

BROUGHT LOW

A story from the singer they bought for a loaf of bread.

Impossibly small, a girl stood painfully on the tips of her toes to see into a barrel, hoping for some fresh water or a bite to eat. Craning to see over the lip of the wood, the little girl missed the calculated stare on her back. “What are you doing?” The voice sounded like Sunwing down, refined and dignified. Still, its sudden intrusion jarred her enough that she fell backward, landing on the uneven path in the alley.

“N-Nothin’, s-sir!” The girl squeaked, squeezing her eyes shut as she braced for whatever punishment this stranger might dole out.

“Do you need a drink? Food?”

The question threw her off-canter even more than his sudden appearance had. Gelspar wasn’t a place to help each other, and any sort of notion otherwise should be met with a keen amount of cynicism, unless you wanted to find a knife plunged deep into your gut. Chancing a peek through one eye, the girl noted his boots first—the soles were thick, not worn down from use, and the material looked like a soft, brushed leather that was no doubt more expensive than the sum of everything she had ever owned or stolen. His fingers ran over the pinion clasping his cloak together—the engraving on it caught her attention, but she did not recognize that particular insignia. A candelabra with three candles, encircled with waspish vines, gave the clasp an air of regality. Down here in the skiffs, the man looked ripe for a mugging.

“Are ya lost?” She blurted out the question. Concern was threaded into her tone, but the forward approach could have been perceived as impolite. Crimson blossomed in her cheeks when she realized, and she shyly looked down at her feet. “I mean, ya don’t look like yer from ‘round here.”

“No, I had some... business to attend to.” He chuckled instead of elaborating just what sort of seedy dealings had him rubbing elbows with the rank and file. “You still have not answered my question.” Tilting his head, he pondered what would become of this girl if she stayed here in the filth, and could only imagine a grizzly end. “Are you hungry?” His tone was kinder.

She met his gaze then, clearly befuddled by a display of humanity from a stranger. Narrowing her eyes, suspicion played in her expression as she checked his hands for a weapon. “Definitely not from ‘round here.” She stated, dusting herself off after she rocked back up onto her feet. “Livin’ in the Droops—”

“—The *Droops*?” He questioned with a tilt of his head, the moniker entirely unfamiliar to him.

“Ya know, Gelspar.” She paused as if that alone fully explained her logic for the name. “‘Cause it just hangs from the rest of Adriel.” She said, pointing a small, ruddy finger upward, beyond the stacks of sheet metal. “Drooping from away the rest a’ people.”

Following the point of her finger with his eyes, he nodded as he understood, taking a step toward her. This far down in the underbelly of Adriel, the simplicity of the description fit the district well.

“Anyways, livin’ in the Droops means yer just waitin’ for starvation or the Chasers to take ya. Or maybe even the Twistmist to flood the district. One of those.” Her shoulders rose up toward her ears in a shrug at the idea, as though the likelihood of the latter did not intrude upon her daily life. The way she dubbed the Miasma the “Twistmist” made it evident that falling victim to the noxious cloud beneath their home was the least of her concerns.

“I see.” Calculating what the girl might become if she were raised in different circumstances, the merchant stayed silent for a few more moments. There was an intelligence in those eyes, a beauty beneath the layer of grime. “What is your name?” The merchant asked gently as he finished his appraisal, kneeling down so as to better match her height and appear less imposing.

“No one ever bothered to give me one.” She admitted, more matter-of-fact than such a sad statement had right to be. “But the other kids call me Dull.” Most of the orphans like herself were just called some sort of expression or colour. Obviously, few in the district had any effort to spare in giving the kids a sense of dignity.

“And what if it could be different? What if you could live up there?” Reaching over to her, his fingers lifted her chin toward the upper parts of Adriel.

Though merely a child, she simply laughed, shaking her head in a way that the tangles of brown hair circled her head in the air. As if people like her could escape the clutches of poverty. Grabbing onto the small, stuffed bunny fashioned from scraps of cocoa bags, she rested her chin against the flabby head and gave the idea a moment of thought. The squeeze wafted a sweet smell that provided a level of comfort, the fleeting scent of what the bag once contained, while also banishing the putrid stink of the slums. She knew not what cocoa was nor what it looked like; the bag that it came in was as close as someone like her could come to such a luxury.

Glimmering eyes peered upward, brightening as a fanciful dream took flight. Her gaze seemed to go beyond the stacks of sheet metal, beyond the heavy chains that held this world tethered to its betters. Her fingers danced, her fist opening and closing as she fought against herself to reach out toward the horizon, as if the mere motion might finally bridge the impossible distance. To her, the soaring airships looked like bright, dangling trinkets she could pluck from the sky with her tiny hand, holding the weight of her entire future between thumb and forefinger. But then, the fragility of the thought struck her; the light in her eyes dulled, and she pulled her hand back, curling it into a tight, defensive knot. She did not dare to dream—dreaming was a luxury that cost more than a girl like her could afford.

All of the kids had a fascination with the world above them, but it was only when visitors such as this man came to ‘slum it’ that they were given any sort of fuel to feed the imagination. She dreamt of flowers, the streets lined with so many that the air smelled sweeter, perhaps even like her little bunny. The floors of their buildings had to be even and without the mud and the muck they tracked everywhere. The buildings themselves were probably made all in one sort of material, like a perfect circle that just seamlessly fit together. Their textures must have been softer, and the view of the Azure must have spanned for miles and miles, with them being so far from the lower reaches of the skies.

Up there, she would have a family—a mother to hold her hand as they passed through the markets selling shiny beads and proper toys. A father who held one of those pretty parasols to shade her from the oppressive afternoon sun. She would have a real pillow, stuffed with feathers instead of dried grass.

“...I suppose...”

A faint, ethereal smile flickered across her face before vanishing into the layer of grime, her mind struggling to grasp the weight of his proposition or articulate the swell of longing in her chest. Hope was a phantom language she had never been taught to speak. Before she could bridge the silence, the merchant's fingers closed around her own, and with a sudden, decisive pull, he began to guide her away. The confession she might have made was swallowed by the shadows of the alley, a fragment of her old life discarded on the uneven stones.

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Dirty floors and troughs of stagnant water slopped in the small dips of the cobblestone at the threshold of a home that always left her streaked with filth—echoing her place in society. Though with a quick glance about the place, few might have deemed it worthy of such a name. The ill-fitted door hung precariously on one tilted hinge; the wide berth had always allowed the rain and muck to sweep in with the wind, caking every surface. More aptly described as a den than a sanctuary for the unwanted, the small area used all of the space—a rickety table next to the fire pit for prepping food also served as a place to store their plates. A water spout jutted through a jagged tear in the sheet metal wall, and piles of ruddy scraps for blankets covered the remaining area of the floor. There remained only one partitioned “room,” separated by a platform and a ladder, with sheets hanging from the ceiling to serve as walls. He guessed that the matron had claimed the space as her room. Privacy was obviously a luxury that only the aged in Gelspar earned. Even still, this shelter was clearly unfit to serve as anything but a storm shelter, much less a fully functional orphanage.

If August Montgomery was put off by the place, he kept it well concealed as he gingerly stepped into the hovel and silently counted the makeshift pallets. Based on the sheer number of torn sheets and piles of dried grass to serve as pillows, the tenants must have slept nearly stacked on top of each other. “Good evening.” He said, dipping his feathered hat in an act of reverence for the girl's caregiver.

“What sort of trouble did you bring back to us, girl?” Her voice dripped with venom as she lifted a hand with the intent to punish the whelp. “I've told you time and again that you're going to bring the Chas-” Grasping her wrist gently, he halted the effort mid-swing before she could finish her line about the Chaser's guild, and his smile flattened into a thin line. In turn, her gaze raked over his form, and as she took in the rich textures of his garbs, she shrank back and dipped her head in reverence.

“Actually, I was hoping that she might trouble you no longer.” He interrupted, his timbre smooth as he went in for a sale. “This is an orphanage, correct? It seems we might be able to help each other.”

He theatrically looked about the establishment, his disdain clear. “The girl says that life is hard here. That there are too many mouths to feed and not enough resources to make sure everyone gets their fill.” Reaching from under his cloak, he pulled out a soft, fluffy loaf of milk bread from the Red Market. Even to someone ill-used to the finer imports that Adriel offered, the golden colour of the crust conveyed the quality.

She salivated as she caught the wafted fragrance that marked it freshly baked. “Would this suffice as a contract to take her from here?”

He had expected more questions, but the woman's fingers gripped greedily at the proffered food, breaking it open to sample some. "Go on, then." She urged, dismissing them with a bob of her head toward the entrance.

"She will not be back if her parents come looking for her." He warned, expecting a bit more ceremony to "adopt" a child. It had taken no twist of her arm to sell a child so that she might feed the rest of the miserable lot for the night. No consolations, no haggling... That surprised him. He expected the woman to perhaps protest, that her parents were coming back, ask for coin, or have him sign documents. Something.

If the woman had any reservations about trading a child for a crust of bread, she concealed it beneath several layers of raw hunger. But, he supposed... surviving at the edge of starvation could do that. Add to it that the girl was clearly not hers by blood, and he doubted that she would be missed. "Good riddance, I says." She said as her hands made a shooping motion to scoot them along.

The quick transaction almost made him reconsider, but as he took in the orphan's expressive eyes and dark locks, he knew that something of merit could be found underneath the crust of poverty. "Come." He coaxed, a gloved hand motioning toward the threshold. "There is nothing here worth taking."

The girl heaved in a breath, then her insides gnarled into an anxious tangle. She had always dreamed of more. She dreamed of taking air into her lungs, not weighted with soot. Fields of flowers, watching skyships on her back. She longed to be free of fleas and vermin, to have clothes that were more than patchwork sacks ripped and tied back together.

But now, taking a fleeting look at her ad-hoc home... the only thing she had ever known... tears welled within her eyes. Uncertainty painted her horizon. Would the other kids be alright? Would they survive into adulthood? The babe wailed in the corner, and her chest shrivelled as she considered him. Would he make it to his first birthday? Would she ever see any of them again?

"We should leave before it gets too dark." He reiterated.

She stifled a sob, and the tears spilled over onto her cheeks, leaving streaks on her dirty face. She murmured an inaudible goodbye and a series of "I love you's" to her friends before he wrenched her from those final embraces and dragged her to a new life.

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The House of Courtesans took Rhiannon, the girl's new name, in at August's behest. There, what was left of the little girl playing in alleys, scrounging for scraps, evaporated and was replaced with a woman fit to entertain and charm a king. The education of a courtesan included history, arithmetic, literature, art... Anything that might prove useful, might aid in being the perfect consort. She transformed from an urchin wandering the streets in the underbelly of Adriel into a lithe, graceful woman whose visage was fit to fill someone's dreams.

The Merchant lord left her there, expecting that in a few years' time, the courtesans would make her the ideal ornament for his home—obesant, charming, intelligent. What he had not anticipated was to be outbid. Though August had promised the girl that he would return and see to her well-being once her training was complete, the day never came.

A part of her wondered what might become of her if he did not return.

Instead, August watched bitterly as someone else claimed his prize. The girl he had so invested in, acquired from the slums with the intent of making her a great woman within the city, slipped from his fingers and wound up in the care of a noble. His eyes blazed with fury as he watched someone else steal her away. That anger, the way he set his jaw, had left her quaking in what sort of retaliation might follow.

Out-maneuvered, August Montgomery considered her his greatest loss.

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The vapours curled around her feet as the world she lived in plummeted toward the abyssal clouds. Hundreds of screams cried out in terror, not desperate to escape the noxious mist, but the cloaked figures chasing them toward the edge of the district. The swaths of people dove off into the mist, choosing that fate over the hounds nipping at their heels. Paralyzed, consumed by her fear, her fingers gripped her throat, as though it would fix her silence. Sheets of metal clanged against the ground, and when she looked up, the city above was obscured as menacing eyes pierced her very soul.

Searching for her voice again, nothing came, and the scene in front of her shifted back to reality. A crowd of people stared at her expectantly. The notes of a violin played behind her; she missed her cue, and she felt a tug on something at her back. A rope? She saw them then, tethers at her wrists, felt the ones digging into her scalp, shoulders, and legs. A puppet on strings.

“Sing.” A voice commanded. “Sing, or you’ll find yourself back where you belong.” The miasma crept through the back of the theatre, inching through the audience seating. The vapours only just obscured the moving shadows within them, but she caught the glint of a dagger when one of the lights shifted on the stage.

Her mouth opened, lungs full of air, but no song followed. The person using her as a marionette yanked harder, urging her to comply. The twisting fog rolled closer still, picking up speed on the downward trek, spelling her doom as it filled the orchestral pit and more bodies moved within. Hungrily, it approached her place on the stage, hissing its promise to give the Chasers their opportunity to gut her.

With a sharp gasp, Rhiannon came to a sitting position in her bed. Her skin was damp from the cold sweat that her nightmares had inspired; she absently rubbed her wrists, checking for the cords that someone had been pulling in her dreams. A sigh of relief escaped her when she found them bare. “Just a dream.” She bade her fluttering heart to settle, for her breath to slow. “Just a dream.” She reiterated, the declaration allowing the tension in her shoulders to loosen.

Sixteen years into this luxurious life, and the threat of being tossed back with ‘the trash’ still haunted her. That one of the thugs in the Chasers Guild would find her an inconvenient witness still shook her to her core. Clutching her robes, Rhiannon swung her legs out from under the duvet and touched the sandglass floor with her feet, the motion grounding her back to reality. She was safe here.

Glancing over to the iron-caged window, she noted the sun’s birth on the horizon and how the bustling district never seemed to slacken. Even at this early hour, a myriad of people weaved in and out of the ports. Skyships hovered long enough to exchange passengers, and shops already had their signs out to welcome tourists.

Sighing, she tore her gaze from the window and inspected the full-length mirror in the corner of the room. Rest had not come easily; dark circles under her eyes made her appearance sallow, almost lifeless. Pinching her cheeks to gain some colour, she forced the last dregs of her nightmares aside just in time for her maidservant to swing open the door.

"Time to get ready!" Adrianna bounced into the room cheerfully. "Your first concert in Wingspan... the whole district is abuzz with excitement." She intoned, already pulling out a brush to help temper the singer's hair. "Everyone has likened your performances to those of an angel."

Rhiannon's smile failed to reach her eyes with the stark lack of enthusiasm she felt for this concert in particular. Normally, playing at a new venue brought immense delight at the thought of travelling and being able to experience different parts of the world.

Indeed, a concert at the Span's recently renovated opera house should have served as a cause for celebration. But a knot of anxiety formed within her breast any time she thought about being here.

What if *he* came? A shiver trilled down her spine, and she swallowed a lump of air. Would he still be angry? Would she recognize him? Would he even know it was her?

Her eyes flitted open to catch her reflection, barely able to recognize the woman in the glass. Her long brown hair shone in the dancing candlelight, falling behind her shoulders in cascading waves. Her carefully applied makeup, her artful gown, within the hour she was the picture of perfection... But the serenity that her appearance conveyed hardly represented the turbulence she felt within. "Perhaps I can sing something new... perhaps something I wrote as a way to celebrate." She mused quietly, attempting to coax her spirit to feel the joy her maidservant did.

But the man in the doorway crossed his arms as he inspected their progress. "We've talked about this." Annoyed by the tired conversation, he stepped toward the women, determined to squash any pregnant longings before they could bear any fruit.

"I know that the songs are chosen ahead of time, but I think—"

He cut her off there, his voice hard as steel. "This performance, especially, given the locale. That voice is more than just talented, Rhiannon." Her songs were meticulously selected for her. Her voice served as a tool, a vehicle to spread whatever message they chose. And with certain merchants reaching for that which was not theirs to control, they needed the not-so-subtle reminder.

Though Kendrick Maddox had not been the man interested in purchasing her, the Council sought to punish his peers—remind them of their betters. They needed to remember that they trifled with matters beyond their ken. Perhaps with this message, the other merchants might band together to pressure the Baron to retire his aspirations of becoming one of them. He was an ant that needed to meet the sole of their boots by whatever means necessary.

"Yes, your Grace." She dipped her head in reverence, her countenance trained into neutrality.

Lifting her chin so that he might meet her eyes, he shook his head, feigning sympathy for the briefest of moments. "Never forget your place, Rhiannon." Her place in society relied solely on his continued benevolence, and on a whim, he could throw her back to squalor—a fact that he lorded over her head when he saw fit. Her life hung just as precariously as Gelspar, but a few chips more from the hearthstone, and they would see it plummet into the miasma. One mistake too many and she would experience that descent for herself.

"Of course, your Grace." Trapped in a world of glittering things, the singer could never forget the leash that still held her. Starved of her own choices, her soul clawed at her insides, desperate to escape. As with most

born of her circumstances, she had never anticipated making it to adulthood. Now she had to wonder if that would have been a mercy. "I overstepped. It was my mistake."

"You are forgiven." He said after a moment of deliberation. "Stick to what we give you."

Once, as a girl, she told a merchant that if she no longer had to struggle to even survive, she might get the chance to fly. That day, he inspired hope within her that her life could be more. What she had not expected, never dreamed, was that this life in a different stratosphere would only serve as another cage, that they, too, would stifle her ability to try.

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The bustling vitality of the Span tugged at Rhiannon's senses, a welcome distraction that briefly quieted the gnawing apprehension in her chest. Her focus splintered across the vibrant marketplace, where every stall whispered of distant horizons. Rich tapestries, woven with motifs from territories far removed from Adriel, hung beside craftsmen meticulously shaping strange, lion-visaged creatures from a dark, alien timber. Delicate ornaments of kiln-fired sand-glass woven together with what was described as "coral"—an exotic treasure supposedly harvested from the depths of some vast, watery expanse known as a "sea"—coiled into intricate, spiralling designs, each punctuated by the muted gleam of smoky agates. Driven by an inexplicable allure she could not name, she picked out a pair of verdant earrings and adorned her ears with the sea-green composite shimmering with the quiet promise of the depths.

Even the spices and foods smelled exotic, promising new experiences in every bite. Sampling some of the crispy rice in triangular shapes, she nodded once when one of the staff for her 'family' cleared her throat and indicated her time flouncing about the district had come to a close.

"You need to get ready."

"I'm coming." She uttered after nearly choking down the last bites of her snack. Dabbing her fingers with a towel, she followed the maid back to their rooms.

An hour later, she stood behind the maroon curtains and listened as the hushed whispers of the audience started to quiet. The orchestra played, the faint notes of a violin signalling the start of the concert. The curtains pulled back with the whisper of velvet brushing against itself, and the lights within the house dimmed.

Nervously, she wondered if August Montgomery would be somewhere in the sea of seats, if he would be interested in learning what his sponsorship had cultivated. Closing her eyes, dark eyelashes dusted her cheeks as she took a breath, and flashes of that day burned into her eyelids. The bread he had presented lingered more than anything else.

A small, secretive smile broke her angelic expression. Just what was the price of bread?