

Lisandra looked down at the small, red and grey feathered corpse on her balcony. She had never seen a red cardinal anywhere closer than the Nettles, usually too wary of the smoggy heights of the city. A small pang of homesickness took her and she placed her mug of coffee on the stone palisade to crouch down by the small thing.

"You shoulda stayed at home," she gently scolded the dead creature, reaching a hand out. "At least ye have family there. Not just a smoggy balcony to a pretty apartment of empty rooms ye can never invite them te see."

As she spoke, tendrils of pale golden light drifted from her fingers, seeping into the bird's form. As she lifted her palm carefully upward, the ethereal form of a cardinal rose to follow the gesture, until the pale spectre of the poor bird stood. With a half-hearted smile, she extended her hand and the cardinal hopped into her palm, chirping softly as she rose and placed it down beside her mug.

"The ol' man always told me to plan ahead on a long con," she sighed, settling down on her elbows and watching the spirit hops and flutter across the palisade. It tilted it's little head curiously, chirping softly. "Now his lungs are gettin' worse and I can't even be there without gettin' tangled up in me own net. He's always been there fer me... it just feels... wrong."

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"... What happened? Did the prince really marry someone else?"

The tiny redhead clutched her old blanket tight, brow furrowed with worry as she stared up at Otis. The man chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly as he realized perhaps his choice of bedtime story may have been ill-advised.

"Uh... well, she returned to the sea," he replied, purposely glossing over the part where the little mermaid was tasked with killing the prince but instead turned the blade to herself as the tide came in.

"But she gave up being a mermaid for him!" the girl protested, scrambling up a little into a full sitting position. "Did she drown?"

A groan came from one of the other pallets in the room and Connor rolled over with a scowl on his face. "No, she grew back a tail and swam off back to her family, Ly. Go to sleep!"

Otis hushed the boy, who promptly rolled over and stuffed his pillow over her head with a sigh. Lyrie frowned, wriggling back down into her sleeping pallette and letting Otis tuck her back in.

"That's so dumb," she muttered. "I'd never give up being a mermaid princess fer some guy who just ends up runnin' off with the first pretty voice he hears. Boys are so dumb."

"I can still hear you," Conon's muffled voice made its way through his pillow.

"Good!" she called back.

"Oi now, you two... knock it off," Otis scolded, his pointed look settled on Lyrie and she rolled her eyes and snuggled down into the blanket.

"... Okay... okay, fine... I'm sleepin'," she relented, sounding a little crestfallen that her diversionary tactics were coming to an end.

"I know it's not your favourite activity, love..." he sympathized. "But everyone needs rest. Little ones more than most."

Otis handed her the mermaid doll from the crate beside her bed and gently ruffled her hair before easing himself to his feet and grabbing the cane rested against the old chair.

"Alright, ya rascals... I'll see you all in the morning..." he chuckled and snuffed out the candle by the door leading into the main house.

Lyrie watched his limping silhouette leave before settling in properly and hugging the doll close to her.

*... please don't let them come... please.*

The girl squeezed her eyes shut tightly, hoping another dead soldier, riddled with war wounds wasn't going to turn up at her bedside looking for their wife or child.

*... please don't let them come...*

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Lisandra glanced down at the spectral bird, jumping curiously between damp spots of tears that dotted the pale stone of her balcony. With a frustrated sigh, she wiped her cheeks and frowned down at the spectre.

"Shut up," she sniffed. "You're cryin'."

With a delicate dab of her fingertips, she tried to salvage her makeup and sighed. It was hard to stay mad at Connor, knowing he was being stupid for the right reasons. She sank back onto her elbows, lifting a hand up for the little bird to hop up onto her finger. Its little crested head tipped to the side as it chortled at her curiously.

"I wish I knew how te speak bird," she sighed, "... and knew where that fool Connor was stayin'. I could send ye out te spy for me before you disappear to... wherever spirits go when they're gone..."

The cardinal's tail bobbed up and down as it balanced on her finger, twittering up at her.

"Instead, I'm just gonna worry about him and complain to a dead bird like it's somehow useful."

Maybe Gaelan wasn't the only medium in Flint who was going a little crazy...

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"So? What's the damage, shark-boy?"

Lyrie called down from one of the old stacks of crates that dotted the pier. Connor's dark mop of hair bounced as his head swung up in her direction, raising a hand to shield his bright green eyes from the sunrise reflections off the bay. Shoving a leather pouch into his pocket he bounded forward, hoisting himself up beside her by the thick, salt-crusted netting.

"Ladies first," he grinned, bringing a knee up to rest his elbow on as he side. "How'd you make out tonight? You left the tavern while I was still cleanin' out the pockets of those traders from Ber. Wimp out early?"

Lyrie raised a brow in mock offense, producing a leather pouch from the folds of her skirt that looked relatively and tugged the string closure open with a grin.

"Saw a fancy carriage heading up through to North Shore and thought I'd take a chance on a big hit," a glow grin crept over her face as her fingers slipped in and produced three gold coins. Her grin broadened at the slack jawed expression on Connor's face. "Three gold, eighteen silver, thirty-two copper. I'm loaded!"

"Ugh, birthday girl luck," he groaned, pulling a face as the boasting little redhead held up one of her fabled gold coins to the rising sun in victory. "How'd you manage that?"

"Fancy carriage had a fancy lady in it. She had one of those Crysilli accents, talking to her driver about some charity event in North Shore..." she started, tucking the coins away and leaning back on her hands to appreciate the morning sun starting to turn the horizon a mix of reds and pinks. "...and not like those fat birds we have in Flint who think buyin' Docker art is charity. She actually sounded concerned. So cut through the workers alley and caught the back of the carriage with a fist and drove in the mud with a cry that'd make anyone's mother freak. She was the perfect mark for a sob story and was so worried about hittin' me, she insisted on covering any treatment."

Lyrie looked like the cat that had eaten the canary, her cheshire grin unstoppable. She glanced at her scruffy companion with no attempt to hide her smugness. "So, do I win?"

Connor didn't even bother to pull out his pouch, he just rolled his eyes and leaned back beside her with a sigh. "Yeah... I almost made three gold in silver and copper pieces. I'd have beaten three easily if I hadn't spent some on a present for you..."

He tempered a grin as she perked up beside him.

"Whaddya mean you got me a present?" she asked, peering at him curiously.

"Well, since you're sixteen today, I figured it was in order," he scratched the barely-there stubble on his chin. "But... you're so loaded, nothin' I can afford would be nearly that impressive... I should just go return it..."

Lyrie swivelled to face him, sat on her knees with a pout that threatened to break his poker face.

"Aw c'mon..." she tugged his shirt, making a show of her best set of puppy-dog eyes, "Y'can't leave me hangin' after that... what did ye get me?"

Connor squinted out towards the ocean, pretending to consider her request as he leaned back on his hands.

"I dunno..." he watched her in his periphery. "It was such an impulse spend... really irresponsible of me..."

"Conor..." she whined, throwing her head back with exasperation before lunging at him, graping for the pockets.

The young man curled in and grabbed at her hands, bursting out laughing as he snatched the gift up and out of sight, holding his arm out wide where she couldn't reach. "Alright, alright! Easy, or we'll both end up fallin' in the drink."

Lyrie sat back and crossed her arms. A few of the dockers shot them curious looks for the outburst as they began getting settled into their work for the day. Connor kept his hand tightly balled into a fist as he brought it across to rest on his knee between them, and uncurled his fingers.

Her curious expression dropped as the morning light hit the bottle-green glass pendant that sat in the center of the boy's hand. Shaped into the graceful shape of mermaid, the sea glass was polished smooth and hung from a thin strip of leather.

"Where'd you get somethin' like that?" she breathed, carefully picking it out of his palm to hold it up to the light. The corners of her mouth tugged into an awe-filled grin.

Connor shrugged, "... one of the traders I cleaned out tonight was wearin' it. I offered to give him back some of his coin back if he'd part with it."

He stole a glance in her direction, pausing to watch the veridian prisms dance across the look of delight on her face. Taking the trinket from her grasp, he tugged the large knot closure free of its loop and held it up. She grinned and quickly swivelled her back to him, moving her hair out of the way as he secured the pendant around her neck. As Lyrie turned back, she launched at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and tugging him close.

"Woah..." Connor chuckled, returning the embrace. "What did I say about avoidin' the ocean?"

"I love it so much!" she mumbled into his shoulder. "I'll never take it off!"

The corners of his mouth twitched upward and he rested his cheek against her head with a soft sigh. "Happy birthday, Ly..."

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The pale little cardinal faded out of sight and Lisandra hung her head, her hand reaching up to touch a pendant that wasn't there. She brought her coffee to her lips with a sigh, before frowning at the lukewarm liquid.

"Yeah... happy bloody birthday, Lyrie..."