



A Fire in the Darkness

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Retold Fairy Tales

The clouds hung above the spires and domes, graying the towers of the buildings to match the cobblestones below. The citizens of Edinburgh hid behind gray cloaks and the haze from the coal to create the illusion of uniformity. Each of us, sculpted the darkness and our untruths in order to survive.

The stone steps led me deeper into the city towards my tiny apartment, which acted as much as a haven as it did a cage. The more that I recognized my true self, the more trapped I felt. There was no opportunity for freedom in a city where individuality had been criminalized.

Always in view, the castle at the center of the city now functioned as a prison for traitors, for anyone who thought differently, but this constant reminder to blend in could not protect us from ourselves.

I had one person who cared about my well-being here, my only living family, my grandmother. She loved me, and I loved her, but it left a burning question, a ghostly apparition that only I saw haunting every mirror, every reflection in the pointed-arch windows — would she still accept me if she knew the real me? The question made her affirmations of love disperse like smoke before they hit my ears.

Behind a fire of burning books, a man's eyes gleamed yellow. His scruff, his beard, and his chest made him more wolf-like than human. He destroyed knowledge. He destroyed thought, and he did it beautifully.

I hated him, the Wolf.

As I passed his destruction, his speckled eyes latched onto mine as if he knew of the book I held, of the secrets I knew. My forbidden possession, my only connection to my parents, to a time other than this adversity, was my

mother's diary. It had been illegal, of course, for my grandmother to keep it hidden, to pass it down to me, and to teach me to read it. I looked into his eyes and feared the day when he would discover it and cast it into the flames, for no secret can stay concealed forever. I will be caught. It was only a matter of when.

The crackle from the embers awakened a cry I recognized as my grandmother's. Rushing closer to the scene, the fire seared against my cheeks. One of the Wolf's men stepped out of our building clutching all of the letters from my grandfather. My grandmother shuffled after him, pulling at his cloak. I reached out to calm her, but she wouldn't stop as he marched over to hand the Wolf the collection of parchment.

"Please, they're harmless! They're all I have of him."

The flames danced in the Wolf's irises. He scanned the letters before staring intently at my grandmother and me.

"Let them take them," I said. "We have to."

His gaze remained locked on us, even while tossing the parchment down into the blaze. My grandmother screamed and clambered onto my shoulder, heaving.

"It's going to be okay," I said, for I knew not what else to say.

The Wolf barred his teeth. A slight chuckle emerged from him and his men, along with the hissing from the burning pages. He could lock her away, if he chose to. I'd never see her again once she'd been detained in the castle.

I squared my shoulders, attempting to quench the fear clawing inside of my stomach. "Don't take her."

"You seem like more of a threat to the city than she," the Wolf said.

My grandmother wailed, but the Wolf ripped her from her hold on my cloak. He shoved her towards one of his men and grabbed me by my hood. I wondered if he would toss me into the fire, as he did with everything else. He gritted his teeth and shoved me backwards. I caught my step. I was not afraid of leaving this prison for an actual cell. I would adapt. I would survive. The Wolf couldn't hurt me, and maybe he knew that. Maybe that was what was hiding at the edges of his snarl.

“Hold onto her,” the Wolf said. “I’m going to need to search your belongings.”

He would find the diary. His warm breath grazed the back of my neck as I led him into my building and up the spiraling stairs. I tried to think through my options. He seemed determined, so distracting him wouldn’t be easy. I could try to shove him over the railing, but I doubt I could overpower him.

There was nothing I could do, except unlock the door to my room. The Wolf ambled around, casting my belongings in a heap on the floor. The diary was hidden inside my pillow. Soon, he would find it. I wondered if the Wolf was as scared as I was, for I was terrified, but the terror faded into a slight jangle, a hint of the metaphoric chains locked around my shins. This terror was also excitement, something like a wild fire inside of me, brighter than any book burning could roar.

“Do you ever read them first?” I asked.

His eyes wavered only for a moment. A bowl crashed against the floor as he stomped towards my bed.

“You do. But you could never tell anyone. None of your men would understand.”

“Are you saying that I would commit treason?” The Wolf growled towards me with his fists clenched. “Save us some time and tell me where you’ve hidden them.”

“I don’t have anything to hide,” I said.

“That’s not true.”

“I think you have more to hide. More to lose.” My eyes fully opened. I was no longer a master of imitating magic, out of necessity, but a true source of wisdom. “Do you ever save any of the books? Hide them away for yourself?”

He dragged my mattress onto the floor. My mother’s diary tumbled into plain sight, but the Wolf turned to me instead. He had what he needed now to ruin me. It didn’t matter what I revealed now. I could handle a few extra bruises.

“Tell me about them,” I said. “The books you’ve read.”

I reached out and touched the Wolf’s forearm. He didn’t lurch away. I felt the hair down to his wrists until my

fingers reached his hand, a hand of destruction — the very destruction of knowledge. And I took his hand in mine, and he didn't push me away.

"What was your favorite?" I asked.

"Let me show you."

The door to my apartment crashed open. My grandmother burst in and saw our hands touching before I could tear mine away.

My grandmother collapsed onto the door. "What? What is this?"

"How'd you get away?" the Wolf asked.

"What are you two doing?"

"It's nothing," I said.

"First, you take my husband's letters, then you corrupt my grandson." She snatched a knife from the mess on the floor and shook it at the Wolf.

I stepped in between them, but the Wolf grabbed me by the waist and pulled me out the door with him. We ran down the hall and down the stairs. There was no way she could catch us, but what could happen now. She didn't love me. She couldn't accept this, who I really was. The Wolf could probably lock her up. He could probably have her put to death, but I wouldn't want that. But that would be the easiest for him. He was a monster. He'd probably do it, even if I asked him not to.

We passed the burning books. He led me through the crowds, to Mary King's Close, and into the underground of Edinburgh.

"We need a plan," I said.

The stone walls surrounded us as we stepped deeper into dimly lit passageways.

"I have some books hidden down this way. There's an exit there, where we can get out of the city."

"You're going to leave?"

“What’s the alternative?” he asked.

Locking up or putting my grandmother to death hadn’t even crossed his mind. How had I misread this man for so long? I wondered what it would be like out in the wilderness with him — just us and a few books. I had left my mother’s diary, all of my possessions, but they seemed like the belongings of another version of me. I didn’t know that man any longer, and I didn’t need his trinkets. I didn’t need this city of darkness and suppression. The open woods and this wolf of a man would be everything my true self had ever desired — had ever required.

The tunnels rambled on until we entered a vault full of books.

“The exit is on the other side,” he said.

I picked them up one by one, reading the covers, feeling their pages. I’d never been surrounded by so many words, by so much to learn. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to ask him about every one. We couldn’t carry them all. There were too many. Even when I’d seen so many books perish, he’d kept all he could. He really was a genius.

He watched me with a slight smile as I flipped through and scanned the words. I couldn’t leave all of these books behind. I wanted to absorb them all.

“We should really get going,” the Wolf said. “Grab what you can.”

Footsteps echoed towards us. My grandmother appeared out of the shadows with a knife drawn.

The Wolf put his hands up in surrender. “Please, we’ll go. You’ll never have to think about us again.”

“My grandson would never want to leave Edinburgh.”

With a lunge, she pierced him in the shoulder.

He groaned, stumbling closer to the exit. I squeezed his hand. Blood marked the hole in his cloak. He hadn’t wanted to hurt me or her; she had no reason to. It had been heartless, and she didn’t even respect my choices enough to let me go — to allow me to be myself. I cannot allow this woman to transform my solace into a dungeon.

Charging at my grandmother with the book in my hand, I watched her raise the knife at me. I slammed the

hardback against her wrist. The knife clanged onto the stone, and I shoved her into a stack of books.

Rushing back to the Wolf, I held him up as we stumbled out of the vault and down the passageway. My grandmother screamed after us, but her words echoed in to mush. She didn't matter now, her opinions didn't matter now, and we were almost free.

The Wolf groaned in pain, but he was in my arms.

"We're almost there," I said, even though I had no idea where we were headed.

The darkness continued up the stone steps. We fumbled our way up and out to where the air became lighter. Branches and leaves revealed hints of stars above us. We had made it into the wilderness together.

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