but the hurt is quickly lost in the queer taste of my own salt and the roughness of his beard. His tongue is soft and slow against mine, and my petulant knees spur against his flanks, urging him on. He buries his great head in my neck. And then—

The bed creaks in protest as my hips are driven downward into it and my skin screams and stretches with the impalement. The pain fades almost instantly, replaced by heat, by moans and fullness and aching thrust. His body weighs heavily on mine, dwarfing me, and as his muscles bunch and release my hands clutch at his rough back as though I am drowning until finally a sound escapes him—the only sound he has made through our coupling—and I pull him deeply into me with my heels one last time as he spasms.

He opens his eyes and stares at me, unreadable. My Lord strokes my brow again, once, and then disengages from my spent limbs. We breathe in the heady gloom together. Tentatively, I turn to nestle my cheek in the soft forest of his chest, stroking my hand through the pelt, and he slides an arm underneath my back and draws me close. It is sweet.

The sweetness does not last long.

Blood and seed still wet on my thighs, he sits up abruptly and rises to dress. For an instant, I see the dim light gleam on his broad back; it seems marred, somehow, but he pulls his shirt on before I can get a good look.

“Sit up,” he orders grimly. “There are rules to this house you must be told.”

Dumbfounded, I do as he has commanded, watching silently as he tugs his breeches on and ties them. He then withdraws something from his vest pocket—something which glitters in the low light and chimes softly in his fingers. A necklace?

He approaches the bed slowly, and I see a chain stretched between them like a garrotte. I instinctively shrink back but he is on me in a heartbeat. I close my eyes.

... seventh wife in seven years...

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The chain wraps around my naked waist, twice, and then something clicks home. There is metal against my belly, heavy and cold. I blink.

“A wedding gift,” he says bitterly. “The keys to the house. They do not come off. Ivan will go over them with you. You are free to enter any room in this place, even my own, save one... the one that is opened by this key.” He indicates a large golden key hanging from my new belt, though he does not touch it. “You must never open that door. Do you understand? You must promise me.”

I nod, bewildered, but find the resolve to speak. “I promise. But how will I know which door that is?”

“You will know. You will come to know every part of this place... of that I am sure.” There is inexplicable sadness in his voice.

“They do not come off... not even to sleep and bathe?”

“They do not come off.” He repeats, tiredly. “Now sleep.”

He turns to leave me alone with my new, apparently constant, companion. I call out to him as he is just reaching the door.

“My Lord... shall I inform you if you are to expect an heir?”

He stiffens and stops, turns, and walks back to me with the dusty step of a soldier weary of the sword. His eyes bright stars, he cups my cheek and says, more kindly than I could ever have imagined, “That will not be necessary, *lapushka*. There will not be time for a child.”

Then he does leave me, my eyes sore pricked with tears, and when I awaken the next morning in my bloodstained sheets he is gone. I do not see my husband again for a full three months.



Three months! Three months of boredom, of needlework and tedium and endlessly pacing endless halls. I have gotten to know the ponies quite well, and have even given them pet names, but my new noble life is dull. Thank God for the books, and the capacity to read them... some of them, anyway. I do not understand all the words in my Master's collection, as most of them seem to be of a scholarly nature, but I understand enough to amuse myself.

I hardly notice the chatelaine around my waist anymore, though I spent several sleepless nights with it chafing me at first. In addition to the keys,

there are a few trinkets—a snuff box, a pair of small scissors, a hand mirror. I have also attached my locket to it, as it is customary to keep an image of one's husband close at hand.

The closure is puzzling, as it appears to be nothing more than a large barbed hook but I cannot unlock it no matter how I twist or push (I had no intention of breaking my Lord's instructions that it does not come off, but I was curious to see whether or not I could if I wanted to).

I have exhausted the mysteries of the house these past weeks; even my husband's room has felt my feet disturb its dust. The only remarkable thing about that was its sheer unremarkability—a monk's cell could not have been more barren of comfort, empty save for a hard narrow pallet and a pot. Hardly a fitting bedchamber for a wealthy nobleman, and in such curious contrast to my own sumptuous nest.

Today, Ivan tells me that my Lord will return from the steppes the following day, and I should make any preparations I see fit to greet him. He has become increasingly irritated with me with each week that has passed, almost hostile, though I have been nothing but quiet and pleasant with him and have even been helping him in the kitchens and with some of the cleaning. My continued presence here seems to be causing him some kind of inexplicable distress.

The news of my husband's return has made me restless, so I kick off my slippers to wander the halls again. I have taken to walking in bare feet, as even the softest echoing hisses of my hard-soled slippers begins to grate on me after awhile and I enjoy the feel of the floors beneath my feet. It reminds me of home.

I take the familiar route past the kitchens, past the library with its wealth of carefully alphabetized tomes, past the store-rooms and parlours and dining halls. I amuse myself by counting the doors until I do not know the numbers to count higher and then I begin again. I have traced this path countless times, but this time—this time, something is different. There is a new door.

Perhaps I have simply missed it in the past. It is not particularly memorable in shape or material, hardwood bound in iron the same as the others, although the plate itself is gleaming gold. I retrace my steps to be sure it is not simply another closet I have forgotten; when I come to the door again, I am certain I have not explored it yet.

Without thinking, I reach for the keys at my waist, and pick the singular

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key out from the company of its duller fellows.

The key is warm in my hand. Its gilt nose touches the escutcheon and I shiver without warning, my hand shaking so violently that the key skates across the metal with a shrill whine.

The sound gives me pause. But, surely, no-one would ever know? Ivan is in the stables, and I am otherwise alone. What care have I for a promise made to a husband who prefers the company of animals to that of his own wife? What in this room is so precious that the rightful chatelaine of the house may not view it? Again my hand moves toward the lock, and again I hesitate.

I am very still, contemplating my next action. The hem of my skirt rustles in the breeze blowing across my toes, from beneath the door.

I have an idea.

I lie flat on my belly in front of the door, pressed up alongside it, and bring my hand mirror around to the front. The glass is thin, its silvering slightly blackened from age—but it is midday, the light is good, and I am hopeful. I slip the hand mirror into the crack, and twist and turn it hoping for a glimpse of the room's contents.

The reflection I am rewarded with does not make sense to me at first. I do not recognize the object I see in the glass, white and oblong and moving slightly from side to side. And then in a sudden burst of horror, as my skirts disarray themselves from my ankles in my attempts to see better, I do recognize it, and cannot help but scream.

I bolt back to my bedroom, bare feet slapping on the cold floor. Only a few moments later there is a knock at my door. It is Ivan.

"Lady," he calls. "Are you well? I heard your scream all the way down in the stables." There is something truculent in his voice. Satisfaction? I steady myself and try to keep my voice calm.

"No, all is well, Ivan. Thank you. I will take some vodka if you please."

I hear him depart only to return a few moments later with a bottle and a glass. When I open the door, he presents them to me with a flourish and bows, smiling, out of the room.

Smiling. Surely he must know his Master's secret. He must know the horrors I have just seen. I drink a little, then a little more, to blur the image that is now engraved upon the furthest reaches of my mind: A white foot, swinging gently as from a chain.

LIKE A THORN

A slender, white woman's foot.

God help me, the rumours are true. I have married the Butcher of Belgorod.



I awaken this morning, the morning of my Lord's return, to find my sheets and buttocks smeared with bright red blood. I am not due to bleed for at least another week; I can only assume that it was somehow brought on by the shock of what I had seen the day before.

I gather up the sheets and briefly contemplate washing them myself, but as I am not sure how much time I have before my husband arrives I dump the linens to the side and focus instead on remembering the midwives' magic of getting blood out of beds.

Ivan comes in on my labours; he suppresses a grin when he sees the task. "Everything well, my Lady?" His insolent mirth infuriates me.

"None of your business," I snap, for the first time during my stay here. "Take the sheets and wash them so our Lord has a clean bed with me this evening, should he choose."

He bows in mock deference and, whistling, sweeps the soiled linens away. I am left to my toil and embarrassment.

The bed mostly restored, I bathe. My husband arrives home near noon, leading a rope train of hoof and hair behind him. I watch him through the window, seeds of dread taking root in my stomach. Ivan hails the Master at the gate, and finally I turn from the window to pace my prison, ears straining for the footstep that will herald the inevitable summons.

The call does not come. One hour passes, then two, without tap or tread. Finally my patience grinds fine, and I don my slippers to set out to find my husband.

Why should I not go to him? It is not that I am not fearful—but if I am to go to the lion, I will do so calmly, upright, looking into its eyes. Whether or not one is afraid of the lion has little bearing on whether or not one is eaten, after all.

The door to the library is open. I knock softly and enter; he is seated by the fireplace still in his travelling clothes, eyes closed, head tipped back.

THE LAST MISTRESS OF THE CHATELAINE

Shards of broken glass glitter on the hearth—a smashed bottle? They were not there when I was last in this room. The scent of liquor is heavy in the air.

“My Lord,” I offer. “It is good to see you home.”

He grunts something unintelligible and does not look at me.

I try again. “Husband, I have missed you. Was your trip successful?”

Nothing.

Determined to get a response, I pull a book from a nearby shelf and make a noisy show of riffling through its contents. “My Lord, what does this word mean? It comes up often in your books but it is not familiar to me.”

Success! But what a viperish success it is. As soon as he sees the book in my hands, he uncoils from his chair, crosses the room in three great strides, and rips it away with enough force its spine shatters. He takes my throat in his other hand and forces our faces close. The cloud makes my eyes water, and my feet graze the floor.

“These are my books. You don’t touch them. They are precious and not for the likes of you.” He speaks slowly, emphatically, enunciating every word as though I am deaf or a dullard. The noose around my neck tightens.

“My Lord, you never gave me... any such order. You only gave me one condition... with regard to the contents of this house, which I have... followed.”

As my vision greys, I wonder if these will be the last words I ever say. One heartbeat, two, and then he releases me with a snort. “You’ve followed. You’ve followed. Ivan tells me different.”

So. The accusation hangs in the air between us. I swallow hard, holding my neck, and take a few hungry breaths.

“Ivan is lying.” I state quietly when the spots before my eyes have cleared. “I have kept my promise to you, my Lord. I swear I have not unlocked the door with the golden key!”

I can see the muscles in his jaw clenching and unclenching, rippling under the glossy sea. I begin to think the storm might pass, but then his eyes fall upon the wreck of pages dangling from his hand and the sight seems to enrage him afresh. Hurling the maimed book to the floor, he seizes my wrist and drags me from the library into the hallway.

“You are lying. You are lying. They all lie.” He repeats this through gritted teeth, again and again. I am hauled bodily through the house, though I am

unresisting, until we come to the door.

He shoves me forward. "Go on. Open it again. Look. See."

I shake my head. "I will not open this door."

"Again," he growls. "You mean you will not open it again."

"No. I mean I will not open it."

"Damn your **disobedience!**" For a moment I believe he will strike me, his fist balling into a mace at his side, but he simply scowls.

"As you like. It doesn't matter now. The puppets will dance until the story has been told."

Still holding me fast, my husband thrusts me behind him and raises his hand to the latch, making as though to walk through. The door does not open, however, and forward momentum carries his shoulder into the oak with a resounding creak. He curses softly; he was obviously expecting it to open easily. He tries again, but the door again refuses him.

Frustrated, he flips the golden key at my waist up from its siblings and fits it to the lock himself. I notice that the scratch I had made the day before is still there. The hasp clicks. The door is unlocked.

The door swings open, and my blood turns to ice even though I know what I will see.

There are six of them. Six women, as pale and drained as rusalka; all hanging, all dead. I do not know how they are suspended and I cannot bring myself to find out. I stare, mesmerized, as the naked corpses sway on their chains like a furrier's harvest. When the initial shock wears off and I am able to take my eyes from their bodies, I discover the rest of the room is no kinder. This is nothing less than a torture chamber, its other occupants elaborate monsters of sadism and steel.

My hand creeps up to my mouth to filter the stench of decay, but there is none. If these are my husband's murdered wives from years past, why have they not rotted away? I am reeling from shock, sensation, disorientation. No part of the scene before me makes sense; the murderer standing next to me is the most comforting presence in the room. It is all I can do not to huddle my body closer to his warm **realness**. I become aware that he has let go my wrist and is watching my face.

I do and say nothing. Finally, he moves to stand next to the first corpse.

"You have opened the door, just as these women all did before you."

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Meet them.”

He touches the first corpse, causing her to swing slightly out of sync with the others. Then, to my nauseated amazement, she lifts her head and begins to speak.

I am Marta, the dead woman says, air pushing past cold blue lips to somehow form words. I am your second wife. You left me, and I opened the door to both our damnation.

My husband moves resolutely to the second, and does the same.

I am Liana. I am your third wife. You left me, and I opened the door to both our damnation.

And so the unholy parade continues. Mari. Olga. Karolina. By the end, six pairs of clouded milk-white eyes have come to fix on me.

I finally find my tongue. “How has this happened? How has this... blasphemy... been birthed into the world? Did you kill all of them?”

The black beast roars. “I did not kill any of these women! But I am a murderer, and you are standing in my perdition.”

He begins to pace, thrusting his hands through his hair. “My first wife and I were married in secret as she was not a fit match for me... so deemed my family, ha! A better woman I have yet to meet, yet we had to move here so as not to bring shame upon them. She was of the traveller stock. I was studying in Saint Petersburg when I met her. My intention was to join the monastery; it was what my family and I both wanted. My love of books, of God....”

I wonder how many times he has told this tale, or if the women previously standing in my position had ever bothered to ask.

“She... Lyuba. I loved her. My heart was torn. We married, but I traveled back to Saint Petersburg often, too often for her liking. She begged me not to be gone for months at a time, but what right had she to deny me my first love? One day I came home and found she had... she had burned my books. They were forbidden for her to even touch.”

I look at him impassively. Is he seeking sympathy from me? As if in response, he repeats:

“She burned my books. Out of spite.”

“Of course she did.”

He frowns. “What do you mean, ‘of course’?”

“They were your mistress. If your mistress had been a girl, she could have simply killed her.”

His eyes narrow, but he barrels onward.

"I strangled her with my bare hands. I flew into a rage and I killed her. With her last dying breath, her life in my hands, she cursed me to forever take a wife I will condemn to death with the wedding kiss... all because I demanded simple obedience from her." He is breathing heavily now, his body thrumming with pent rage, and he seems to be speaking as much to the room as to me. "I have condemned myself. I have condemned all of you. If only you women... if only you could *obey*, you would be safe! I told you all! I tried to make sure you understand... all of you... Why could you not *obey* me?"

The angry dead jerk on their tethers, muttering. I am very much alive, and have more to say besides.

"You marry these women knowing their doom is at hand, and don't tell them of it. You leave them alone for months at a time, as you left your first wife. You speak of their sin of disobedience—what of yours of neglect?"

The choir abruptly falls silent. "What... did you say?" My husband glowers at me, as though no-one had ever had the audacity to call his own actions into question so plainly.

"Surely if you remained here with them you could give these women more to occupy themselves with than one room in an enormous house. Do you really think it is the mere fact that they are forbidden to enter a single room that compels them to disobedience? Or is it boredom and heartbreak?"

He pulls himself up to his full and terrible height. I have nothing to lose now. My death is already circling. I will look the lion in the eye.

"The guilt is both of yours: yours for taking a passionate woman's love and making it second to the leaves of a dusty book, and theirs for using disobedience as petty revenge against you. They are both sins against the sacrament of marriage."

My husband's rigid noble mask flickers for just a moment, then settles itself again. "It doesn't matter now, wife," he says stiffly. "You are destined to join them. Ivan told me of the scream, and the blood... did I not mention that the key will bleed uncontrollably to indicate the guilt of the wife? Your sin cannot be hidden. You will be taken just as these women were, and I will be forced to watch another innocent suffer for my crime. So come now, you damned things! Give me more nightmares. I am ready. I am watching. Do your worst!"

In the aftermath of this ringing challenge, I brace myself for pain, but

nothing happens. He stares at me in mad disbelief as I remain unmolested.

"Come on! Take her, damn you! Why are you waiting?" He is a hunched demon now, tearing around the room on two legs and four, kicking the metal devices as though he expects them to suddenly become beasts themselves and come after me. Finally, the madman's will is spent and he collapses, sobbing and begging for them to end his suffering.

I take one wary step, then another, until I am standing directly above him. Gently I rest my fingers upon his crown and ease his face into my skirts. I stroke his hair and hum, nothing in particular, while despair wracks his body. Eventually his sobs grow quiet, then stop, and shame replaces grief. The giant turns his fallen face from me.

I bend to kiss the top of his head. He does not flinch.

"I spoke the truth, husband," I say simply. "I am going to leave this place now. It stinks of guilt and none of it is my own."

I exit the abattoir and calmly walk back to my room to change my clothes.



I seek him out later. He is neither in his bedroom nor in the library. Just outside the stables, I hear a soft rhythmic hiss I cannot identify, and I pull open the gate.

He is indeed there—kneeling in a penitent's pose and stripped to the waist. In his hand, a length of silver; before him, a large wooden bowl into which he dips the chain before returning it to its ministrations upon his red and welted back. He is murmuring something, perhaps a prayer, as he ritually scourges himself. He has not been at this very long today; while red and angry, his back is not yet bloodied. In daylight, I can see the gnarled trails of absolution that have come before.

The shame of intruding upon this most personal of moments slaps my cheeks red, and I know I should turn my face away and give him privacy for these pious labours... yet my feet will not move, nor will my eyes cease their hungering linger on the glossy muscles knotting with toil and pain. I stand entranced, and an echo of our wedding night's sport flutters in my belly; it was hands and chains and flesh then, too, worked with only slightly

less fervour. I confess there have been many nights since that one I have lain awake in my nightdress, replaying every thrust, knowing I will wake the next morning with fingers tangled and scented with the salt perfume of carnal dreams.

I have a sudden and savage impulse to lap, frenzied, at the sweat winding in trails down his flanks; to squat in the dust behind him and snake my tongue all the way along his spine, plunging into the downy divide at his breech-top and working, slowly, up to his nape. Exquisite depravity comes unbidden—imagining myself crouching at his back, hands and hips locked over his from behind, my teeth working the edges of the nascent welts to expose the delicate meat beneath. So vivid and shocking to me are these images that I cannot stifle a gasp, and my breath whistles in sharply between my teeth.

With that one small sound, the spy is caught: one of the girls flicks an ear in my direction and chuffs a greeting. My husband pauses, hand still upraised, and then drops the chain back into the bowl. The compulsion to fly nearly overwhelms me, but I force myself to step fully into the stable before the nerve to do so is wholly lost.

“Leave me.” There is imperative in his voice, but it lacks authority as he still will not meet my eye. I ignore him, taking a moment to push the feral images from my mind, and give the mare a handful of oats from the bag by the door. She whickers, and I pat her nose before moving to stand directly before him.

“Vinegar,” I toe the bowl. “Traditional.”

“Are you here to mock me, or to fatten my stock beyond usefulness?”

“Do you use this as your confessional? A priest would be more legitimate.”

Beads of sweat glisten in his beard. It is summer, and the stables are close and buzzing. Much to my surprise, he does not treat my suggestion with derision.

“There is no priest who could admit to believing the unbelievable without compromising his own soul, and there is no law protecting women. This is the only penance I can pay for my crimes, and so I pay it, and will pay it as long as I am alive. It is the closest thing to peace I will ever have.”

I mull this over and conclude that he is perhaps correct.

THE LAST MISTRESS OF THE CHATELAINE

It is a strange thing to look down upon a wretch, a murderer, a drunkard, a heretic, and feel sympathy... yet I do. I do not understand what has taken place here, only that it is certainly not of God's doing; but to be prevented from confession, from taking Communion, from grace itself does not seem holy to me either.

So vulnerable now, my proud Lord, on his knees in horseshit and straw. I am keenly aware of his need for atonement, and also of my own dark delight at his suffering, both for it and for want of it.

I kneel to face him, pushing the acrid bowl to the side, and place my hands over his.

"Husband. Look at me."

He lifts his heavy head. I do not see a monster. I see a once-strong man burdened by his own sins, as are all humans. How cruel to make him carry them, unlightened, through his lifetime! His eyes plead with me, wet and aching, for release. My fingers tighten over his; I am filled with resolve, compassion, power... and something less noble.

I will give him what he needs. I will take what I want.

His mouth is red and full and sensual; ripe. My teeth find his lower lip and prove their edge before easing into the tender sheath of a kiss. He endures the bite without protest, accepting the bitter with the sweet. Arms reach to pull me close, crushing me against him until our lips' union must be broken so I can breathe.

"Sophie... " he groans into my hair. "Help me."

I will.

"Take off my chain."

He complies quickly, despite the bafflement on his face. The latch which proved so impossible for me comes apart easily in his hands, and I take my chatelaine from him and wrap it around my palm. He watches me, never taking his eyes from the barbed hook dangling from between my fingers, and I know my intent has become clear to him when he leans forward, bracing his upper body in taut readiness, and closes his eyes.

"Say their names."

"Lyuba." The weighted chain sings through the air and whips along the flesh of his back, leaving a dewy trail of blood-drops where the hook skips across his skin.

“Marta.” My arm rises and falls, untempered by pity.

“Liana. Mari. Olga.” Each name a plea for forgiveness, and each strike an answer to it. Seven blows for seven wives, seven scourges for seven murders. I am flushed, full to bursting; I feel bright and hot as the sun.

We come to the end of the pageant of sin: Me.

“Sophie,” he finally says, drops rolling from his beard, a beard so black it is almost blue. He is queerly pretty there in the stables; panting like a beast all painted in crimson trammels, the livery of the contrite. He tenses, expecting another strike, but instead I circle in front of him and bend to touch his brow with one finger’s feather-weight.

“No.” I chastise gently. “Not yet.”

Using all my strength, I bear his massive head down to the floor in my hand. He balks as his cheek grinds into the dusty floorboards, but oh, too late—my little slipper has already darted forward to pin the dark whorls at the back of his neck beneath its hard leather sole. I watch impassively as his eyes fill with water at the sudden pain his struggle has caused him, and the choking filth of the stable fills his nostrils.

Awkwardly, he fumbles for my foot, and I wonder if he is going to force me off—perhaps I have finally gone too far, pushed the limits of his abasement beyond what he will willingly endure. A flash of panic; the deepening bruises on my throat are testimony enough of how he treats those he feels have wronged him. I cringe to think of the penalty for such blatant humiliation should he choose to impose it.

But there is no violence, no rejection. The wounded giant under my heel simply strokes my foot through the slipper—gently, almost reverently—and closes his eyes once again in anticipation of the next lash.

Relieved, the heady rush returns to me, filling my limbs with a thrilling effulgence I could never have imagined.

“The others, now. Again.”

And so it is there, among the stamp and steam of the stables, that I bring the chain down over and over as he confesses the names of his past lovers, victims all, to the only person left alive who can absolve him. With each stroke a new freshet wells and streams, but his voice remains strong until the last name cracks; it is then that I know his poison cup is empty, and my arm falls quiet by my side.

THE LAST MISTRESS OF THE CHATELAINE

The cusp of power is ebbing in me now; I lean heavily against a support and catch my breath before turning my attention back to the man at my feet. He is curled, child-like, face still pressed into the floor and runnels beneath his hands where fingernails carved his pain into the wood—a ruin of sweat and blood, yet beautiful in the breaking. When I have regained more of my strength, I roll him back into my arms, holding him tightly while the dying rays of sunset slant through the windows. A surreal peace settles over my heart.

I kiss his poor fingers, the slack muscle of his arms, his raw cheek. I stroke his sweat-matted hair, and pluck the straw from his beard. My dress has become a butcher's apron in our embrace, but it is of no matter; I simply cradle him, soothe him, and listen to his raspy breathing ease with each passing moment.

His breeches are soaked with sweat and blood, plastered to every sculptor's chisel-stroke of his body. My fingers—perhaps somewhat purposefully, perhaps not at all—find the curve of his thigh and follow it first down, then up again to idle and play at the joins of flesh and seam. He is helpless; I am brazen. The cleft of his buttocks parts under my curious inquisition, cloth keeping flesh from flesh but hiding nothing from the relentless push of my fingertips. He stirs, groans quietly into my neck, but makes no complaint as my hand makes its slow and unflinching map of his body's secrets. And then, unexpectedly—

I press my palm against the solid outline in the linen, feeling heat and sinew throb against my hand in response. Is this possible? As exhausted as my husband is, the base desires and function of his body are clearly not; they push and strain against the wet cloth as though outraged by the imprisonment. I become aware of a smell, a tantalizing mineral odour that pricks my nostrils and floods my mouth with water. With a sense of wonder and amusement, I help him to his feet: it seems the puppets are still dancing, and the story is not yet done.

He staggers drunkenly (whether from pain or injury or catharsis I do not know) and we make our way back inside the house, away from the muck and straw of the stables to the clean softness of my bedchambers. The chatelaine still jingles softly in my fingers.

I undress him the rest of the way tenderly, as though he were made of glass, and pull back the coverlet to lie him down. Bright red poppies blossom

where he rests his shoulders; he shivers, and I tuck the blanket back down so he will be warm while I disrobe. I slide into bed next to him, chain in hand. He is cold to the touch, so I wrap my warmth around him and stroke his pain-matted brow. He has not spoken since the stable.

Kisses now, on his cheeks and nose, and over his wretched heart. My one hand, encumbered by metal, continues to stroke his hair... but the other slides down the expanse of chest and belly, claiming my wife's right. I cup softness in the palm of my hand while my thumb seeks hardness and coaxes it prouder. Still, he lies still.

I bend my head to his musky sex and take him on my tongue, still part soft. He utters a questioning sound but does not push me away; in fact, one of his immense hands drifts to my hair and finds purchase in it. I welcome the guidance as he pulls my untrained but willing mouth down along his length, as this act is foreign to me, and I am rewarded by a tightening in his belly and a swelling throb against my tongue.

But surely—surely he will not grow much bigger? I am quickly stretched to capacity, gagging in spite of my best intentions, and must pull away to catch my breath. His fingers tighten momentarily in my hair, fighting to stay buried deep within my throat, but then relax and I manage to pull away and gasp for air.

He is looking down at me, my husband, with those dark coal eyes—cheeks flushed, erect and demanding.

“Soph—,” he begins, but I place my hand, so small, over his mouth.

“No.”

And then, quickly, I am astride and over him, settling my weight onto my haunches. I feel an inquisitive nudge at the top of my inner thigh and know he is straining there, straining to sink himself so deeply within me our bones meet, wedded mortar and pestle. I make him wait as long as I can stand it, stroking him gently with my free hand, sliding his hottest part along my slickest... but I cannot wait long. I ache for him too, the familiar knotting of want within my womb amplifying the existing tightness of menses, and there will be no gentleness this time.

He groans as my buttocks come down hard on his thighs, taking him to the root all at once, and then again when I throw my body forward and bear the gleaming chain of the chatelaine down across his corded throat with both

THE LAST MISTRESS OF THE CHATELAIN

hands. The crimson patchwork of his back grinds into the bed; blood blooms anew and I ride him this way, harrying him between Gehenna and glory until the line between them blurs. We are glossy with mixed blood, awash in our wedding bed, and he finally howls and pulls me down onto him with such strength I fear he might shatter me to pieces—and now, only now do I release the chain and permit him to cry out my name.

Then, finally, there is peace for us both.



Ivan is gone, as are the bodies in the room. We assume he took them with him when he left, though the mysteries of how and why are perhaps best left as such. The room itself remains intact, with all its ghastly effects; we have not decided if they will be left as a standing warning from the past, or if it is better to dump the horrors into the sea somewhere. There is no hurry.

I am sure when the war is over and my brothers get word of my marriage, they will ride north to rescue me from the rumoured fate of all of Bluebeard's brides... but when they come, they will find their little sister quite alive and the true mistress of the estate and all that lies within it. Perhaps someday I will tell my husband a story of mirrors and door-cracks and the canniness of women... but I have my secrets.

We are expecting our first child in the spring.

THAT WICKED WITCHCRAFT

Sunny Moraine

“So,” said the woman, and she tossed her long black hair back over one shoulder. Her arms were crossed over her chest, the swells of her breasts hidden under a black suit jacket, and Greta couldn’t stop looking at her. Since she’d walked in Greta and Han attempting to walk out with the last piece of her stereo system, things had been a little awkward.

They were on their knees, hands behind their heads. That was part of why things were awkward.

“So,” the woman said again. She raised a hand to her face and tapped an immaculately tapered fingernail against her chin, looking coolly thoughtful. “I should probably call the police, now. Shouldn’t I?”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” Greta shuffled a little on her knees. Her shorts felt too short like this, pulling up uncomfortably into her crotch. She glanced at Han, who was looking at her with his jaw tense and his face grim. Police. Jail. They’d come too far for it to end like that. Pulled off too many things, had too many plans come together. But she wasn’t sure how to explain that in any way that sounded at all appealing, and the woman was looking at her and arching an eyebrow in such a way that Greta wasn’t sure she could even speak.

“I bet you do.” The woman laughed, a rich, deep sound, and something in it sent a shiver down the muscles of Greta’s back. “Pretty little thing like you, spending a night in lockup. Maybe a lot of nights. You and your friend. I guess it would be kind of a shame.” She leaned against the back of the plush loveseat and crossed her spike-heeled shoes. “You got any other ideas?”

Han opened his mouth to say something but Greta silenced him with a look. She could feel a thread of something here, a guideline out of the

situation, if she could just keep hold of it. The woman was severely beautiful. Would Han be jealous? When she'd rolled up and scooped him out of his bland suburban house and his senior year in an equally bland high school and taken him away with her, she barely had to convince him. She had known from their first moment together than he would do just about anything for her. She loved him, she supposed, in the way that she loved anyone or anything, according to its usefulness. But Han was sweet. And good in bed.

Stupid geek name aside.

"We could pay you back," she said slowly, lifting her head as much as she could with her hands pressing against the back of her neck. "You know... like washing dishes or whatever. We could do work for you. Whatever you wanted."

The woman smiled, and it was thin but it was amused. And maybe interested. "And what do you think I'd want?"

"I don't know." Greta took a breath. "Like I said. Anything you wanted." "Anything?"

"Greta, I don't like this," Han hissed at her. "Look, let's just—"

"We're both eighteen, you fucking moron." She rolled her eyes and the woman's smile spread just a touch. "They'll try us as adults." She turned her attention forward again. Forward was where the real help would be. She knew it with the kind of instinct that had kept her alive until now, and would see her out of this in one piece.

And Han, too, if he watched his fucking mouth.

"Anything," she said. "I mean... I'm not really into killing anyone, or anything that could get us killed. But anything else..." She shrugged, doing her best to seem nonchalant. "Sure, why not?"

The woman nodded, still smiling, and when she shifted her arms, her tits pushed up under her jacket, and Greta stared a little more. And she could tell the woman had seen her staring. So much the better.

"What're your names?"

"I'm Greta." She inclined her head in Han's direction. "He's Han."

The woman arched a thinly-trimmed brow. "Han?"

Han flushed, and the combination of his pale skin and red hair made it seem even more pronounced. "It's... it's stupid. My dad was a big Star Wars fan."

"Obviously." The woman's lips pulled into a sardonic twist. She nodded

briefly, as if satisfied, and stepped away from the loveseat. "I am Circe. I'm not sure I want you to call me that, though. I need to give it some thought. While I'm thinking, you can tell me why you were robbing me." She pointed down a short, narrow hallway. "And you can tell me on the way to the bedroom."

"Greta," Han hissed again, a note of panic creeping into his voice, but Greta ignored him. She and Han fucked pretty regularly, but it had been a while since she'd had much occasion to do anything else, and even the hint of it sent heat rushing south of her belly. It might all turn out to be perfectly innocent, she knew.

But she didn't think so.

"We just needed money," she said, beginning to get to her feet, until the sharp sound of Circe's spike heel clacking against the tile floor stopped her short.

"You can crawl." Circe smiled thinly. "Walking isn't for thieves."

Han stared up at her, and for once Greta could only do the same. But whereas Han looked mildly horrified, Greta felt another rush of that heat. So this. Okay, maybe.

She could do this.

"Okay," she said, beckoned Han with a look, and started to crawl. When she bent forward on her hands and knees, her shorts dug even harder into her crotch, the lips of her cunt caught and tugged uncomfortably. So maybe it would be nice to have it off entirely, at some point.

"We needed money," she continued, her eyes on the white tile floor in front of her and the shuffling sound of Han following behind. "We're... we've been living on the streets. We need to eat and we were gonna buy a bus ticket." Which was partly true. Partly. True enough for her purposes.

She could hear the *click, click, click* of Circe's heels as she followed the two of them. Ahead was a door, mostly shut but ajar just wide enough for Greta to see the end of a bed, black metal and white sheets. Everything in the bungalow seemed to be black and white.

"And how do you know each other?"

"She's my girlfriend," Han said, and Greta thought he sounded as though he were trying to be strong. Aggressive. Maybe a little bit of a foolish attempt when he was on his hands and knees like that, but she was almost touched. She had never given any indication that she needed his protection, but maybe

he was still the kind of boy who would try to provide it.

Circe laughed. "Is she? Well, that just makes everything more interesting." She lifted a foot and lightly kicked the door open. "In. Go on."

The bedroom was big, bright, a contrast of blacks and whites, and Greta stopped in the middle of the floor on a furry white rug, looking around. Filing things away in case she needed them later. It was a habit, and more than once it had saved her a lot of trouble. Han stopped beside her, closed his hand over her and when he did she could feel the tension in his body.

"It'll be fine," she muttered, and smiled. "Trust me. It'll be fun. She's not going to hurt us." And truthfully, there was no way for her to know that for sure. But she knew it all the same.

Circe had turned slightly away from them, opening a black steamer trunk at the foot of the bed, and Greta realized that this might be their chance. They could make a run for the door, maybe slow Circe down with a well-placed kick on their way out. But she didn't move. She didn't really want to. Whatever money they could have gotten for the stereo, this was a lot more interesting already.

And it was even more interesting when Circe turned to them with two sets of leather cuffs in her hands. She smiled again, that delicate, wicked curve of her red lips, seemingly the only red things in here.

"Strip."

Greta returned the smile. "All right."

Circe shook her head. "I think you mean, 'yes, Mistress.'"

"Yes, Mistress." Greta was still smiling as she said it, and from beside her she heard Han's soft intake of breath, too soft to be a gasp but definitely in the same family. Circe placed her free hand on her hip and gave him a hard look.

"Is he going to be a problem?"

"Han," said Greta, turning to him. She was still on her hands and knees, and it was strange that it should feel like such a natural position after only a short time. "I told you, it's going to be fun. C'mon, play along. Just for a while." She leaned forward and kissed him gently, her lips parting his a fraction of an inch, the kind of kiss that she knew would melt him. And as she did it, she could feel the tension lessening in him.

"She's right." Circe smiled again. "I promise, you won't regret this. It

won't be like punishment at all."

Greta nodded, reached down and pulled at the hem of his t-shirt, trying to get it over his head, and after a second or two he lifted his arms to help her. Everything was feeling a little strange, roles in flux; she had begun this teamed with Han against Circe—or at least against her stereo—but now it felt as though she and Circe were at work on Han.

And winning.

With Han's shirt off she could almost feel Circe's eyes moving over him, the slimness of his waist, the wiry muscles of arms and chest and back. Han wasn't built big, and he was clearly young, but Greta knew as well as anyone that he was something to look at.

"His pants," said Circe, with a short nod. "Everything"

"Yes, Mistress." And that time, when she said it, Greta heard Han echoing it softly, almost under his breath but unmistakably there. He pushed up and onto his knees, unbuttoning his fly without her help and shoving pants and boxers together down his skinny hips. Greta felt herself smiling as she watched him, as he toed off his sneakers and kicked his pants away, kneeling there naked and blushing. But she could no longer see the fear on his face, and when her gaze wandered downward she could see his cock beginning to swell and stiffen. A long way off from even half-mast. But getting there.

"Now you," said Circe, but Greta was already unbuttoning her shirt and shrugging it off, reaching behind her to unhook her bra. Her tits weren't big, she knew, but they were a nice shape, and firm, and she knew they looked good. As she tossed the bra away and reached down to unzip her plaid skirt, she could feel Circe's gaze moving over her, and she liked it. There was something both distant and appreciative about it, as though she was an object in a store or a piece of artwork in a gallery rather than a person.

Skirt, panties, shoes, and she was naked, no blushing, only a little bit of a chill that vanished instantly when Circe's eyes met hers.

"Good," Circe murmured. "Very good." She clacked the heel of her shoe against the floor. "Come here, both of you."

They went, crawling, and knelt by her feet. Greta thought that she was even lovelier from this angle, towering over the two of them, strong and statuesque. She raised her eyes, but she kept her head bowed, trying to appear humble. She had a very good idea by now of the attitude expected from her.

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“Raise your hands,” said Circe, and when they did she closed a pair of cuffs around each of them, reaching back into the chest again and pulling out a handful of tiny padlocks. She locked the cuffs in place with these, and though the introduction of anything that locked sent a ripple of disquiet through Greta’s mind, she wasn’t too badly concerned. The cuffs were soft leather, easy to cut through if they had to, and not uncomfortable. She moved her wrists slightly, feeling the little weight of the lock, the odd sense of confinement even though she was not even really confined.

Not yet.

“Very nice.” Circe straightened up and took a step back, looking the two of them over. She closed her hands together in front of her and drummed her fingertips. “So. Han.” Han looked up sharply, his eyes wide, though still not exactly afraid.

“Greta is your girlfriend?”

He nodded.

“Show me, then.” Circe bent slightly at the waist, her red lips curving. “Kiss her.”

Han looked almost relieved and Greta chuckled inwardly. Just kissing. Not so bad. Of course, only a complete idiot would assume that they’d be both cuffed and naked and on their knees and only get as far as kissing.

Han wasn’t a complete idiot, but he did come close sometimes.

He raised a cuffed hand, the lock clinking softly against the metal clasp, curled a hand around the back of Greta’s neck and tugged her closer. Her lips parted for him as a quiet sigh escaped her; this was something Han was admittedly good at. Kissing and pretty much everything else in the same bag. She kept her hands at her sides as his tongue slipped into her mouth, running over the points of her teeth, almost delicate, as though getting his first taste of her. The first time he had kissed her, backed against a tree in his immense back yard, it had been a little like that.

“I believe you,” Circe said softly, and she closed a hand around Greta’s long brown hair, pulling them gently apart. She straightened up again. “Well. That was lovely. What shall we do next? Ah, yes...” She reached down and threaded her long fingers into Han’s hair and pulled, and Greta could tell by the twist of his face and his wince that she was being rougher with him than with her.

"Get on your feet," she said, and Han did, mumbling, "Yes, Mistress," stumbling a little and standing there with his feet together and his cock protruding almost comically from between his legs. Circe released him and reached down, cupping his balls in her palm and smiling when he gasped.

"I feel like you're still a little afraid of me, Han," she said, her voice a smooth purr. "That hurts my feelings, I have to say. Do I look like some kind of... wicked witch? All ready to shove you in my oven and eat you up?"

Han managed to meet her eyes, but he was trembling just a little, though whether it was in fear or arousal or the simple fact of his nakedness, Greta couldn't say for sure. He shook his head. "No, Mistress."

"I do want to eat you up," Circe murmured, her fingertips dancing down the length of his cock. "But I think you'll like it, Han. I really do." Her fingers curled and squeezed and Han moaned, his hips rolling helplessly forward and his head dropping back. Greta felt herself grinning. She had never gotten to see him like this before, being slowly unraveled the way she sometimes liked to do.

"It's a nice cock, Greta." Circe glanced at her, smiling wider with her red lips. "Do you like to suck it?"

Greta nodded, biting gently at her lower lip as heat began to pool between her legs. "Yes, Mistress. I love it."

"That's good." Circe gave Han's cock another tug, now clearly using it to direct him as she stepped toward the bed and pulled him with her. "Let me get him settled here, and then I think you can show me just how much you love it."

Han went willingly enough, and when Circe stopped him by the foot of the bed and bent to shove the trunk aside, he caught Greta's gaze and smiled. Just a little, and there was still a degree of uncertainty in the smile. But she smiled back, feeling a certain amount of relief; she liked Han, whatever else she might think, and if he had continued to be unhappy with the situation she probably would have tried to find another way around it.

So it was good that she didn't have to.

The bed was big, steel-framed but painted black and made to look older, with the headboard and the foot high and ornate. Circe pulled his hands against the top bar at the foot, reached into her pocket and produced a small ring of keys. Greta looked, following each one carefully as Circe flipped

though them. They looked fairly mundane; car keys, what could have been house keys, a couple others, and at the end, a single smaller key. Circe fitted this into one of the padlocks on Han's cuffs and unlocked it, tugged one wrist under the bar and one over, and slipped the padlock through the D-rings of both cuffs, locking him to the bed, slightly bent and entirely unable to pull away.

Circe stepped away. "Greta, come here."

"Yes, Mistress." Greta scooted forward on her hands and knees, stopping by Han's feet, and when he looked down at her she gave him a quick wink.

The keys were back in Circe's pocket. Greta wasn't going to forget which pocket it was.

"I want you to kneel between him and the foot of the bed," said Circe. "Can you do that? Do you have enough room?"

"I think so, Mistress." Greta slid forward again, angling herself where Circe had instructed, and when she looked up again, Han's cock was barely inches from her nose, hard and glistening at the tip, and her mouth began to water.

"Good girl." Greta heard Circe moving away again, heard the trunk open and close. "When I tell you, I want you to start sucking him." Han gasped again, though now she was sure that it was excitement more than any darker apprehension. "You look so pretty like this, Han. You have such a lovely ass. Ready, Greta? ...Now."

Greta leaned obediently forward, opening her lips for the head of Han's cock, and when it slid into her mouth and the smooth taste of precome spread over her tongue, Han's moan echoed her own, though hers was far more muffled. One of her hands curled around the base of him, squeezing in just that way that she knew he liked; her other was sliding down between her thighs, half unconsciously seeking to fill a growing need. She moaned again when her fingertips brushed her swollen clit—but just then a sharp slapping sound cut through the air and she froze, startled. Then she realized that Han had cried out, and when she raised her eyes to his face again, his eyes were wide and shocked, his cheeks flushing darkly.

"She hit me," he whispered, sounding far more surprised than upset, and Greta saw Circe stepping to the side, brandishing a short black leather riding crop.

“Sorry,” she said, her dark eyes dancing “I just really couldn’t resist. All that gorgeous pale skin. It needs a few marks.” She caught Greta’s gaze and smiled. “Don’t worry. I didn’t hit him hard. It sounds so much worse than it is.”

“Did it hurt?” Greta asked him, and he shook his head, his brow furrowed with confusion.

“No. I mean... yeah, a little... but I didn’t hate it.”

“So don’t worry about it,” Greta said, giving him another wink, leaning in to take him back into her mouth. As she did, and he moaned, she heard another smack, and Han flinched and winced, but it didn’t even sound exactly pained. She wasn’t sure that she could say how it sounded.

For a few moments they went on that way, moving Han between them with mouth and crop, and again Greta felt that she and Circe were working together, constructing some kind of spell for Han to fall under. And he seemed to be going willingly, his groans low and rhythmic, the barely controlled movement of his hips and the pleasure-grimace stretching his mouth. It was a spell that almost worked both ways, pulling Greta into a deep and sustained focus, for when Circe halted the whipping and stepped back, ordering Greta sharply to stop, she had to repeat the order before Greta heard and understood her.

Greta leaned back against the foot of the bed, gasping, her fingers sticky with her own arousal. Han loomed over her, hands braced on the bar and his shoulders heaving. He had been close, she realized now, and Circe had seen it.

“You weren’t kidding, Greta,” Circe murmured as she stepped close, looking down over Han’s shoulder. She kissed the side of his neck, slow and lingering, and he let out a deep sigh. “You’re very... enthusiastic. In fact, you made me a little envious.” She tossed the crop aside and stepped back again, her hands moving to the buttons of her jacket. “I think I’d like some attention now. Come here.”

Greta slid out from between Han and the bed, dropping forward onto her hands and crawling until Circe’s shoes in front of her made her stop and glance up. Circe’s jacket was open and under it she was wearing only a bra, white satin. Greta was a little surprised. Somehow she had expected black.

“Get up,” Circe purred, shrugging the black jacket off her shoulders. “Let me see you.”

Greta obeyed, and it felt strange to be on her feet. It also felt strange

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to meet Circe's dark gaze, face to face with her, and she dropped her eyes, feeling, for the first time since this odd little game had begun, as though she was knocked slightly off balance.

"Beautiful." Circe's graceful fingers were moving over Greta's collarbones, down over the curves of her tits and over the peaks of her nipples. Greta let out a breath as she felt them harden, the liquid heat flaring between her legs. Circe smiled. "You like that?"

"Yes, Mistress." Greta nodded, and out of the corner of her eye she could see Han craning his head to look.

"You have a lovely mouth, Greta," Circe murmured, and the fingertips at Greta's nipples pinched and tweaked gently, pulling her forward in a way that made her gasp. Circe swallowed the gasp, covering Greta's mouth with hers, and the gasp became a moan.

It was different from Han. She had kissed women before but it had been a while since that kind of softness, that light scent filling her nostrils, and she parted her lips and let Circe into her, and everything melted for a moment into softness and warmth.

"We'll have to do more with that mouth," Circe said softly as she pulled away, licking her lips. One of her hands moved lower, down over Greta's belly and between her thighs. Fingertips slid into the wetness between the lips of her cunt, and Greta gasped, caught between wanting to clench her legs shut and wanting to spread them.

"Do you want more of that?"

"Yes... Mistress," Greta whimpered, and now she really wasn't acting at all. No embellishment. She didn't need to turn her head to know that Han was watching them.

"On the bed," said Circe, giving the side of Greta's thigh a light slap. "Go on."

She moved without thinking, crossing the floor on feet that felt oddly light. She climbed onto the big bed, the mattress giving under her weight, and the sheets were impossibly soft against her skin. She sat, glanced at Han, who was staring at her with wide eyes, and then at Circe, who was taking off her slacks as she walked closer. She pushed them down over the wide curve of her hips, revealing white panties to match her bra, and down her pale thighs. When she reached the bed she stepped out of them, her shoes still on, and

fixed Greta with a stare.

“Do you like me?”

Greta licked her lips. This close, she thought she could smell the woman, an intoxicating mixture of soap and perfume and the thicker, deeper scent of her arousal. She nodded. “Yes, Mistress.”

“Good.” Circe reached forward and combed her fingers into Greta’s hair, pulling her closer, Greta’s cheek against the curve of her tit. “Here’s what you’re going to do, Greta. You’re going to go down on me, and you’re going to do it where Han can watch. I think he’d like that.” When Greta glanced up, Circe was grinning in his direction, reaching behind her back to remove her bra. “Do you?”

“Yes, Mistress.” When they had begun this, she hadn’t felt this way. It had been a game, something to go along with just to get to a point where she could get them both away. But at some point that had changed, and when she thought of Circe’s cunt, of tasting it, she felt a deep and undeniable hunger. Like a spell, she thought again. As though she didn’t really have any control here at all.

And maybe never had.

Circe tossed her bra aside, her big tits bobbing free, creamy and capped with dark pink nipples, a small tattoo of a snake eating its tail circling one of them. Greta was staring and Circe saw her stare, and she cupped her tits in her hands and pushed them forward. “Suck.”

Greta did as she was told. When she closed her mouth over each nipple by turn, they tightened and hardened and she felt her fingers wandering between her own thighs again, growing desperate for some kind of stimulation more direct than the maddening rubbing of her thighs. But Circe pulled back and slapped her hand away.

“Not until I say.” But she was still smiling, and Greta felt a thread of hope in spite of the frustration. “Enough, now. I’m tired of waiting.” She climbed onto the bed beside Greta, arranging herself at its head with her back supported by mounds of white pillows, and wriggled out of her panties. Greta watched, and Han watched, and Circe tossed the panties to the floor and spread her legs. She nodded, again the corner of her mouth curling wickedly. “Go on.”

Greta bent over her. Her cunt was dark, the lips swollen and glistening

with moisture, the clit a little protruding nub crowning it all. She was shaved, completely smooth, and Greta ran a hesitant, fascinated hand over it. Suddenly she wasn't aware of anything else. Not Han, not even really Circe, and not the situation they were in. Not yesterday and not tomorrow. Nothing but what was in front of her, tugging at her with something primal. She leaned in close, felt Circe's hand at the back of her head, closed her eyes and flicked out her tongue.

Circe moaned, and somehow, echoing it, she heard Han echo the moan in a soft breath. It was maybe too bad, she thought, that no one was tending to him, and then she lapped harder, the taste of Circe's juices almost sweet on her tongue, and everything else blurred away. The smells, tastes, sounds of Circe's pleasure, the gentle pressure of the hand at the back of her head, and then the twitching of her hips as Greta took her closer and closer. In the end there was only a hitching gasp as a warning and then her mouth was flooded with more of that salty sweetness, almost a consistency like water, and she swallowed it without a thought.

Circe was shaking when Greta lifted her head, aftershocks rippling through her; Greta laid a hand on her smooth thigh and felt them as if they were hers. Her face was wet and she wiped at it. She was smiling.

"That was... God... very good, Greta." Circe had a hand to her forehead, as though it was paining her, but she was smiling too. "You've been so obedient. I think you deserve a reward. You and Han. Han." She lifted her head, her fingers still combing through Greta's hair. "Do you like to fuck her?"

"Yes, Mistress." And there was something dark in Han's voice, something growling and hungry, and Greta's eyes widened slightly. She had never heard Han sound that way before.

"Would you like to fuck her now?"

"I would, Mistress."

"I know you would." Circe pushed herself up and off the bed, bending to her slacks and fishing out the ring of keys. She bent close to Han, reaching around his shoulders, and again she kissed the side of his neck as she unlocked the cuffs. "I don't even usually like boys," she murmured. "But you almost make me change my mind. Greta."

Greta turned, marveling again at how ready she was to take orders.

"Lie on your back. Put your hands up toward the headboard."

Greta lay back. Her eyelids fluttered, she felt hands on her wrists, looked up, and it was Han, unlocking one of her cuffs and pulling her wrists through the bars. When he caught her gaze he froze, but only for a moment.

She smiled. "Han..." Her voice dropped into a whisper and he leaned closer to hear her, even as his hands kept working, locking her in place. "I told you it would be fun."

He returned her smile, bent and brushed his lips against her forehead before straightening and turning, waiting for more instruction. Greta could see Circe a little over his shoulder, reaching into a drawer in the bedside table and pulling out a little packet. A condom. She handed it to Han and he took it but his eyes didn't leave Greta's face.

We've come through so much, she thought as he unwrapped it, his eyes closing briefly as he slid the latex down over his cock. Come across the goddamn country, begged and stolen and seen mountains and cities and the road going on and on. So much.

But this was new.

She pulled her wrists against the bars of the headboard, the lock clanging softly against the metal, and she spread her legs as he knelt between them. She turned her head; Circe was standing beside the bed, one hand at her tits and one working between her legs, her eyes moving over them. Greta felt like a toy, a little, something enchanted and brought to life to do the bidding of her mistress. And really, it wasn't such a bad deal. Han pushed forward and into her in one smooth thrust and she arched her back and moaned loudly, echoing through the black-and-white house.

It was good. With Han it was always good, but this was something else, something sharp and throbbing into her. His hips moved in a hard, steady rhythm, and he braced himself over her and used his legs to spread her even wider, almost to the point of pain. She didn't mind the discomfort. It only made the pleasure sweeter. She strained against the lock and gasped and whimpered, trying to grind herself against him just so, but her clit was sadly neglected. She wasn't going to be able to come like this, not with her hands cuffed. Han... she looked up at him, pleading, and she was sure that he knew what she wanted, because he smiled—and shook his head. She bared her teeth and twisted with frustration, and Circe must have seen her because suddenly she was leaning over Greta and trailing an elegant hand down her body, lips soft against hers.

“Do you need some help?”

“Yes,” she hissed, and bare second later that slender hand was closed around her jaw, tugging her face up.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Mistress.” It came out almost in a growl, shuddering and hitching with Han’s thrusts into her, but Circe smiled and kissed her again. And then the mattress was giving under her weight as she joined them on the bed, moving up and over Greta to straddle her face. Greta gasped and then, realizing what was being asked of her, she leaned up and closed the last little bit of distance, her mouth closing over Circe’s cunt at the same instant that fingertips touched her clit, moving in tight and expert little circles.

And after that it didn’t take very much, or very long. Everything was a blur of wet and dark and pleasure, and then her head was filling up with fireworks as she arched herself upward, her mouth still working furiously. She came and it seemed to go on for a while, and maybe Circe came, and maybe Han came, but she didn’t know and she didn’t really care. At some point Circe climbed off of her and Han pulled out of her, and then she was surrounded by warm panting flesh, her mouth stretched into a smile that didn’t seem to want to leave her.



“You could stay,” Circe murmured against her neck, and on her other side, Han shifted and sighed. “Not forever. For a few days. If you wanted to. I have room.”

Greta stirred. She wasn’t sure how long she’d been lying there. It was still dark outside, though for all she knew the dawn was approaching. She was beginning to be hungry as well, she realized, and there were other things changing beside that. She stared up at the white featureless ceiling and pondered the idea.

You could stay.

The spell was lifting, fading with the afterglow of her orgasm. Outside, there was an old pickup truck and a pawn shop waiting for her, and then, the road. The endless road. No home and no family to go back to; she had lost her way back there a long time ago. And now she had pulled Han into the same

placeless place as her. She had no responsibilities and she had always been proud of that, but maybe she did have a responsibility to him.

But you could stay.

“Do you want us to stay?”

Circe stretched against her, one leg between hers. “I’m by myself here.” Greta felt her smile. “Not even a cat.”

“You should have a cat,” Greta mused.

“Why?”

“Aren’t you a witch?” Greta almost surprised herself with how matter-of-fact the question was, but somehow it seemed like it made sense. Everything about this seemed just a little inexplicable, if there wasn’t some kind of magic at work. She half expected Circe to be annoyed, but she only smiled again, and Greta thought of the tattooed circle around her nipple, the snake devouring itself and devouring itself.

“I might be. But if I am, I’m not the wicked kind.”

“No.” Greta nodded, and she managed to nudge Han with her foot. Gentle, barely there, but he stirred again and lifted his head to look at her. She met his gaze, nodded almost imperceptibly to the beside table, the ring of keys. He nodded back, seeming to understand, though there was something reluctant in his eyes that made her a little uneasy.

Hopefully he wouldn’t give her any trouble.

“Stay,” Circe purred. “Stay and be my familiars.”

Or let you fatten us up and eat us, Greta thought, but she didn’t really think that Circe would do that. But all the same, staying... no. A place to sleep every night, always enough to eat, safety and security and knowing what was coming day after day...

It sounded awful. Maybe Circe wouldn’t fatten them up and eat them, but Greta had seen the world she’d run from, and she’d seen the world from which she had rescued Han. Bland, boring, monotonous and entirely without risks or any great rewards. No life. She wanted to live, keep her body and her mind lean, see and do everything. And Han deserved that.

“Maybe,” Greta murmured. Han was moving for the keys; a second later and he was quietly unlocking her, and Greta felt sure that Circe had to know, but Circe made no move to stop him. Maybe she didn’t care. The cuffs slipped away from Greta’s wrists and she moved her arms around Circe’s shoulders,

pulling her closer. "I guess you have other games you could play with us?"

"Mmm." Circe smiled, laid a hand on her hip, and she didn't resist at all when Greta slid herself over her body and straddled her hips. "Lots of games. Fun ones."

"It sounds tempting," Greta admitted. She lifted her hands to her chest, pulled off the unlocked cuffs and slipped the padlocks into one fist. Circe watched her, bemused. "Really tempting I told you we didn't have anywhere to go. And I like you... Han likes you." Greta leaned in and kissed Circe's pale neck, and kissed her again, slowly taking Circe's wrists in her hands and moving them up toward the head of the bed.

"We had so much fun with you." It was easy to get the cuffs around Circe's slim wrists, and Circe still wasn't fighting her. Greta wondered if she were casting her own spell, with her body and her voice, pulling Circe in and hypnotizing her, her defenses already weakened by sex.

If she was a witch, she should be able to fight off witchcraft. Unless she didn't want to fight at all.

"We had fun," Greta repeated, and she locked the cuffs into place, through the bars of the headboard, and it was only as she pulled away and Circe tried to chase her with her hands that the woman seemed to realize what had happened. "But I think we're gonna pass. Thanks anyway."

Circe frowned, but only for a second, and then she was laughing and laughing. "Clever girl." She moved lazily under Greta, arching her chest up with her big tits bobbing, but if she was trying to fight magic with magic it wasn't working. Greta sat back and looked at her, pleased but feeling more and more dispassionate. It was time to go.

Han touched her shoulder. Greta turned; he was already dressed, and holding her clothes out to her. "We should get on the road," he said. "It's getting light."

Greta nodded, turned back to Circe and bent close to her again. "Sorry," she whispered, and there was a moment of softening. "We really did have fun."

Circe smiled and the smile was unexpectedly and disarmingly gentle. "I know."

Greta lingered there, and while it felt like minutes it must only have been a few seconds. Then she was moving again, her bare feet hitting the floor and

pulling her clothes back on, glancing behind her at a window, looking for the line of dawn on the horizon, but all she could see were trees and houses and gray sky.

“Get the rest of the stereo,” she said to Han, and headed for the front door without a look back, pausing only to grab an expensive-looking black ceramic vase from a side table by the door.

Outside, she paused again. Now she could see the dawn, a faint pink flush at the edge of the sky, and now she felt a pang of regret, a kind of loss. It had never occurred to her that someone might mourn the breaking of a spell. But it was broken all the same, and she turned to gesture impatiently to Han as he came out carrying the speaker.

“Come on.”

“Coming,” he said, and as he passed her to load the thing into the back of the truck with the rest, he caught her eye with a look she wasn’t sure she could define. He hadn’t ever looked at her that way before.

She felt better in the cab of the truck, flipping it into reverse and backing down the driveway, turning and heading down the silent street. No one stirring yet. It was a weekend and they probably wouldn’t for some time. But at some point, someone would find Circe. Greta felt sure about that.

“Han,” she said suddenly, and he looked up from the passenger’s seat, one arm out the window and the vase in his lap.

“What?”

“You’re still wearing the damn cuffs,” she said, and he laughed. When she rolled her eyes at him, he laughed harder. Whatever. She could deal. For the cash they’d get for this haul, she figured she could deal with just about anything.

SKIN DEEP

Shanna Germain

They say I am the Beauty. Capital, like that. Beauty. In a softly brushed script that makes you feel safe, that gives you images of beauty beyond your imagining. Sometimes with flourishes and fleur-de-lis and a bird tucked into the bower of the B, as though all of those things will make it true. They even named me Belle. Which, in some ancient country, stands for beauty. All those Bs, the way they roll off the tongue. B. Buh. Buh. A stupid sound, for a stupid, pretty girl.

But B can stand for so many other things, can it not? Beast. Bad. Bare. Bones. Bitch. Blood.

I am all of those things inside. Aren't we all?



My father brought me a rose from the creature's castle. He picked the most gorgeous one he could find, I'm sure—my father is a kind, big-hearted man, if he is a bit blind. The flower was red as blood, and big around as my fist, each petal wide and curled as a tongue. I thanked him kindly—I am nothing if not a dutiful daughter—and then I took the flower to my room and stripped every petal from it, every silky slip of flesh, and threw them out the window.

Let my sisters have the dresses, the rings. The silk and pearls. Let them have their twittering laughter like fragile birds, as they twirl in the light.

I wanted for other things. The broken mirror. The poisoned comb. The

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cursed spindle.

They say I went willingly, and that part is true. It wasn't for the rose, or even for the beast though—after all, I hadn't met him yet. Would I have gone if I'd known what awaited me? Oh yes. Oh yes.

But I went for the stem, the thorns. Strong as a lash, sharp as claws. I bent the long stem of it over and over in my hands, closed my palms on their curved points until they pierced my flesh.

Oh, yes, I went willingly. Wantingly. Wantonly. A thorn in each hand.



They say he is the beast. His b is big, but lowercase, as though it deserves no more. Carved from hard wood and boasting of sharp, rough edges. Here, the sound of b is ominous. Towering backwards d, like dirty, dangerous, despicable.

I hear him coming. Does he mean to eat me up?



I want for nothing here, in this hidden castle of his.

He knows my pleasures as well as I know them myself. Better perhaps. An outfit that I didn't know I wanted until it appeared. A bird that sings me awake each morning at the window. Gardens of thorns without a single flower. Chests of delights—boots made of the finest doe leather that curve around my calves, long strips of crimson and gold scarves, rings jeweled in stones and sharp-edged mouths—just mine for the picking through.



My heart hammers to see him. Such a huge creature he is. Such big hands. Long claws, those fine points at the end. I wonder at his teeth, the tapered sheen of their curves. At the wide pink tongue that rests within the cage of his menacing mouth. His eyes golden-brown as ripe pears, soft and tender in contrast to that sharp mouth.

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And then he kneels before me, his forehead nearly brushing my covered breasts. His head bowed so that I can see the back of his neck, the tendons and muscles that strain his shoulders and upper back. I want to drag my palms over the jumping swathes of skin, pull at his hair. But I stay standing, only his breath touching me, the low snarls of want that heat the space between my thighs.

But such good manners, that soft, fine voice.

“Good morning, Belle.” “Are you well, Belle?” “Will you marry me, Belle?”

“Good morning, beast.” “I am, beast.” “Never, beast.”

He will ask again tomorrow. He always does. He must.

Glutton for punishment, he is. Such a terrible, terrible glutton.



They say I dream of a Prince. This, too, has a seed of truth. He is tall and handsome, with hands as soft as lily petals and lips as red as apples. He comes to me in my dreams, and he promises me many things. “Oh, Beauty!” he says. “You’re the only one who can save me!”

But it isn’t true. It’s the curse speaking, the witch’s voice behind those pretty, pretty lips.

I know I could save him. Return the beast to his pretty, pretty Prince. But I won’t. I won’t.



There are many rooms here. There are rooms hung with pictures and rooms spilled with books. Rooms stuffed with music and rooms strung with jewels.

The time room is filled with clocks. They chime my name twelve times. They don’t say Beauty. They say Belle. Belle. Belle. Their faces are the pretty face of the prince from my dreams. I stop keeping track of time.

The aviary is flighted with birds. They chirp my name a hundred times and pull at my sleeves, at the ribbons ‘round my wrists. Remember the prince,

they sing. I cover my ears.

The room lined with mirrors reflects my face twelve times. They don't say Beauty either. They say nothing. Nothing times twelve. I like this room best of all.



To get to the mirror room, I walk many flights of stairs. My black boots carry me up the stairs lightly. My ruby dress, tight in the bodice, loose over the curves of my hips and ass, trails behind me with a small swish-swish. I carry a wax candle in a diamond and ruby candlestick holder, the flame flickering along the walls.

The beast is already there. Waiting. He wears no clothes. Not now. He is reflected a hundred times in mirror after mirror after mirror. The wide shoulders and lean hips, as he clasps his hands behind his back, opens the expanse of his chest to the mirrors' hundred unwavering eyes. His head is bowed, chin nearly touching his chest, the golden eyes closed tight.

I know he hears me—my steps in these boots are light, but his ears are terribly good. And yet he makes no movement, gives no outward sign. Only the quick catch of his breath and a tiny glitter of moisture from the end of him. Shiny and tear-shaped as the finest diamond.

His cock—such a glorious thing—rises from his muscled hips, aiming skyward, quivering like a hunter's arrow, notched and ready. I want to drop to my knees before him, grasp the thick base so that the veins stand up higher against the skin, tighten until the drop of liquid expands into a slow stream. I'm tempted. So tempted that my hand reaches out, nearly brushing his skin before I can stop myself.

In response, his cock arcs and twitches. He knows where my hand is, where my desire is, without even opening his eyes.

Instead, I pace around him, touching here and there, drawing a nail along the curve of his ass, flicking lightly at the inside of his thigh. I press the candle flame close to his face, as though I am exploring every eyelash, every fine hair. The flame taunts him, I know; its almost-there heat, the smell of dripping wax.

"Such a good beast," I purr as I circle, but the sound is not soft and

rolling. It is sharp-edged, shiny as a blade. "So hard for me."

His breath catches, stops, then releases in a growled, choked breath. His cock weeps with every gasp and I finally allow myself to touch it. I circle the hole at the very tip, to draw his glittering liquid away from his skin and bring it to his lips. "Open," I say.

He does, he opens his lips and he lets me draw his own moisture along the flat of his tongue with one fingertip, but he doesn't like it.

There are many things he likes. And just as many things he doesn't. And, yet, he will do them all for me. If I so much as ask it. If I so much as think it. If I so much as think about thinking it.



The birds are well-trained. They cut and pinch and pierce with claws and beaks. They leave him gasping and panting, bruised and bloodied. They leave him whispering my name over and over, until the sound becomes a single chorus, a chimed plea that makes me ache through my stomach, that makes me wet with want.

I've tied him tight, with my own dresses, the golds and blues and reds of silk and satin binding his thick arms and legs to the iron circles I've had his servants screw in the floor. The muscles bunch inside the chains of fabric, his dark sharpness in strong contrast to the soft flow and drape of colors. One dress, a creamy vanilla, covers his eyes, much of his face, leaving only his bared teeth visible, their aching clench.

For a long time, for as long as I can, I sit and watch. I am naked in his chair, legs spread, a hand playing softly between my thighs. He can't see me, of course, but he can smell me. He writhes in the bonds as the birds do my work for me. The seams of the dresses rip and tear as he struggles but not enough to set him free.

"Please, please, Belle, please. I want you. Please, Belle." His tongue drags across his lips. The muscle is slick with saliva, glossing his skin.

I make him wait while I slide my fingers along my slick skin. Over the peaked point of my desire, small quick movements make his ears twitch toward me, make him go quiet despite the pain, so he can hear me. Our hips lift in time with each other, a hidden unheard beat that we both dance to.

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“Belle,” he growls. There is so much want in that single sound of my name that I can barely breathe. I come quick and hard, not even trying to be quiet now, calling his name across the room, across the rooms. The birds pick up the sound, echo it.

I slip from the chair and bend over him, my tongue feather-light along the length of his pulsing cock. I am barely touching him, but he jumps each time, lifting his hips from the floor, groaning and straining. Around me, the birds etch their beaks into his chest, an ancient, animalistic language that I will trace with my tongue, that I will soothe with the soft brush of my lips.

I slide over him, press the lips of my mouth to his as the same time that my wet nether lips press against his tip.

“Such a pretty beast,” I whisper. “Such a pretty beast in your girly dresses...”

He groans and arches into me, impales me with that single, sudden movement, filling me so deep and fast that I am dizzy. Delirious above him, I ride him without thought or control. I push my hands to his thick neck, feel the pulse beat beat beat beneath my palms, tighten until neither of us have breath, until our bodies are nothing but cock and cunt, thrusting.

“Belle,” he cries. No, he roars. He roars my name when he comes and it shakes the house and scares the birds until they’ve left nothing but feathers, white feathers that fall and fall around us. When I open my eyes, the feathers are covering us, their shafts turning red with blood.



The clocks watch us with their impassive faces. Time is speeding, soaring, ticking in a metronome too quick to hear. I let the thick green length of thorned vine fall again and again upon his straining back in time to that unending passage of space and time.

“Soon, she’ll come, the one who is to save you,” I say, my voice husked with want and effort. “And you will let her in.”

“No,” he wails. His voice rises and falls in time to the vine’s tug and catch. “No, no, no.”

“Oh, yes,” I say. It is cruel, this. But it is true.

I draw the end of the vine down his back, brushing the thorned edges

softly across his quivering skin. "She will be dumb and beautiful and she will fall in love and kiss you and you will become that pretty, insipid prince you once were."

"No, Beauty, no. I won't." His voice when it's like this, all want and pain, on the very verge of pleasure, snags at my thighs, tugs at my lips until I am an open fountain, begging for him to drink.

I crack the vine with all my strength on his back, once, twice. His skin sears and splits. A drop of blood wells and breaks open, rolls down his back to splatter quick upon the floor.

"Down," I say. He goes down on his knees, his eyes raised on mine. "What do you say?" I ask. My fingers are clenched so tight around the vine, I can feel the thorns sticking me, I can feel them drawing blood.

"Will you marry me, Belle?"

"No," I say.

I widen my stance, lift the hem of my shimmering dress with both hands. One of the thorns in my fist catches the fabric, ripping it, but I don't care. I am dripping, aching, listening to him beg and heave, that big body down at my feet. I drop the vine and grab for his head, bringing it forward, into that river between my thighs.

When he dips the length of his tongue between the folds of skin, when he brushes the tip against my clit over and over until I'm clutching his head and bucking into the heat of his mouth, the sharp sear of his teeth, when he makes me come, time stops. But not for long enough. Never long enough.



They say I left him to return to my family, that I was homesick. That I meant to come back. That I was naive and sweet and gave in to my sisters' jealousy and whims. That the beast nearly died, heartsick and spellbound, because I did not return in the promised time.

They are wrong.

The girl is coming to him. The one who can kiss him and make him princely. He says it is not what he wants, but she is his only chance. She is Beauty, through and through. Bones like the finest china, blood like soft-spun silk, a heart that will beat only for him.

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Look, there in the mirror, deep in the dark of the cave, do you see him? See how his head is bowed, eyes closed, his breath slowed? He quivers and aches for my barest touch. I will not need whip nor lash to make him come. Only the softest draw of a nail along his ear, the most gentle sink of my teeth against his lip. He waits and waits for me. He must not touch himself, must not break or bend. He knows this, and still he is proud, erect. Clear fluid seeps from the corners of his eyes, the tip of his cock.

He must choose on his own. To be her beastly prince. Or to be my beautiful beast. If he calls my name like the chime of a clock unwinding, I will return to him, quick and cutting as a hundred broken mirrors, a thousand clock faces, a million beaks of birds.

For now, I watch and I wait. I wear the ring he gave me to get back to him. I twist it round and round my pale finger. In the flicker of candlelight, the ruby shines like the brightest red rose, the darkest heart, the tiniest drop of blood.

CONTRIBUTORS

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ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Circlet Press was founded in 1992 to publish works of fantasy and science fiction that were considered too erotic to be published by the mainstream genre presses. *Telepaths Don't Need Safewords* by Cecilia Tan was the press' first chapbook, followed soon after by *Mate* by Lauren P. Burka, and two anthologies, *Forged Bonds* and *Feline Fetishes*. (All four chapbooks are now available in an omnibus volume, *Tales from the Erotic Edge*.) Full size trade paperback anthologies soon followed, including a series of erotic vampire books (*Blood Kiss*, *Erotica Vampirica*, *Cherished Blood*), and those focused on gay male sexuality (*Wired Hard*, *Wired Hard 2*) and SM/leather/fetishes (*S/M Futures*, *S/M Pasts*, *Fetish Fantastic*). Circlet then branched out into non-erotic fantasy and science fiction with queer themes with the imprint The Ultra Violet Library, which has featured, to date, *The Drag Queen of Elfland* by Lawrence Schimel, *Things Invisible to See*, edited by Lawrence Schimel, and *Through A Brazen Mirror* by Delia Sherman. In the year 2000, Circlet will take the next step in its literary erotic excursions with *Nymph*, the first collection of erotic short stories from cutting edge urban fable weaver Francesca Lia Block.

For more information about Circlet Press, upcoming anthologies, internship opportunities, and more, please visit us on the World Wide Web at www.circlet.com

If you enjoyed this book, you will likely enjoy many of our other fine anthologies of erotic science fiction and fantasy including *Best Fantastic Erotica*, *Sextopia*, *Erotic Fantastic*, and many others. In summer 2008 we have converted nearly all of our backlist print titles into ebooks, but if there is a title you want that you don't see available in the format you prefer, please let us know!

We'd also love to see feedback from you about what you'd like to see in future print or electronic books! Drop by our Live Journal community at circletpress.livejournal.com or comment in our MySpace, or on any entry at

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Our line of ebook originals includes:

Like a Queen and Like a Prince

Have you ever thought that your favorite fairytale from childhood would make a great bedtime story for adults? *Like a Queen* and *Like a Prince* feature erotic retellings of fairytales, fables, and bedtime stories in a pair of books: *Like a Prince* with a gay twist, and *Like a Queen* with lesbian themes. These stories tell the parts that the Brothers Grimm left out - what was really going on between Cinderella and her fairy godmother? What did the dwarves spend their time doing before Snow White arrived? What if there were a beautiful boy with golden locks at the top of a tower, waiting for rescue by a handsome prince? Fairytales are about the fairest of both sexes, governed by outrageous passions and gifted magical powers with which to pursue them.

Like Twin Stars

According to Scientific American, bisexual behavior is common in over 1500 species of animals on Earth, including humans, for whom it has greater social and personal consequences than it does for penguins, baboons, or garter snakes. Use science fiction and fantasy to get at this subject. Could there be worlds where bisexuality was the norm? What is erotic about being attracted to both ends of the gender spectrum and what sort of fantasies and fantastic worlds of magic or science can it spawn?

Like a Myth

Four erotic tales featuring folkloric settings of India, Japan, Korea, and a fantastic orient that never was. Circlet's newest ebook anthology features supernatural elements and steamy chance meetings set against a rich backdrop of faraway places. Like all Circlet books, *Like a Myth* is both sex-positive and explicit, celebrating the erotic imagination and "erotic fantasy" in all senses of the term.

Like Clockwork

Seven stories of erotic steampunk, exploring worlds of clockwork people and their relationship to their creators. If a mad, or not-so-mad, scientist of the steam age, were to create his or her own being, what desires would be reflected there? Follow up to the best-selling anthology *Like A Wisp*

of Steam.

Sex Noir

From the sultry heat of New Orleans comes *Sex Noir*, a collection of erotic short stories from writer Jamie Joy Gatto. Gatto (Mind Caviar, Ophelia's Muse) mines the rich lode of erotic longing, of wanting, the sublime pain-pleasure in tragedy, setting all of her erotic tales in New Orleans.

Up for Grabs

An anthology of erotic stories where gender is up for grabs. Thousands of people spend time on the Internet identified with a gender other than the one they were born with, for erotic gratification or to stretch their imaginations. But we asked our writers what if you got a tax break for changing your gender? What if you could choose to be no gender at all until you went on a date? What are the implications, both sexual and social, of gender possibilities beyond the choices and ideas our society currently holds.

... and many more.