

CINDERELLA, NECROMANCER

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*To my elementary school teacher, Mr. J. White, for letting me stay
inside at recess and write my weird stories.*

*To my middle school English teacher, Mr. T. Colp, who—after
reading the very first writing assignment I handed in—asked what
I wanted to be when I grew up, and when I told him I wanted to be
an author, said “Yes, I believe you can.”*

I

The Ending

*B*lood. The blood of my enemies drips down my forearms, fleeing the confines of the spaces between my fingers, traveling toward freedom on the cold, stone floor.

Red and hot and sticky and sweet—ah, how sweet the air smells—and I can't help but wonder if things might have turned out differently.

For me.

For them.

For us.

It tickles as it pools at my elbow, the many bright rivulets joining as one before that final leap.

I understand their need for freedom. Would that I could simply slip away and escape, but no, not this time.

This *was* to be my escape—and yet, standing here with bloodied hands and flesh beneath my fingernails, I wonder.

Was I wrong?

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Was this truly the only way?

No one deserves to die, my father would have said. As cruel as a person might be, only a monster wishes death upon their enemies.

Ah, Father.

If only you knew.

If only you'd seen.

If only you'd met my sisters.

2

The Beginning

On the morning of my fifteenth birthday, my mother died. It was a cruel and terrible death, wrought with pain and suffering and moments of relief between the screams.

When death finally took her, the darkness hovered like a plague over our home, my father and younger brother and I only moving and breathing to survive, though if anyone had asked us why, we couldn't have given an answer.

On the morning of my sixteenth birthday, the darkness descended in a form incarnate, though at first, we couldn't see it.

Why should we have?

Father thought he'd brought me the best birthday gift a father could give his daughter: a new mother.

I saw nothing but a vile attempt to replace someone utterly irreplaceable.

I screamed, threw the pot I was holding at his head, and locked myself in my room for three days.

On the fourth day, six-year-old Edward knocked on my door.

“You can’t stay in there forever,” he said, his small voice wavering. “Father is threatening to call the locksmith. Mother—”

“Don’t call her that or I won’t speak to you,” I said.

He paused before continuing, an awkward pause that made me wonder—no, suspect—that *she* stood outside my door too.

“*She* is threatening to take a hatchet to your door,” he whispered, so soft I could barely hear.

Was she now? I wanted to see her try. Difficult, though, being on the other side of the door.

“And ruin Father’s fine craftsmanship? She wouldn’t.”

But I didn’t know if she would or not. After all, I’d only caught one glimpse and hadn’t even seen her face. Or looked in her eyes. I’d been a fool.

One’s eyes say so much more than most people suspect. While the superstitious bustle about, trying to hide their true names—for they believe there is power in names—they should really be wearing dark glasses and learning to speak while gazing at the ground.

Names? Please. Child’s play.

To learn the state of one’s soul, find their gaze and hold it.

But I’d thrown a pot and run away.

How differently things might have turned out if I’d only followed my own rule.

A deep, calm, female voice penetrated the safety of my walls and wormed its way into my inner ear. “Ellison, please open the door. You must be starving, and I can’t imagine how—”

“I have a window.”

Edward sniggered, and I knew he’d been thinking the same thing. Just because there was a chamber pot in the room and I hadn’t come out, didn’t mean I hadn’t at least thought that much through.

She sighed. “I can’t even imagine what you’re going through, Ella dear.”

I flinched. *No one* called me Ella. No one but my mother.

“And I’m certainly not here to replace your mother,” she continued. “I hear she was a wonderful, outstanding woman.”

Outstanding? When my mother smiled, flowers bloomed. When she cried, the skies wept. When she spoke, seas parted. No phrase on God’s green earth could even begin to describe her.

“But I’m afraid I’m here to stay and, at the very least, I hope we can be friends.”

Afraid? No, this woman at my door wasn’t afraid. Fear makes people tremble and weep and piss themselves, and *she* did none of those things.

No, *she* stood outside my door and fed lie after lie on a silver spoon to my brother, and to me, just as she’d no doubt done to my father.

“I have two daughters who are about your age, Ella.” Her voice grew soft and warm. I shivered at the change. “They’ll be arriving soon, as soon as school ends for the term. I just know you’ll get along splendidly. Won’t you come out so I can show you their portrait? I’ve put it up in the parlour, just above the fireplace.”

Above the fireplace? Father’s rifle went above the fireplace, not some hideous painting of strange girls in no doubt too-frilly dresses.

Ah, but curiosity and temptation are evil things when they join forces. They crowd one’s brain and push and pull until nothing is left but an ache to do exactly that which you know, beyond all doubt, you should not, under any circumstances, do—but at the same time, how could you ever *not* do it?

The inner self can be so cruel.

I allowed myself a quick glance around my room. No one could say I lacked for anything—I had clothes and dresses for every occasion, a wardrobe that would be envied by the Queen herself, books upon books upon books, jewels to rival the brightest stars,

and mirrors wherever I turned.

To remind yourself that you're beautiful, no matter what state you're in, morning, noon, or night, my mother had said.

But what worth was beauty, and what wealth were jewels, compared to the comfort of a mother's touch? I would have given all worldly possessions for that alone.

And so, with trembling fingers and a heart screaming of betrayal, I opened the door.

3

The Betrayal

Her smile was full of teeth, her lips red and full and inviting. I still did not meet her eyes. Though I thought myself a fool and coward for not doing it sooner, I admit I was afraid. Afraid of learning a terrible truth, or worse, discovering that no terrible truth existed beyond the reality of a new mother.

I looked to Edward, but his innocent face was flushed and rapturous as he gazed upon the intruder.

“Come along, Ella,” she said. “I’ll have your girl draw up some tea. She won’t be with us much longer, just until Charlotte and Victoria arrive and get settled. No need paying for a housemaid when there are plenty of able-bodied women about, hmm? Frugality is the Lord’s delight!”

This should have been my first hint at what was to come.

“I’m not in the mood for tea, if it’s all the same to you,” I said, still looking at Edward. He might as well have been a glowing firefly, for all the attention he paid to her. What *had* she done during my self-imposed isolation?

Not-Mother waved her hand before placing it on my shoulder—long, pale, slender fingers curling around my flesh like icy tendrils. But they weren't icy at all. Her touch felt warm and strong and as much as I hated myself for admitting it, reassuring. Was this the beginning of Edward's devotion?

"Edward," I said, perhaps a little more forcefully than warranted.

His gaze snapped to mine as though my speech had sliced through a taut line.

"You're out!" he shouted, a smile spreading across his face without reservation. "You'll love what Mother has done to the parlour, come see!"

Off like a shot, Edward disappeared from sight in the manner that little brothers often do.

What had she done to the parlour? I looked to her for the meaning behind Edward's outburst and caught her eyes.

We froze, she and I.

She gave a tiny gasp, so quiet that I might have missed it were I not looking for any clue or hint or indication as to the nature of this woman we were to now call *Mother*.

To this day, I know not what she saw when she looked in my eyes. My heart, however, remained in my throat, for I saw something that both terrified and intrigued me in the same blow.

I saw *nothing*.



"The place simply needed a woman's touch, don't you agree?"

I ignored her veiled insult, choosing to focus my attentions on the abhorrent display of extravagance and wealth that had

overtaken our parlour in a matter of days. Our comfortable chaises, Grandfather's tea table, and the practical, heavy window drapery, all gone. In their place? Ornate, delicate seats with barely a hint of cushion for padding, exotic dark-wood furniture, and swaths of fabric so heavily beaded and gilded that I feared robbers might break into our home and live for a year on one drape alone.

I prayed that this woman had spent her own wealth on such a display, for Father would never approve. While we lacked for nothing, he saw no value in decadence, nor the need to flaunt our blessings.

How ungrateful that would seem, my dark beauty, he would say, when there are so many others who have so little?

Not-Mother flew to the window and grasped the corners of a flimsy ivory fabric, pulling it tight across a sliver of sunlight that threatened to invade the dim-lit room.

"Isn't it marvelous?" She sighed and drifted to a portrait on the wall of three women. I recognized her, but not the two younger girls beside her. They stared out of the portrait with an unnerving intensity, and I pitied the artist they'd sat for. The smiles on their lips did not extend to their eyes, and it did not take much deduction to conclude that they must be Charlotte and Victoria.

Our new sisters.

The portrait presented a convincing enough façade, no doubt, for the likes of Father. What was he thinking, bringing this woman and her wretched darlings into our lives?

Not-Mother cleared her throat, waiting for a response.

I couldn't help myself. "I admit, I preferred the rifle."

To Edward, I whispered, "And with so many beads about, I'm afraid to sit down lest one lodge up my—"

"Ellison!" Not-Mother gasped, but at that very moment the front door slammed, both saving and damning me in one breath. I

knew those footsteps like I knew nothing else save my own hands.

Father appeared in the doorway, a thin smile plastered on his face. It wavered ever so slightly as he took in the renewed parlour, a flinch at the corner of his mouth at seeing the replacement above the fireplace.

His gaze shifted to me and his true happiness returned. "Ellison, you've emerged."

I hoped he would run forward and envelop me in one of his consuming embraces, but he refrained and offered a tilt of his head instead. Was he embarrassed to show affection to his own children around *her*? I hoped not. We'd all been restrained since Mother's death, but I saw no necessity for this level of ambivalence.

"I got hungry," I said, hoping to draw him out. "There are very few things worth eating that fit under the crack of a door."

His smile broke free, and a roar of laughter brightened our tomb. My heart lightened and I clutched my mid-section for emphasis, feigning starvation, which made his laugh that much heartier.

It was a beautiful sound, and too long past since heard in the corners of our home.

Of course, our delight was *her* dismay. She couldn't even allow us this one moment of joy, and she strode toward Father with purpose, grasped his arm and patted his shoulder with what should have been a loving touch.

I wish I hadn't been the only other person in the room. I wish I hadn't been alone in seeing Father's face grow slack, his eyes dull and laughter cease like a bow screeching across taut strings mid-note. Where had Edward run off to?

"Darling," she said, "Ella and I were just getting acquainted. I've told her about my gorgeous girls, due to arrive any day now. Won't it be wonderful to have the whole family under one roof?"

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I gaped as Father nodded, vacant stare fixed on her visage. It made me uncomfortable to admit—she did possess an unearthly sort of beauty—but surely my father would never be swayed by a pretty face and too-sweet words?

He mumbled some incoherent agreement, or so I presumed, and the rage in my belly returned.

Without another word, I grabbed a jeweled pillow from the nearest settee and hurled it at his head.

Then I fled the room and locked myself away for three more days.

On the morning of the fourth day, everything changed.

4

The Leaving

“I’m leaving for a little while,” said Father, his gentle voice drifting through the space between door and wall. “I have business to attend to. It’s an opportunity I can’t pass up.”

I pressed my forehead against the crack. I didn’t want to speak to him, but my heart did.

“How long?”

“A little while.”

“You’re lying,” I said. “Lie to Edward, if you must, but not to me. You’ve never, so don’t try to start.”

A soft thump against the door told me I’d been right.

“Oh, Ellison,” he whispered, “if all goes well, it won’t be for long. I truly have a necessary task that demands my—”

I flung open the door, nearly sending my poor father sprawling. “Take me with you.”

It seemed the only logical solution.

“I’ll make your meals and tend your clothes.” Sudden desperation rushed my words. “And you know I’m very good at selling to ladies in the marketplace—”

His smile was sad but kind. “That you are, my daughter. But not this time.”

I tried to protest, but he placed a finger across my lips like a seal. His eyes pleaded with an urgency I’d seen only once before. Right before Mother’s death.

“Be good while I’m gone, Ellison. Promise me that much. Take care of Edward. Celia will see to it you’re well cared for while I’m gone.”

I should have stopped him, then and there, but he pressed something into my hand and curled my fingers around it, holding tight to my fist.

“Be good,” he repeated, and my puzzlement grew. How could I not?

“I will,” I whispered, “but when—”

He shook his head, gaze downcast. “After my business is complete, I will return. That I can promise you.”

I nodded, heart aching to diffuse his sadness, while every ounce of my being screamed to cling to him and refuse to let go.

But I did not.

He released my hand and stood, straightening his coat and running a set of fingers through thinning, chestnut hair.

With a firm nod and a glance toward my closed fist, he turned to walk away. At the top of the stairs, he looked back.

“Ellison?”

He sounded weary, though resolute. What had we become in just one short year?

“Yes?” I tried to match his tone, giving comfort in whatever small way a daughter might.

My father took my gaze and held it, growing suddenly intense and, in a way, frightening. “Prove all things. Hold fast that which is good.”

He swept down the stairs, leaving me trembling like a newborn lamb.

I plunged my fist inside the pocket of my robe and released the object he'd given me.

I couldn't bring myself to look. Not now.

Believing he'd return soon was a far easier truth to bear.



He left that same morning, quietly, while the rest of the world still slept. I watched from my window as he galloped down the road that would lead him through town, past the King's palace, and out the other side on the road headed north. For years I'd begged him to take me on one of his distant journeys, and after Mother's death, he'd promised his trips would never again separate the family. We had to stick together now.

Celia's arrival had changed everything.

Father and his horse had barely disappeared from sight when someone rapped on my door—three sharp knocks, and a fourth with ominous finality.

I suppose I shouldn't have answered, but at the time, some small part of me must have hoped that Father's leaving had only been an illusion or some semblance of a nightmare, and that he actually stood on the other side of my door once again, waiting.

But Celia Not-Mother stood there instead, hands clasped at her middle.

"Your father has taken leave for several days to do business in Neustadt. Be a good girl and bring me up a pot of tea. Sweet child."

The last she added as an afterthought.

Be a good girl? For Father, certainly. For her?

"That is not my place," I said, for I had no knowledge of

kitchens and pots, nor the necessary interest to deduce what might be needed. “Miss Mary—”

“Is no longer in our employ.”

A breath caught in my throat. Father’s trail barely minutes cold, and already she’d loosed the woman who’d nursed us and raised us during Mother’s frequent convalesces. Miss Mary had no children or family of her own save us.

“You didn’t,” I said, fists firm at my sides. “You can’t.”

Celia lifted her chin as though height meant power and folded her arms across the looseness of the blue silk robe she wore which—I swear it, even now—once belonged *to my mother*.

“I can, and I did. A needless expenditure, she. We must be careful with our coins, child.”

Tell that to the curtains and pillows.

She tapped a slippered foot. “Tea, child. In my room. I will be waiting.”

Indeed she would.

I exited my room without a word, descended the stairs, and slipped out the front door in nothing but my night shift and the light, ivory robe I’d favored during my isolation.

The cool morning air sent a chill through my bones, and though the earth’s pebbles stung my feet, returning inside the house for comfort did not once enter my thoughts.

I crossed the courtyard and slid on my belly underneath the front gates, staining not only my robe and shift, but also my own limbs with scrapes that bloomed tiny streaks of bright red blood.

Speed and quiet were my companions, lest Celia burst from the house and drag me back into the kitchen. I expected I had as long as a kettle should take to boil before she realized I hadn’t turned left at the bottom of the staircase.

The sting of scratches drove me onward, each piercing stone in

my feet a distraction from the pain of abandonment.

I saw few faces along the road, and those who saw me simply nodded and continued as they were. The town knew our family and our sorrow. Perhaps the strangeness of a barely-clothed girl in town spurred pity instead of shock, or perhaps they secretly admired my boldness.

I suspect the former.

A strange feeling crept over me as I made my way down the dusty roads on the town outskirts, where the more fortunate citizens—such as my successful merchant father—had built their dwellings. Living just outside town limits provided more space than the closer, smaller homes, and offered a little more freedom from some of the stricter regulations that, out of necessity, came from living within a well-functioning inner city.

Upon reaching the cobbled streets that led toward city center, I realized that several weeks had passed since I last set foot upon this stretch of road. There to my left? The butcher's shop, from which I'd ordered the foods to sustain us through our period of grief, and there to my right, the quaint storefront of Mother's favourite dressmaker. A lump formed in my throat at the sight of one place in particular.

The jeweler's.

I owned many of the jeweler's skillfully crafted pieces, some which were conceived of and designed by none other than Liesl, his daughter and my dearest friend.

Ah, Liesl. The sister of my heart, she'd endured my mourning, my silences, and my weakness in the past year with a patience that knew no bounds. Indeed, I knew no other person with as strong a will as my dear friend. Her yellow hair and plump figure had caught the eye of several gentlemen in town in recent memory, but so far as I knew she'd held her ground and refused to be swayed by any—despite the advantageous social status a marriage to one of

these men could provide.

I did not blame her for her caution. As a jeweler's daughter, it was doubtless difficult to be certain of the sincerity of a proposal, lest the gentleman be more interested in the holdings of the family business.

I had not seen Liesl in weeks. We'd seen little of each other as of late regardless, an unfortunate effect of growing up and of my involuntarily assumed position as lady of the house—but I hoped she also still held me in her heart, in some way. When this—whatever *this* was—ended, I would seek her out and tell her the tale of my subverted freedom. And pray that her patience with me had not fully waned.

I continued along the still-dry streets—a far more comfortable journey than walking unshod would be once the day began and the roads filled with horses and their puddings—and traversed the market square of town center. Several sleepy merchants had arrived early to claim prize positions along the perimeter of the square, though they remained fully engaged in their tasks and did not spare me a glance. I veered right at the King's Arm, and though it was quiet at this time of morning, it wouldn't be long before travellers and town-dwellers alike broke bread together over a pint of ale or beer and a tall tale.

Ah, but young ladies such as myself were not to know of these things, or so I imagined Celia would say. Tell that to my father, who I suspect favored the Sunday evening minstrel for my eventual betrothal. We teased my mother mercilessly about this, before. She would laugh and shake her head, call me a mere girl barely of age to braid her hair, let alone dream of marriage.

I didn't, really. But anything was worth hearing her laughter during the days of illness, and it was a way for both of us to cling to the familiar.

A gust of lavender-scented wind twisted through my loose hair, and I let it carry me further down the cobbled road until it turned to dirt again, and just beyond that still.

My feet came to rest in front of the Church of the Holy Paraclete. The grand cathedral, lovelier than most due to the King's generous donations—or so I'd heard—stood as it had for centuries, its two outer spires seeking heaven. I'd often wondered if they were the only ones.

I had no need of confession this morning, despite recent defiance. I believed God would accept my actions as necessary under the circumstances, and so my visit to the Holy Paraclete held other purposes.

Onward past the cathedral was a field of mournful stones: short, standing, or flat against the ground. Others were carved with images to comfort and celebrate the lives of those who'd gone before.

An iron fence surrounded the field, and although on days past I'd had to climb over it in a most unladylike fashion, on this day, the gate—usually locked—stood open. Whoever had left it so had clearly never heard of the dangers of roaming spirits.

I slipped through the gate and breathed deeply, allowing the scent of hazel and lavender to envelop my being with the peace I sought. I closed the gate.

Under a hazel tree, in the center of the field, rested the one thing I ached for above all else.

“Mother,” uttered my lips, as my feet carried me toward the simple, marble stone she'd requested. On one half, her name and year of passing, with a tiny, shallow cross. On the other half, emptiness. It waited for *her* other half, who'd since betrayed us all.

A piercing pain in my right foot sent me pitching forward, knees scraping the flattened earth before my mother's grave.

I pulled my knees to my chest and brushed off the dirt before

inspecting the source of pain. A green, spiky seed jutted from my heel.

Devil's weed. I drew the bulbous spires from my flesh. "Did you do this, Mother?"

But she hadn't, though I couldn't have faulted her spirit if she had. With Celia for a replacement, I'd send spiny thorns into my daughter's feet too.

I crawled on the hard, grassy ground until I leaned against her stone, eyes closed, face tilted to the misty gray sky. In the stillness of the early morning, it was easy enough to imagine her next to me. Though certain it was a trick of the mind and my yearning combined, I could have sworn the air grew warmer, the breeze softer with her memory. I felt awash in her spirit as the scent of lavender and hazel grew stronger and stronger, until I had utterly convinced myself that she must be gazing upon me from her place of glory in heaven.

"He's gone," I whispered to her, though who is to say whether the spirits hear or listen? Perhaps they can only see us from far above. "Oh, Mother, forgive us ... "

"I'll forgive you if she won't," said the empty graveyard.

My lids flew open as one small drop of saltwater escaped along the curve of my cheek.

A boy—or perhaps rightly, a man—stood a mere ten paces from where I sat, smartly dressed in a navy riding suit and an obtrusive gold medallion, but without a horse in sight.

And although I'd strode through town without a second thought for my apparel or lack thereof, I drew my robe closer and tighter and pulled the long shift overtop my ankles.

He stared with an intensity that rivaled a priest at mass.

I did not speak.

He did not bother to understand my subtle hint.

“What are you doing in a graveyard in your night clothes?” His voice was rich, deep, and twinged my nerves.

When I didn't respond, he sighed and slipped out of his long coat. He held it out toward me and stepped closer.

I must have cringed, for he stopped and raised his other hand in surrender.

“I'm not going to hurt you. I just thought you might be cold in that, ah ...”

“I'm fine.” I didn't want his coat. Nor his pity. Nor even a slight measure of his company.

“Please,” he said, still advancing, “a girl like you shouldn't be out during these early hours unaccompanied, let alone in your state. People might talk.”

A girl like me? In my state?

I would have asked after his meaning, had I cared. Instead, I stated with patience, “Please go.”

“I'd be a terrible gentleman if I did.”

“And you fancy yourself one for gaping at a girl in nightclothes once she has asked you to leave?”

He laughed and I admit, it was a sweet sound on a dark morning.

But I could not have him here.

“I suppose you're right, miss, but there are terrors about these days, and it'd be a sin to leave you to them.”

Terrors? “I haven't heard of anything.”

His eyes grew wide like saucers, as though terrors were as common as cows. “What about the royal proclamation?”

“What about it?” I spat the words rather than acknowledge my ignorance. Nearly a week locked in my own room and the world had fallen to terrors, whatever they might be.

His brow furrowed as he watched me like some kind of newly

discovered curio. “I don’t mean to frighten you if you don’t know. It’s best I let your father tell you on his own time.”

Mother, give me patience. “Frighten? Please. Do try.”

Another laugh, and a toss of the coat in my direction. Rather than allow it to lie in the dirt, I picked it up and draped the heavy fabric across my shoulders.

“I won’t,” he said, “but it’s regarding spirits and death and so forth. Not something a lady ought to be bothered with, in the end.”

I would bet one silver coin that *he* left the gate open. And he thought to lecture me about spirits?

I uncurled my legs and braced against Mother’s stone to stand up. Without another word, I crossed the space between stone and gate, ignoring the ache from where the thorn had pierced my heel.

At the gate, I slipped off the coat and draped it across the first link of iron fence.

Foolishly, I spared him a glance, for it occurred to me that once again, I had forgotten about the eyes.

“What’s your name?” I asked, though I didn’t care.

A smile replaced the creases of worry, and he touched his forehead while placing an arm across his middle to bow in the formal manner of noble men.

“William. At your service, my lady.”

He drew upright to meet my eyes, and afterward I thanked God that the iron gate had been there to halt my backward stumble.

Like a crack of lightning in the clear night sky, there was nothing sharper in his eyes than pure, unadulterated goodness.

But more than that, something stirred within my belly as our eyes met.

Something I could not afford, nor did I want any part of.

I had learned all too well that the allowance of love brought nothing but sadness.

5

The Coat

I left William and his warnings in the graveyard, with a fervent prayer that our paths never cross again.

I couldn't bear it.

As an afterthought, I had taken William's coat off the fence and draped it back across my shoulders, though at the time, I knew not why.

Now, I can see as through crystal: I was trying to keep a piece of him with me, a reminder, perhaps, or a promise that he might need to seek me out to retrieve it.

As I walked home, however, the stirrings were easily ceased by the journey, for the town had finally awoken and come forth to conduct the day's business. The town square was awash with stalls of fresh fruit, vegetables, and foreign cloth in a variety of colors unseen in common garb. Several familiar faces nodded in polite recognition, and one gentleman struggling under a weight of iron pots—why he didn't sell them in a shop, I cannot say—called to bid me good health and happy morning. I replied in kind, though

my torn feet and the circumstances which brought me to the town square at such an hour defied both his blessings.

I noted, as I passed by, that the door to the jeweler's shop stood open—and as my friend had no love of rising before dawn had well passed, I continued onward.

I arrived home, feet aching and further bloodied from the devil's weed, leaving trails of precious red liquid in my wake. Would that those were the only trails of blood to my name.

As I crossed the threshold, Edward bounded down the stairs, wild and panting.

"Ellison!" He stopped a mere hand's breadth from where I stood, the worry on his face almost more than a sister could bear. "Stepmother is very upset with you." He took a heavy breath, full of panic and fear. "She's threatened a whipping."

A whipping? For a lack of tea?

She wouldn't get far on her threat, seeing as how we didn't own a whip. Not for horses, nor for people.

"She won't." I spoke with all the confidence of an impudent child. "She wouldn't dare. If Father found out, he'd divorce her presently." A thought occurred. "Though perhaps that's not such a bad idea—"

I stopped the jest at seeing Edward's blanched face and knelt to embrace him instead. If Father wouldn't hold us, I saw no reason not to do it ourselves. I certainly couldn't see *her* ever doing so.

His tiny eyes filled with tears as we pulled apart, leaving me to wonder what she'd dared say in his presence.

Words bubbled from his pouted lips. "Stepmother says Father has gone to market. And Miss Mary—"

"Will return in due course." I'd make sure of it. "And Father is on one of his trips, is all. He'll be back before you know it."

God forgive my lying tongue.

Edward sniffed and blinked as one does when crying, and I sought a handkerchief from the pockets of William's coat. I found one inside the inner breast pocket, but as I drew it out, a small object slipped from between the folds of fabric. It plummeted to the floor, bouncing three times before skidding to rest underneath the grandfather clock.

With a shout, Edward dove to the floor and reached for it. I admired his lack of hesitation. In my hand he deposited a wide-banded gold ring with a circular, engraved face.

The ticking of the clock ceased.

My blood flowed like syrup.

The face of the ring was engraved with a seal. I had seen this before, on bulletins in the town square, on sealed letters, on a flag that flew high above the people on a tower even taller than the heaven-reaching church spires.

This was the royal seal.

I had met the Prince.



I tightened my fist and smiled at my brother, though truly I fought to contain the contents of my stomach.

I might as well have walked into the palace, insulted the Queen, and stolen the King's crown. I might as well have asked to be arrested.

No. I would not allow Edward to be left here alone with that woman.

"What is it?" Edward peered at my fist and tapped a knuckle. "Can I see?"

I shook my head and searched for yet another lie. "Just an old bit of brass, nothing more. Thank you for retrieving it."

It was then he noticed my coat. “Are you wearing a man’s clothes?”

I tousled his wild hair, the color of breakfast tea, and slipped the ring into my robe pocket. I remembered only then that this pocket already had an occupant—the item Father pressed into my hand that morning.

I still hadn’t dared look, lest it speak a truth I was unwilling to hear.

“Does Celia still want for her tea?” I asked.

As children are wont to do, he’d already forgotten his first question.

“I don’t know, but she’s very angry.”

“She didn’t hurt you, did she?”

His confusion was all the response I needed. I grasped his shoulders and turned him in the direction of the library. “Why don’t you head in there? Choose a book, and I’ll come along shortly. We’ll read it together. Would you like that?”

“Would I!” Like a shot, he ran full tilt, leaving me in an empty hallway with nothing but a pilfered coat and the royal insignia. I needed a place to hide them. If the Prince came looking—or worse, a contingent of palace guards—how could I explain myself?

No matter if I told the truth. It wasn’t my fault that William—*Prince* William—had been so stupid as not to wear it in public. Why he would choose to do so was beyond my imagining, but far be it for a merchant’s daughter to cast judgment on a royal.

Regardless of reason or purpose, they could still have my head for it.

And I rather preferred having a head.

END OF SAMPLE