

HEAVEN THE LONG WAY 'ROUND

BY CINDY RÆ



This little tale is inspired by a bit of Thoreau, the art collection of Allison Duggins, and some of the contents of the Treasure Chambers Museum.

There are some things that just beg for a story to go with them. I hope that if you browse the Museum someday, you'll feel the same. Cheers!

If you'd like to know what romantic images got this story going...

[https://treasurechambers.com/Museum/Fine
%20Art/687BlightonFireRose.jpg](https://treasurechambers.com/Museum/Fine%20Art/687BlightonFireRose.jpg)

<https://treasurechambers.com/Museum/Fine%20Art/703BBprint.jpg>

The author fully acknowledges that Beth Blighton is a magnificent artist, and that her work continues to inspire, to this day.

With thanks, to Allison, for making me more aware of Beth's amazing talent.

Dream, fancy, or flight of fantasy, this little fic is up for the reader to decide. Happy Valentine's Day!



**

*BUT OUR ICARIAN THOUGHTS RETURNED TO GROUND
AND WE WENT ON TO HEAVEN THE LONG WAY 'ROUND.*

~HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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CHAPTER ONE

LONGCLAW



*Once upon a very different and long-ago time, in a place that would
one day (probably) become New York City ...*



“Enough!”

Vincent stood atop the hill, and raised his fearsome sword skyward. Flashing the metal blade in the afternoon sun, he turned LongClaw down and drove it into the loamy earth. “Enough!” he roared again, and every man and woman on the battlefield froze, and knew the fight was done. – at least for the moment.

Weapons clattered to the ground, their sound absorbed by the rich, northern soil. Once, it had been farmland. It had been homeland. But now, it was riven, and drinking blood.

“Enough,” he called again, softer this time, holding every eye with one that carried its own kind of steel. Any hand that still held a weapon, lowered it. Every hand, save one. Hers. Catherine’s.

“Enough,” he said, for the last time, knowing he had the attention of every warrior on the field.

Across from him, She stood, her own sword still held high. She was his opposition; and his opposite, in many ways.

In spite of her wealth and breeding (or perhaps even because of those), she was battle-born and bred, and her army was at her back, just as his was at his. Expensive armor protected Lady Catherine, and a black man who moved with exceptional martial skill guarded her flank. He fought with a stout pole, with a point on one end, and a metal counterbalance on the other. It was more than a staff and less than a spear. It was his weapon of choice, and he’d been wielding it with ferocious energy all afternoon.

Catherine put a restraining hand on her companion’s arm, telling him they would listen to the beast-man on the field, as she slowly lowered her sword. Green eyes that shone with intelligence met Vincent’s, and

held. There was fire in them. Fire, and just a hint of ... something else. It mattered not “what.” They were enemies, here.

She tipped the gleaming edge of her sword down, and drove it into the earth, as well. “Parley,” she declared, matching him. She removed her helmet and handed to an aide. Sandy hair woven into a tight plait was tied off just below her long neck.

The man at her side shot her a look. He clearly wasn’t sure he liked this. “Why? Why, when we have the advantage?” He said it aloud, daring to contradict her. Either he was a trusted friend, or one with orders to speak his mind, no matter what.

“Because I said so, Isaac,” she replied, holding up a fist, then lowering it, signaling the men behind her to hold their positions.

“Do you yield?” she called to Vincent, stepping forward.

“To conversation,” he replied, letting her know this wasn’t the surrender she was hoping for. “And to treat the wounded,” he added.

Catherine nodded, as her own people began to tend those who needed it. It had been a long day, and injuries were obvious on both sides.

Winslow was cradling a deep gash across his palm, and Kanin Evans’ arm hung limply at his side, obviously broken. On her side of the field, Greg Hughes bled from a deep cut across his cheek, and Joe Maxwell was favoring his left leg. Vincent himself had dented much of their armor, and had knocked four men unconscious.

It didn’t matter. There was a legion, behind her.

“It could be a trap,” the black man at Catherine’s elbow advised. “There is no way my lady is going into a tent of yours,” he called. Vincent respected how protective he was of his charge.

"It is not trap," Vincent answered, bringing himself up to his full height. He inhaled, and it strained the banded leather vest he wore, the tough hide almost as thick as armor. There was challenge, in the pose. *Either accept that I'm telling the truth or call me a liar, and fight me.* He might as well have been shouting it.

"If I send you my captain, will you send me yours?" Catherine asked, posing the question with a certain hauteur. She knew he was about to accept her terms.

"Yes," Vincent said, agreeing to the exchange. Vincent nodded at Winslow as Catherine nodded to Isaac. The two black men began walking toward each other, across the expanse of bloody ground. When they passed each other, Vincent could have sworn he heard them both growl.

But both knew their place. The exchange was made. Winslow stood in the enemy's camp, and spit on it, for good measure. Isaac simply handed over his staff to one of Vincent's soldiers.

"Make sure nothing happens to it," he warned.

"Afraid I'll lose your little stick?" Cullen asked.

Isaac shot him a sideways glance. "Saves me from killing you with your shoe."

Vincent shook his head, subtly. The two sides neither liked nor trusted each other. At all. That much was plain.

"See to the wounded," Lady Catherine bid Peter Alcott. He was clearly her physician in attendance.

"Same," Vincent instructed Father. As an odd happenstance, both of the two medical men on the field had met in their respective youths. Life had taken them on different paths, but they did know each other.

“Battlefield injuries. Joy,” Father answered, as Sarah and Randolph dragged an injured Simon from the field. His left knee was shattered. That had been Isaac Stubbs’ doing. On Catherine’s side of the field, one of her lieutenants was nursing a bloody shoulder, while another tested a gimpy ankle. Vincent had no idea who they were.

Topsiders, he thought. They’re all Topsiders, on her side. Of course they are.

“Where shall we adjourn to?” Vincent asked Catherine, still holding the high ground. He tugged his sword from the rich earth, and handed it to Mouse, his page. He knew better than to try and take her away from her guards while he still kept a sword in his hand.

“Neither one of us is... unintelligent enough to step into an enclosed space with the other,” Catherine answered, noting that the big beast had relinquished his sword. If he was planning on killing her, it was going to be with something other than LongClaw. Not that he needed the shining steel. His own fangs and claws looked like the stuff mothers told naughty children about, to get them to behave.

“There’s an open field, near where the forest starts.” He nodded toward the area he spoke of. “We could talk there. It’s... close enough so they can still see you, and far enough away so they can’t hear us. It’s someplace where we won’t be interrupted.” He looked toward the greensward, and to where it sloped down toward a stand of pines.

Catherine eyed the softly rolling land. It was pretty and green, and as yet untouched, by their battle. “It looks like a park,” she observed.

“Perhaps when this is done, we’ll make it one,” he answered, leading the way down.



CHAPTER TWO

“OUR ICARIAN THOUGHTS RETURNED TO GROUND...”



“Your park, Milady. Such as it is,” he said, gesturing, as he let her lead the way. She got right down to business.

“This place is an island. There isn’t enough land. That’s at the heart of this. We need the deep water for a port, so the laden ships can come and go. We need places for commerce, room for homes, passage through the river... ways to barter and trade, with places to receive and store goods...” She was running a laundry list of why her people were laying claim to the land. Also why his and her people mistrusted each other. His simple folk wanted none of that.

“I know what you need. I also know what *they* need, he glanced back toward his clan. And it is not... what you need,” he finished.

Catherine tried to show she understood. "Your people want to live simpler lives. I do understand, Vincent."

I doubt that you do. Still...

He liked the way his name sounded in her mouth. "My people want to not be trampled on, by yours," he replied, ignoring his instinctive reaction to her.

"You could take a boat. Go to the mainland. There's plenty of land there," she reasoned.

"Then you take it. This place is our home. Or it was, until you came."

"My father bought this land."

"We did not... sell it to him."

"You didn't own it."

Vincent sighed. As arguments went, this one was circular. They both knew there was a dispute between her people and his; that the troops at her back were being garrisoned nearby, and that as time went on, they would bring ... everything. Everything that would push his people to the edge, until they finally pushed them off of it.

Her people would bring building supplies, families, business alliances, traders, other builders, mercenaries and fortune-seekers. In short, they'd bring almost everything his people weren't, and had no use for.

She was relentless, in her assessment of the situation. "Vincent... We're a larger force than you are. Much. We have better armor and more weapons. LongClaw aside, and I don't discount its power...", she acknowledged his uniquely etched weapon, "you can't win this. And your casualties will be... devastating," she said, looking back up the hill at the ragtag band of people he called his own. There was a fair

number of them. But they weren't all fighters. And there were children, hidden in the woods, behind the battlefield. She knew as much.

"Would you do that? Cut them down? Destroy them, utterly?" He gestured towards his people, and then looked back at her. "Why? In God's name, Catherine, why? Does one more castle in one more province mean so much to you? To the wealthy? The powerful?"

Catherine raised her head a notch. "This island is strategically located. It's far to the north, but not too far. It's a natural port, with a shoreline where we can build more docks. As a harbor, it's perfect. The water is deep, and the ships can come in heavy-laden. It's easy to defend, and it's... crucial as a place of trade and business. Developed properly... a great nation could rise from it." She wanted him to see it as she did. Developed. Impressive. A place for commerce. A place for people who were very much like her.

"As long as we are swept aside." He knew he was arguing with her. Probably pointlessly. It wasn't that she was heartless. It was that she, like he, felt there was little-to-no other choice, than to fight.

"Vincent... I'm not trying to tell you I think your people have no value, that they aren't... important, in their way." She sounded entirely reasonable. Also like she wasn't budging. "It's just that... this area isn't large enough. There simply isn't enough *room* for all of us. And even if there were... your people and mine..." She shrugged her maille-clad shoulders, searching for a tactful sentence. "Well, they don't exactly trust each other. To put it mildly."

"To put it mildly," he agreed with her on that, at least.

He sighed, and crossed his arms over his well-protected chest. "As you say... LongClaw has a certain... reputation to maintain. Your losses will be steep, as well. My people won't just leave this place."

She took him in, deliberately. From his high, heavy boots, to his patchwork pants, to the wide leather belt that protected his waist, from the banded leather vest he always wore, to the blonde crown of his noble, if fantastic head, he was the picture of strength, grace, and a certain princely kind of stubbornness.

And none of it would save him. Or his people.

Her expressive green eyes begged him to see reason. "Fighting us is... folly. You care for your people, I know you do. You don't want to see them hurt any more than I do."

He considered her as carefully as she'd considered him, before he spoke again. "We may not have to defeat you. We may only have to delay you."

"Delay us?" she asked, curious. *You would reveal your plans to me? How interesting. I know you know better. Is this to see what I would do?*

"Delay you," he repeated. "Until other places look easier to settle. Until the ... business you're so proud of takes place *there*, rather than here. Money likes to grow. It does not like to be kept waiting."

Catherine all but scoffed at him. "And what do you know of what money likes to do, Great Beast?"

Vincent eyed her quizzical expression. *Great Beast. Yes. That is my battle name, on the field.* It was the thing her people had called him before they'd discovered that his given name. Great Beast was the title they knew him by, mostly.

He liked it better when she called him "Vincent."

And he didn't rise to her bait. There was no sense in trading insults with her, calling her "Rich Woman" to his "Great Beast." Besides, he

doubted she *meant* it as an insult. To be fair, both were apt descriptions, of each of them.

“All of us don’t need to fight. Choose a champion,” he suggested, changing the subject. “I’ll face them in single combat. Best me, and by the end of the day, this will all be over. You can write back to your father and tell him you... got rid of the people who used to live here. In the most... *economical* way possible.” He placed emphasis on the word as he held her green gaze. “That should please him.”

Catherine all but chuckled in his leonine face. “Just when I think the New World has shown me all it can, it shows me something else. You’d have me deal away my chief advantage. A lesser woman might be insulted... at being thought such a fool.”

Ah, well. It was worth a try.

“I do not think you a fool.” On the contrary. I think you’re intelligent. I might be able to beat a fool. I don’t think I can beat you.

“I have strength of arms,” she pointed out. “I would never risk it all on the outcome of one brawl.”

She assessed him frankly. “We both know you’re the strongest warrior on the field. An army of more... “people” like you, and you’d be unstoppable.”

But there was not an army of more like him, and they both knew it. There was only one. And even he wasn’t sure where he’d come from, so he could go and get more.

She had no such disadvantage. She could call for many just like her: wealthy people. People with money, ambition, weapons, means, and drive.

He couldn't call on more like himself. There were no more like himself, as far as he knew.

Her logic was relentless, as she let him know she was unimpressed by his strategy in delaying her. "Delays take time, if that's your tactic. You'll starve, come the first hard winter." Her husky voice gentled, as she removed a pair of fawn-colored gloves. Her hands were ringless, and pretty.

"The longer this takes, the more people it will cost - both of us. Don't push things that far, Vincent." It wasn't just a warning. It was also a plea. She had no more love for war than he did. She just didn't know how to get out of this one.

"Every building you try to erect will fall to sabotage. That will be expensive," he parried.

"You can't threaten me."

"I can, actually."

And now they were trading bravado. They both knew neither one would back down.

She blew her breath upward, and the air stirred the soft shirring of bangs that went across her forehead. She tucked her gloves into her belt. "I don't think we're making much progress, as far as negotiations go," she admitted.

"Neither do I," he conceded.

She sat down on a nearby rock, as Vincent reached into his pocket, and pulled out a long crystal, suspended on a chain. He held it up to the sun, but the cloud cover was too thick to make it sparkle.

“What’s that?” she asked, curious. The stone was wrapped with metal wire. It looked lovely, but home-made, not something that had been done by a professional jeweler.

“Something that doesn’t seem to be working,” he replied, watching it dangle, and try to catch one of the sun’s rays. “It’s just a stone,” he clarified. “A good luck charm. A friend found it and made it for me. The... blonde boy who stays near the girl with the crossbow. My... page. His name is Mouse.”

“A good luck charm from a mouse?” Catherine asked, smiling. “Well. Since we’re both confessing to being a touch superstitious...” She tugged at her sleeve and pulled out a softly crumpled white rose.

“A rose?”

She inhaled its crushed-petal fragrance. “My own... good luck charm. One that I was given when I was... less a Catherine and more a Cathy,” she said, remembering her mother’s gift.

You will always be Catherine, to me, Vincent thought, watching her as she regarded her rose.

“Red ones, white ones... I carry one... to remind me that I must be strong... even when I’m afraid.” She inhaled it once more, and tucked it back up her sleeve. She wondered if he ever wore anything tucked up the sleeve of his homespun tunic, and decided he probably didn’t. A pair of silver bracers protected his wrists from injury. His sleeves were loose, and unhemmed.

“Strength is an... important trait,” he replied.

She nodded at that. “More than you know. More than any of us know, probably.” He found the answer a cryptic one, having no way to know she’d nursed a child’s fear of the dark.

“There’s strength in you,” he stated directly. *I know it. I feel it.*

“And in you,” she replied, glad they were at least back on friendly terms.

“Do you believe in heaven, Vincent?” she asked, changing the subject, as he lowered his crystal charm.

He considered her question as he wrapped the chain back around the crystal. “Why? Are you planning on sending me there, with that sword of yours?”

She laughed at his temerity, and much to her surprise, he smiled, as well.

“No.” She looked out at the greensward. “I was just thinking that if they ever made this place into a park, we could plant rose bushes in it, and make paths through the woods. That it would have fountains, and fields of grass, and wildflowers. That ... it could be made to look like the path to heaven, but you’d never be in a hurry to get there, because it would be so lovely. You’d want to stay.”

He imagined the image she’d conjured. A soft, unfocused vision came to his blue eyes. It would be the kind of place where couples strolled arm in arm; a place where children played, and old men sat on wooden benches, enjoying the sun. *Yes. I see it. A path to heaven. One you’d go on slowly, so the journey wouldn’t end too quickly.*

“So... you’d get to heaven, the long way ‘round?” he asked, extending a hand to help her to her feet. When their fingers touched, electricity - or something very much like it - arced between them.

“S-Something like that,” she covered her stammer with the grace of a woman born to it. *Did you feel that?* she thought.

“Perhaps our good luck charms are working after all,” she said, covering. “After all, neither one of us died, today.”

He inclined his head. “No. Not today.”

Green eyes met blue ones. “We’re going to continue to fight... aren’t we?” she asked.

They were. He had no hope for any other outcome. “I admit I can see no other way,” he confessed, tucking the crystal back inside his pants pocket. He never wore it as a necklace.

Admitting defeat, she turned from him and began climbing back up the hill. “Well, then. Let’s take the rest of the day to bandage up our wounded, then start hacking at each other again, tomorrow. Since it looks as if there’s really not much choice.”

Her words made him feel as defeated as he knew his people were about to be. “No. There isn’t,” he said, climbing up after her.

“I’ll set up an encampment. We can always get back to trying to kill each other after we’ve had a decent night’s sleep, and some breakfast.”

He knew she wasn’t as cavalier as she sounded. When they reached the top of the rise, he looked back toward her camp. And his. “I like your man. What’s his name? Isaac?” he said to her retreating back. She turned around.

“Yes. Isaac. Isaac Stubbs. He taught me how to fight.”

“I mean this, truly. I respect his strength, and his devotion to you. I do not look forward to being the thing that will take his life... But that doesn’t mean I won’t do it.”

Catherine blinked at that terrible image. And decided to let him have the last word, as he passed her on the way back to his people.

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CHAPTER THREE

IN THE TENT OF MINE ENEMY



“It’s good to see you again, Jacob,” Peter Alcott said, holding up a bottle of brandy. “Even if we are on different sides.”



“It’s good to be seen,” Jacob replied, indicating a chair. “I take it you’ve had no easier day than I’ve had, if we’re drinking.”

Peter pushed the tent flap aside. “Vincent left a deep gash in a man’s side, where his maille rode up, and he broke another’s arm. And those are the injuries I’m talking about. So, yes. Hard day. You?”

“Same. I set a broken arm, and a leg, and Isaac broke Simon’s nose with that staff of his, and Winslow held his own with Joe Maxwell. Barely.

You're better armed." There was no sense not admitting what both men knew to be true.

Peter shrugged. "Joe has a limp, but it's minor. He'll be fine to hit the field again, tomorrow." He shook his head as he uncorked the bottle. "If they fight again... we'll be calling priests for last rights."

Jacob made no answer to that, as he set two glasses down on a rickety table, while Peter poured.

"It's been a long time since medical school," Peter observed.

"Very long," Jacob agreed. "And you're right about tomorrow. Vincent can't stand the thought. But we need a place to live, Peter."

Peter raised his glass. "Catherine knows you're sheltering at least some few children. But she also knows the name of every man on her side, on that field. They're her friends, the people who helped her father build his business from the ground up. If this goes beyond broken bones and stitches... she'll carry it with her to her dying day."

"Vincent wasn't trying to kill anyone, today. If he had been... you'd be making graves instead of bandages."

"He checked his swing?" Peter asked, as he sniffed his brandy. It was a passable vintage.

"I think so, yes. He doesn't want to kill. But he will, if he's pushed."

The two men touched glasses. "But neither one of them will admit that, to the other. And neither one will back down," Jacob stated, knowing it was true.

Peter shrugged. "They can't. Would you tell your enemy you have no stomach for this fight? That when you think about it, all you see is waste?"

They both took a swallow of the good amber liquid.

Peter set down his glass. "I know her father, Jacob. He's not a bad man. But he's... single minded, when it comes to business. Charles has declared he wants this island. All of it. I'm sorry, my old friend. I truly am."

Jacob knew that no one was sorrier than he was, to hear it. "We'll fight to the last man. We don't know how to... to live with you, Peter. We've never had to. Your laws, your ways... they're strange to us. We're not the wealthy, or the powerful."

Peter understood, and knew Jacob likely wasn't exaggerating. "And your communal ways have no place in business. I know, Jacob. I do. And if you fight to the last man... well. Let's just say that Vincent is going to end up killing a lot of good men before that happens, before this is over." Both men stared glumly into their drinks.

"If the city is built... there will be no green spaces left." Jacob imagined huge spires rising to the sky. Concrete, everywhere. Felled trees and the loss of fields and woodlands. "There will be no room for farms."

Peter refilled their glasses. "If the city thrives and trade is good, there won't be a need for farms. Food will be imported."

Jacob shook his greying head. "My people won't live the way you do. No room to explore. Small houses, stacked side-by-side. Bound to whatever the King wants."

"And mine will never be farmers," Peter sighed. "They want to grow this land. But not as farmland. They want it for business, for trade. Commerce. It's the wave of the future. And half of why this New World is being settled, at all."

"It seems... we are at an impasse, then."

Peter considered that. "What if... what if we aren't?" Peter asked.

“How do you mean?”

“Well... he’s a man, and she’s a woman. Or at the very least, he’s male and she’s female.”

Jacob grimaced. “As facts go, that one hasn’t escaped me. But like so many others, I doubt it does much good, considering.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time a good marriage ended a bad war. Or even a bad marriage ended a good one. Don’t tell me you haven’t thought of it.”

Father had, but he barely dared to speak of it.

“Do you think Catherine would consider it?” Jacob asked. Everyone knew how different Vincent was. *That this avenue was even a possibility...*

Peter shrugged. “It’s a thing she brought up to me before we even got off the ship. A... union of some kind, rather than a fight. It doesn’t solve the fact that you’d still have nowhere to live, however.”

Jacob’s eyes glanced left and right. *If the city succeeds, we wouldn’t need to farm. We could live off their excess. Maybe even... thrive, in the caves beneath the bedrock?*

“That... might not be... exactly true...” Jacob began carefully.

Peter raised an interested eyebrow. “Come again?”

Jacob sighed, knowing he was about to give away a crucial bit of information. “When our scouts... when Mouse was doing reconnaissance... it seems there are caves, nearby.”

“Caves? As in... underground passageways? Tunnels, through the bedrock?”

“Quite a system of them, actually.”

Peter sipped his liquor as Jacob told him more.

CHAPTER FOUR ON THE ADVICE OF COUNSEL...



Joe, Isaac, Greg and Catherine, meanwhile, were having a meeting of their own.

“He tried to talk you into a challenge?” Joe asked a refreshed Catherine. His brow furrowed, some, as he considered that particular angle. “A challenge *might* work,” he proclaimed. “He seems like the type who would go for it.”

“And what type is that, in your opinion?” Catherine asked, turning her head to face him as she set the pearls in her ears to swinging. She was aware she sounded defensive of Vincent.



Joe shrugged. "The kind who doesn't want to lose anybody. We can use that to our advantage."

And do you think I want to lose anyone? She thought it, but didn't say.

"Perhaps," she answered. "Then again, I'd be signing the death warrant of anyone who stepped up to challenge hi-"

"I might be able to take him," Isaac stepped forward. "I've fought big men before. And the bigger they are..."

"The harder they fall," Joe finished for him. "I could do it. I'm better with a sword than you are, and can use my shield. And I'm shiftier."

"You nursin' a limp now. And 'shiftier' ain't gonna save you none when LongClaw comes down. He's got the reach on you. You'd never get inside his swing."

"You think you could?" Joe asked, his voice becoming a touch querulous.

“Staff is longer. Lighter. Faster. More range. That’s what you’d need, in a fight with—”

“Gentlemen!” Catherine interrupted their argument, reminding them she was still very much in the room, tent though it was. She rose from her chair, the picture of queenly grace.

Both Isaac and Joe looked at her.

“I thank you for your counsel. I’ll ... consider what you say.” The men were aware that they were on the verge of being dismissed.

“Why not just overrun them?” Greg Hughes asked, nursing a sore head. “We have the numbers.”

Catherine knew why. *Because if we do, the casualties will be highest, on both sides. Because there are children in the woods. And good people, among the adults.*

“Because the survivors will be enemies, all their lives,” she replied, talking military tactics with military men. “And it takes remarkably little, in the way of explosives, to bring down a building. If we fight... we’d have to wipe them out. Every man, woman and child.” Catherine knew what was at stake. And like any good ruler, she knew it before anyone else did.

Greg blinked, and said nothing to that.

“There’s a young girl on the field. She has a crossbow,” Joe remembered. “Looks maybe seventeen.”

“You want to be the one to put a sword in her? Be my guest,” Isaac offered.

Joe sighed, and rubbed his neck, wearily. He’d fought hard, today. But he didn’t consider himself a butcher. None of them did. Her counselors were at an impasse.

“Leave me.” Catherine ordered her captain and her closest men. “I have much to consider.”

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Catherine wasn't the only leader seeking the advice of her lieutenants.

"We have much to consider. We need to stop this war. You're my council, my advisors. Advise me," Vincent ordered the somber group in front of him.

Winslow scratched his bald head. A white bandage wrapped his palm. "They outnumber us three to one. And they're better armed," he admitted.

"Five," Cullen inserted. "They can send for more men. We can't."

"I already know we're outnumbered. I need a way to win the battle even with that as a consideration," Vincent said tersely. There was no sense rehashing what they all already knew.

"If only we could get them to agree to a one-on-one fight," Winslow lamented. "It would be a tough brawl, but I know you could take their man."

"He broke Randolph's shoulder with that staff of his. He won't go down easy," Kanin observed, his own arm in a fresh plaster cast.

Father spoke up.

"Easy or not, such an arrangement would be to our benefit, not theirs. The Lady Catherine is no fool, to cede the advantage she has, in numbers. She'd never agree to it, I don't believe," Father noted.

"Vincent, you spoke with this young woman. How did she strike you?" he asked, Peter's words from earlier in the back of his mind.

Vincent considered the question. "She's... thoughtful, in her way. Intelligent. She has imagination, and she has spirit. Her father had her educated. She's no fool, as she leads her people." He recalled the look on her face as she'd described a park that wasn't there, yet one both of them could see. "She cares for them. But she knows they have strength of numbers."

“She seem... soft at all?” Winslow asked. They all knew he was talking in terms of personality, not physical attributes.

She did, Vincent knew. But in the long run, that hardly mattered. It wasn’t something she’d let them exploit.

“As I said, she cares for her people. When I called the halt to tend the wounded, she allowed it. I think... I think she has no more desire to see people hurt than we do; that when they came ashore with large numbers, she hoped we’d simply leave, and let them have the land.”

“Fat chance,” Kanin said. He had a baby on the way, and was very protective of his family. “What about the caves? We could go in there. Use them, for cover. Come out and hit them at night, maybe. Guerilla style.”

Vincent considered it. “It is not a bad plan. But we lack enough food for a prolonged campaign.”

“Perhaps we could steal what we need. From them,” It was the first time Mary had added her voice to the discussion.

Vincent sighed. “Mary, if I am them, the guards around the supplies are doubled, and food either impossible to reach, or worse, set out as a trap. Every man we lose to such raiding decreases our numbers further, and impacts them not at all.” Vincent shook his head.

William put in his two cents worth. “If we could get them to follow us down into the caves... then we might do some damage. We’d have the advantage of ground. We’d know it better than they do; set up some traps of our own.”

Yes. We could. We could fight in the dark, and risk a prolonged war. If they find and seal the exits, we’d be trapped, down there. With children.

“Perhaps,” was all Vincent said.

“Or, we could get them to come in through a narrow place. You could take them on one at a time, then,” Pascal knew the tunnels better than anyone, even though they were new, as a find.

Do you honestly think an army would allow itself to be bottlenecked in a hallway? Vincent thought.

“If I’m Catherine, there’s no way I let my army walk into that.” William said pretty much what Vincent had been thinking. “It’s easier just to seal up any entrances they find: starve us out.”

Vincent sighed again, knowing it was the truth. “They want us gone, and we need to stay. We want them to agree to a single fight, and they want a war.” He clasped his hands together, thoughtfully. And wondered how many of their number would be left, a few days from now. They were lucky in that so far, their skirmishes had resulted in wounds, not deaths, on either side.

Father offered up what little Peter had told him. “Peter Alcott says they don’t want a war, actually. That Catherine too, has been pressing her advisors for a way to settle this peacefully. Or at least in the way that spills the least amount of blood.”

“He’s one of *them*!” Cullen shouted mistrustfully. “How can you trust him?”

Father kept his voice neutral. “We knew each other... a lifetime ago. Back when we were both young, and in school. He has no reason to lie to me.” Father glanced back at Vincent. “She doesn’t want this war. That isn’t saying she won’t wage it, but she doesn’t want it.”

She truly does have a heart, then, Vincent thought. It matched well with the impression he’d gotten from her while they’d talked in the “park.”

"There's marriage." Again, Mary spoke rarely, but when she did, she said a mouthful. "I mean to say, if you can't beat them..."

Only you would think that's a possibility, Vincent regarded his sometime-mother figure fondly. "I do not believe she lacks for suitors. Some of whom may be... more to her liking," Vincent said tactfully.

"The suggestion is not... entirely without merit?" Jacob ventured it as a question.

"The suggestion is absurd." Vincent dismissed the notion out of hand, thinking that Catherine would never accept marriage to one such as him.

The Great Beast rose, and made a decision. "People of business are always searching for a good bargain. Perhaps we need to... make the notion of single combat more tempting to them," he mused. Everyone seemed to think that was their only way to win this.

"How so?" Father asked.

"We need to give them an advantage. One they'll be unable to resist. Catherine doesn't want a long war. Those cost money. And those are her friends on that field."

"Same as us," Pascal agreed. "What do you have in mind, Vincent?"

Vincent considered. "Tell Catherine she can choose her champion. For argument's sake, we'll assume that will be either Joe Maxwell or Isaac Stubbs."

"Yeah? So?"

Kanin spoke up. "Maxwell fights in half-plate armor, with a sword and shield. Isaac in banded leather, with a weighted staff. Either one would be a challenge."

Vincent considered a moment, the advantage he was about to give away. Then he decided it.

"I could agree to fight without protection. I will not meet them unarmed. But I could meet them... unarmored," he said carefully.

Winslow vetoed the very notion. "You're talking crazy. If you--"

"If I meet them with no weapon of my own, either man will have me. I'll need LongClaw to parry, at least."

"At least!" Kanin agreed. "You don't think you need armor against Joe Maxwell's sword? He knows how to use it."

"I'll have to hope being lighter makes me fast enough to avoid being struck," Vincent answered.

The veteran fighters at the table knew how unlikely that was. In any fight, blows were exchanged. Some were glancing and some were serious, but sooner or later, each opponent in a fight landed at least one blow. It was almost inevitable.

"You're taking one hell of a chance," Winslow said, slowly coming around to the idea that there was at least some merit to what Vincent was saying.

"It's mine to take. Agreed?" He raised a blonde eyebrow, as the people around the table exchanged looks. Without this mad plan, they were all doomed, and they knew it. With it...

Vincent took their silence as assent. "Tell them then, that I will meet them unarmored. No protection, save my sword at my side, and the bracers to steady my wrist. That they may wear whatever they wish; fight with whatever weapon they choose."

“No!” Father exploded, having had time to think about it. He’d seen the damage their enemies could do. His son was likely signing his own death warrant.

Winslow pointed out the risk, for him. “Vincent, I’ve seen both of them fight, and they’re veterans. Stubbs likes that staff, but he will use any weapon he can find on the field, and use it well. But he likes the reach the staff gives him, and he likes its speed. It jabs much faster than a sword, and he swings it. Twirls it, and brings it around. If the one end don’t get you, the other one does. And he’s strong. Strong as he looks, and then some. And with Maxwell, well... there’s just no getting through that armor. You can hit him, maybe. Maybe even break his arm. But he’ll get you back, on the counter swing. All it will take is one good shot. He’ll lay open your abdomen, if you face him without armor.”

Vincent would not be budged. “Tomorrow. At dawn. On the field we left each other on, this afternoon. Deliver the message, Father.”

“They’ll suspect a trick. No one would offer such generous terms,” Father argued.

“I’ll fight in nothing but a loincloth. I won’t hide plating beneath my shirt or vest, or pads beneath my breeches, or carry a knife, tucked in my boot. I’ll be as ... defenseless as I can make myself. Tell them, Father.”

“Vincent...”

Vincent moved to guide the only parent he’d ever known toward the doorway. “Go. Go now, before I change my mind.”

Winslow’s voice stopped their progress. “Let me do it. Let me fight,” he offered. “Same terms. I’ll fight, in your stead. The axe gives me a way to

knock some skulls in. And if I go down... our people will still have you. Still have hope."

Vincent shook his head. "If I lose, then this is done. You accept whatever terms they give you; leave this place. Never return to it. If my life buys an end to this, and no one else is hurt, then let it be so. We must agree to abide by the conditions of the fight; we'd hold them to it."

Father stood near the patchwork tent's exit. "Vincent... this isn't a message I want to deliver," the older man said.

"Peter Alcott trusts you. They'll let you into their camp, and out again. Father... I want this. And the battle isn't over, yet. We have every hope that I may triumph," he said, giving them all a reason to be optimistic – even if it was only for a night.

"I'll do as you say. But I don't think 'hope' is going to win the day, here," Father said, leaving.

"Come with me," Winslow instructed Vincent. "We're going to work on how you parry a big black man who's trying to take your head off with a staff."

Vincent nodded, and the two men left, together

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CHAPTER FIVE

ALL WE SEE OR SEEM



Two hours of sparring with Winslow left Vincent muscle-sore, and tired. But his mind refused to let him rest. *If she doesn't accept my terms, how many men will I have to kill, tomorrow? How many, before we call a halt? Will I be alone, on that hill, when we do? The only one left, of our side?* The possibility was too terrible to contemplate.

Perhaps she's right. Perhaps we should simply surrender, and go into the wilderness on the mainland. Trust our luck to—

"Vincent. Come, child, come!" said Narcissa, motioning to him from a cave entrance.

"Narcissa?" Vincent asked, seeing her holding an oil lantern higher. She seemed at home in the caves they'd found. But then, Narcissa always seemed more comfortable in the low, dark places.

"Sit! You must! I have been throwing bones, and... oh, so much I see that gives me pause!"

Vincent was more open to her gifts of prophecy than Father was. But even he had his doubts. He followed her down until they came to an open place. He crouched with her in the sand, as she cast tiny animal bones into a pewter plate.

"Is it about tomorrow? What do you see? Will we be... victorious?" Vincent asked.

Narcissa shook her turbaned head, and scooped up the bones again, clearly not liking what she'd seen, the first time. "De bones say that you will not prevail, in your fight."

She threw them across the plate, then scooped them up again, and held them in her two hands, the one cupped over the other. "I see strange things. Things I can't explain." She threw the bones again. "But every time... you are not de victor in de battle, Vincent. I am so sorry."

“I lose, then? Catherine’s man beats me?” He had to know. He had to prepare all of them for the worst.

Narcissa stared at the pattern before her. “I cannot say. I only know de bones do not give you a clear victory.”

“Do they give one to Catherine, then? Does the city rise?”

She left the bones where they sat and pulled over a pitcher, and poured the water into a scrying bowl. She nodded, regretfully. “A great city. Yes.”



He bowed his head. “We are defeated, then,” Vincent said sadly.

Narcissa stirred the water, trying to see more clearly. The image of tall spires remained. Yet, there was something... A feeling the old prophetess could not name. *Destiny. Destiny is here*, she thought. *Perhaps for all of us.*

“I don’t know. I can say only that de outcome tomorrow is an unexpected one. And also... incomplete, child.”

“Incomplete? What does that mean?”

Narcissa pulled her cotton shawl more tightly around her shoulders and shrugged. “Heaven. Heaven, in de bones, in de water. But heaven de long way around. Never have de signs been less clear.”

The impression of a high, candlelit balcony ghosted into view, then disappeared.



It felt like it was from the future, but a future past what even Narcissa usually saw. She had no idea what it might mean. “Heaven. A world between de worlds.

She knew the answer was a cryptic one, as she shook her head. “What will you do, Vincent?”

The words were his and Catherine’s description of the park. Vincent sighed, not knowing what it meant, either. Did it mean the park would remain, even as the city threw itself skyward? He had no idea.

“Pray that Catherine sends Isaac Stubbs to fight me, rather than all of us fighting each other,” he answered.

Narcissa nodded, and looked into the water again. This time, she saw Jacob talking with Catherine. The beautiful woman looked regally imposing.

“Your Catherine... she hears de Father’s message. She... accepts his words.” Narcissa looked up from her vision. This was exhausting. But it was also important. “She will send but one champion, from her side.”

Vincent blinked. “But... but that is excellent news! It means there will be but one fight. And she’s not “my Catherine.”

Narcissa ignored the claim. "You and Catherine... meant to be, you are. Not complete, without the other. This time... this time, the promise is there, but is not fulfilled, not complete." She shook her head. "Next time, maybe." She thought about the balcony. It seemed very high up. "Next time? Next time... what?"

Narcissa rose. "If we don't fulfill de promise of a thing in dis life, maybe we have de next life to do it. Go. Rest. You'll see, Vincent. What will be, will be." She could say no more, for she knew no more.

Vincent excused himself, and slowly retraced his steps. He had just stepped clear of the cave's entrance only to be waylaid by an excited Mouse.

"Vincent! Vincent, did you hear? Father sent word. He talked to Lady Catherine! Father says she accepts your terms for the fight, tomorrow. Okay, good! Better than good?" the young boy asked.

"It's more than we dared hope for," Vincent replied. Narcissa's words about not being victorious, however, hung heavy, in his heart.

Oh, well. She isn't always right.

The problem was, he couldn't remember a time when she'd ever been wrong, either.

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CHAPTER SIX

HEAVEN THE LONG WAY 'ROUND



The early morning grass was dew-kissed, and the air was clear. It was a good day for a fight. Or it would be, once the sun got well up.

Catherine stood with men assembled. Isaac had slept little and eaten nothing. He wanted to be light on his feet, for obvious reasons. They could feast, afterward.

An orange glimmer of sunlight peeked above a distant hill. The sky was already starting to lighten. On the other side, Winslow had led his people up, his axe slung over one shoulder. Others came with him, and for a moment, they all waited.

The crowd parted, as a caped and hooded figure, too large to be anyone but Vincent, advanced to the crest of the hill. When he dropped his hood, even the half-light couldn't conceal the bright blonde of his hair.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Catherine could only nod. Isaac Stubbs took an expectant step forward. Torso wrapped in banded leather, his gloved hands held his favorite weapon.

"This will have to be to the death. We both know I will not yield," Vincent clarified, knowing he might well be sealing his own fate.

"It ain't like I'm planning to," Isaac replied.

Vincent nodded. When he unclasped his cloak, it astonished Catherine to see that he wore practically nothing beneath it, not even shoes. Even though she knew the terms of his offer, "knowing" and "seeing" were two different things.

He looks more proud when he's naked than he does when he's dressed, Catherine thought, his incredible physique drawing her amazed eye.

Impossibly broad shoulders caught the first glimmer of emergent sunlight. The coppery skin of his body was heavily dusted with blonde hair... everywhere. Powerful legs stood spread apart, and LongClaw was in his left hand. The crystal talisman he'd shown her yesterday was still there, but he no longer had a pocket to put it in. The stunning crystal was tied to a tan loincloth, a revealing strip of fabric that was riding low, on his hips.

You still carry that for luck, Catherine thought. Even when you don't have pockets to carry it in.

He held his arms wide and turned in a slow circle, showing them all that his back was as bare as his front, that he was hiding nothing. Clearly, he was determined to fight with honor. He turned back to face his enemies.

Scabbardless, he rotated LongClaw, experimentally. The big blade made a low *whooshing* sound as it cut the morning air. Stepping forward to where they'd ceased hostilities yesterday, he eyed the field before him. Catherine's people stood much where they had the last time they'd faced each other. He was waiting for either Isaac or Joe to advance.

Let's get this over with. One way or another, he thought. The bottom of the sun was cresting the rolling hills. They'd agreed to fight at dawn. It was surely that, now.

Isaac stepped forward a pace, hefting his staff. He spun it over his head, then around his back, and brought it forward. The spear end flashed in the early morning light. It was too heavy to throw like a javelin, and Isaac had no intention of giving his favorite weapon away. But as a thrusting weapon, it was formidable, and the other end was a wickedly effective cudgel. And it was much longer than Vincent's sword.

Vincent stood, bare feet apart, braced to meet his opponent. Isaac took another step forward.

“Isaac. Stay,” Catherine told the big man, in a voice that brooked no quarter. She raised one hand, as she did it, and stepped forward.

Isaac stopped, and looked at Catherine, confusion etched into his dark features. “Lady?”

“You heard me.” She faced Vincent. “I’m not going to strip just because you did,” she proclaimed, drawing her sword. She stepped onto the field of battle with him.

Joe was the first to protest, and it was immediate. “Cathy, you are out of you—”

“There is no ‘Cathy’ here.” Her voice rang with authority, as she gave Vincent a dead level stare. “There is only ... Catherine,” she concluded, raising her sword.

Vincent was the next to protest. “I said I would fight one-on-one. I did not say—”

“The agreement is made. I... am ‘one.’”

She advanced on him. Vincent kept his sword up on instinct. She was coming close. He could parry any blow she offered, but... *then what?*

“Catherine...”

“Fight me. Do it, Vincent.” It was the same tone she’d just given Isaac and Joe. Vincent realized she was very good at giving orders, and very used to being obeyed.

She tapped the tip of her shorter sword to his. “Don’t you see? This will end it. Finally. One way or the other.”

She circled around him, and he had to move. Either that, or risk getting skewered by her.

“At least she’s in armor,” Greg Hughes told Joe. He was trying to find the bright side in this. Any bright side at all.

“His reach is a foot longer than hers and he’s got her by over a hundred pounds. He’ll take her head off with that sword. Or her arm,” Joe replied.

On the other side, Vincent’s people were making similar comments.

“Do you think it’s some kind of trick?”

“Maybe her blade is poison-tipped.”

“Is she out of her mind?” The rustling conversation quieted down as the two opponents faced each other, and the morning sun continued to climb.

“Why are you doing this?” Vincent asked her.

“Because it needs doing. And I’m not going to watch you kill one of my friends.”

“Catherine...”

“You’re the leader of your people. I’m the leader of mine.” She slowed her step, then stopped, facing him.

On her side, her lady-in-waiting was appalled. “Catherine! Get out of there!” Jenny called. Edie held her close.

Vincent desperately wished the wealthy woman in front of him would listen to her friends, even though he doubted she would.

“This ends. Today. One way or the other.” Catherine tightened her grip on her sword, and Vincent had a moment to wonder if it had a name, like his did. Her weight was up on the balls of her feet. She was well-balanced and she’d clearly been well-trained, thanks to Isaac. She was ready to fight.

Except... except her eyes were trying to tell him a different story. *Do we really have to do this?* They asked.

I don't know, his answered. *Don't we?*

"I'm left handed. Come at me from the right. It's my weaker side," Vincent said, fully aware he was giving her pointers on how to beat him, if she could. He had no desire to fight her. Much less kill her. She tapped the tip of her sword to his, again.

"Do you yield?" she asked.

"No. You know I can't," he replied. His people would be homeless, if he did. They wouldn't last the winter without food, and they couldn't get food if they didn't sow crops.

"Neither can I," she volleyed. "I'm sorry, Vincent. For whatever is about to happen... I'm sorry."

She hit his blade in the middle, telegraphing her intention to swing there, before she did. He parried her easily. She knew he would. But at the sound of the swords starting to ring, a gasp came up from both sides of the crowd.

Joe Maxwell moved to draw his sword. Catherine heard the sound and took one hand off her own sword, and pointed at him. "You draw that sword and I swear I'll have you charged with treason!" she shouted. The tip of her sword dropped, a little. Vincent knew he could have taken advantage of her one-handed hold. Given his strength, he could have easily disarmed her. He didn't.

"You get hurt out there, and your father will hang me anyway," Joe retorted, unsure of how to proceed.

"Then it looks like you've got a choice to make," Catherine said, readjusting her grip and not turning around. She kept Vincent in her

sights. "Greg, if Joe draws his sword, arrest him and hold him. Obey me." Greg looked from his lady to his fellow lieutenant. "Yes, Milady," he demurred.

Father's voice came from behind Vincent. "Vincent, perhaps this isn't the wisest—"

"It isn't," Vincent agreed shortly, setting in motion a series of light blows, ones she could easily parry. He had no idea what to do. He was trying to buy them all time. Catherine deflected his light advance, stepping backward and circling to her left – and his right, as she did so. She was following his instructions, at least.

She had a woman's nimble posture, but her armor made her slow. The metal that protected her skin would also make it easy for him to close on her, and knock her to the ground. From there, they both knew it would be all him.

"This is madness. I'll best you. You know I can," he told her.

I know you can. But will you? Her eyes asked the question. "You're very sure of yourself for a man who's standing half-naked on a hill," Catherine stated boldly. She swung with a bit more force.

And you're not sure of yourself at all. It's a façade. An act you put on... for them, he thought.

He parried her blow, then stepped into her counter-parry. He was much too fast for her. Before she knew it, they were nearly nose to nose, with two steel blades between them.

"If you have a plan, I would love to hear it," he whispered.

She didn't. They both knew she didn't. "I'm working on it," she replied. She put a booted foot on his thigh and pushed off, re-establishing distance, between them.

“Next time she’s that close, take her head off!” Winslow shouted. The people near him cheered. Some, reluctantly.

Meanwhile, on Catherine’s side, the shouts were similar. “He’s bare-skinned! What are you waiting for? Winter? Swing, Cathy!” Isaac Stubbs was trying to give his lady encouragement.

Catcalls begat more of the same, and the shouting on the sidelines grew to a swelling wall of sound. It was then that Catherine realized she may have miscalculated. For all the odd spectacle before them, the two sides were still inherently mistrustful and disliking of each other. Blood lust was rising through the ranks on both sides, and the human circle around them grew tighter as friends and foes alike forced the couple closer to each other.

Vincent knew what was about to happen. And it wasn’t good. They’d step closer, too close, and fights would probably start breaking out between other combatants, on the margins, if the fight in the middle wasn’t settled.

He couldn’t take his eyes off Catherine. Her expression said it all. *Help me. Please. I don’t know what to do.*

He saw the words pass across her green eyes at the exact moment he actually heard them, in his mind.

Help me. Please.

I heard that. I heard you. I can hear what you’re thinking. How? He thought. But her eyes darted and she shifted to the left, not liking the restlessness passing through the increasingly agitated crowd. He doubted she’d “heard” him the way he’d just heard her. But... something... flickered across her eyes. She’d *felt something*. Of that, he was sure.

Catherine?

She blinked, and he could have sworn she'd "heard" him, on some level.

They're going to make us fight. Vincent, please. I'm better with a sword than you think, and you have no protection. I don't want to hurt you...

There was fear, real fear, in her expressive green eyes. *Help me. Help me stop this.*

"Enough!" Vincent roared, much as he'd done the prior day. His shout silenced the crowd - for a moment.

"Not this time!" Isaac and Winslow, from opposite sides of the circle, said it practically together.

Vincent threw LongClaw before him. It clattered to the ground at Catherine's feet. He spread his arms wide, exposing a wealth of bare chest to her easy strike.

"Do you yield, sir?" It was Joe Maxwell who asked it. "On your knees, if you do."

Vincent's blue gaze locked with Catherine's, and she knew he never would. His pride wouldn't allow it. His devotion to his people wouldn't allow it.

His next words confirmed it. His voice was a low rumble. "I cannot yield. I cannot... give up, for my people." He stepped closer to Catherine. He was now within the range of her swing. "But I can... put my life in her hands. Take it, if you wish. It's yours." He moved a step closer.

"Vincent... what are you doing? Pick up your sword." She was trying to back away from him. – And trying to figure out how to not kill him, as she knew her people would demand.

"No. Catherine... no. You said you cared for your people. Very well. Count me among their number. My fate is yours. And... so am I." She could back away no further. She was close to the crowd.

He took another step, and she threw her sword down near his. "I refuse to be the thing that ends your life! That is not our fate. Surely!"

Her soldiers howled their disapproval. His compelling gaze stayed locked with hers.

Do you know what's about to happen? she asked.

Do you? He gave her only a subtle nod.

"We can't fight, and we can't bargain," He said to her, over the noise. "What would you have us do?"

Catherine blinked. "Peter Alcott had words with me last night. He says there is but one peaceful avenue open to us." Her clear gaze telegraphed her meaning. "I think you know the one I mean."

He did. She meant "marriage." And she was a madwoman, to consider it. *Do you not see what I am?* And yet, in his heart, something very much like "hope" came flickering to life.

He leaned in close. "You think... this..." he gestured to his own, otherworldly visage, "is the face of your husband? Can you accept that?" *I can. I know I can.*

His leonine countenance filled her awareness, as behind her, the crowd grew even more restless. "Is this the face of your wife?" she asked, indicating her own.

It is. It very much is. And yet... "It will be in name only. You know that," he answered. Narcissa's prediction came back to him. *"I don't know. I can say only that the outcome is an unexpected one. And also... incomplete, child."*

It made sense. The marriage, such as it was, would happen. But it would not be “complete.”

“If it stops a war, that’s good enough for me,” she answered.

She crossed to where LongClaw lay, and this time it was Catherine who picked up the huge sword.

“Call for a priest,” she ordered, driving it into the high ground so that it made a cross. The gesture was much the same one Vincent had used, yesterday. They’d be married in front of the etched steel. She eyed the long, shining blade. A snarling lion’s image had been engraved on the blade, near the hilt. *How appropriate.*

I’m going to be married in front of a beast. To a Beast, she thought, tugging the chain maille cowl up and off her head. Her hair was crimped, and wild looking. And she didn’t give a damn.

“Narcissa!” Vincent bellowed, as the crowd grew puzzled, and then silent. What were their leaders up to?

The black seeress emerged from the crowd, looking as if she knew she’d be summoned, and just for this purpose.



“Come, Children, come!” she called, talking to the couple, but waving her beringed fingers to the crowd. “Gather round, come, come!” she invited. “So many things to do. So many things, yes?” she said, calling both sides to stand and bear witness.

Vincent stood before her.

“Your bride will need a love token, Vincent. For the moment you are declared man and wife,” Narcissa told him in a stage whisper. Vincent knew that meant he was supposed to have a ring. But he had nothing. Nothing save the crystal that hung at his waist. It would have to do.

“I have this,” he said, offering up his good-luck charm.

Catherine saw the lovely violet crystal catch the morning sun’s rays, and shatter them into rainbows. She watched as Narcissa’s unfamiliar, milky eyes found her face. “And you? Do you have somet’ing for your groom, lady? Dis be your wedding day.”

It was. But Catherine wore no jewelry, now. It was a day for battle, not primping. Briefly, she thought of offering him her sword, but decided that it was a thing she’d raised up against him. It wouldn’t do, as a love token.

Reaching up her sleeve, she produced a beautiful red rose. It was crumpled, some, from having spent the morning riding between her linen overblouse and her skin, but it was none the worse for wear. “My mother loved roses. She told me when I was afraid, I had only to look at one, and think of her.”

It was all the explanation Catherine had time to give, before Narcissa took both the love tokens, and held them in her rough hands.

Muttering a quick incantation, she blessed the two completely dissimilar objects, and laid them on a snowy white cloth. "You will exchange love-gifts. De crystal will come to you," she told Catherine, "and de rose, she come to you," Narcissa informed Vincent.

"Now, and in years to come... and de decades turn to centuries... de gift of rose and crystal... dis will be one of de ways your spirits know each other."

Catherine had nothing to say to that. She assumed the strange old woman always made such pronouncements. People were gathering close. Some of them were even mingling, from each side.

Vincent leaned in so only Narcissa could hear him. "It will be a marriage in name only, Narcissa. It won't be real."

"Real enough to stop a war. Real enough to make a world. Two worlds," Narcissa replied. "I see what's to come. Our people... go to de deep places, the sheltering places. De city, she grows. Shining and golden it be! De wealthy and de powerful... Dey rule, here. There be plenty for all. Plenty for us to live on what others leave behind. We go to de low places, de cave places. We welcome de dark. And light it up, bright as candlelight can glow! Brighter, sometimes."

"I'll be Below, while she lives Above?"

"Dat be de fate of dis place. Yes, Vincent."

"A married man... with no bride. No... real marriage."

Narcissa shrugged "If dis time it be not real, who knows? In a hundred years, in two hundred, you can always try again. Fate don't be wrong. You and your Catherine... you be... bound to each other, from dis day. Bound! Bonded!"

Bound and bonded. Yes. Yes, that sounded right. We'll be bound together. Bound, until we make this a marriage for real. Make a true bond. Someday.

Winslow offered him his cape, for covering. Vincent shook his head.
"No. No, she accepted me this way. Let her marry me this way."

His bride's response was tinged with humor. "You'll get no complaint from me," Catherine promised, going down on her knees, before the singular sword. Vincent joined her.

Everyone hushed, as the morning sun painted the bridal couple in shades of silver and gold.

Narcissa's voice rose above the crowd: "Dear and Beloved..."

[https://treasurechambers.com/Museum/Fine
%20Art/687BlightonFireRose.jpg](https://treasurechambers.com/Museum/Fine%20Art/687BlightonFireRose.jpg)

**

And so it was that Vincent and Catherine began, Once Upon a Time, in a place that was not quite yet New York... destined to return to each other again... and again... until they could make for themselves a "marriage for real."

But that, of course, is another story...



NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE IN YOUR OWN FAIRY TALE, I WISH
YOU LOVE. ~ CINDY

~ HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY ~



