



Hope Harboured.

Bryony Reid

Magic

Illia's sister fixed her with a burning glare as she sawed through week-old, hardened bread. The glare caused a prickle of heat to fan over Illia's neck as her cheeks reddened beneath the scrutiny.

"If you have something to say, Fern," Illia said, keeping her voice steady, "Then be out with it."

"I have nothing to say," Fern sniffed. Finally her gaze flicked away from the stale bread. In the next room, a low fire crackled whilst the girls' uncle coughed and wheezed. It was the same wet, rasping noise that had haunted the small hut for a worryingly long time. With each cough, Illia's chest tightened and pressure started behind her eyes. Fern simply looked the other way, scuffing the toe of her shoe on the wooden floorboards. Her sister had a way of thinking she could ignore anything if she only looked away.

Eventually, the blunt knife hit the wooden board Illia cut the bread on. One piece cut. One measly, hard piece. She refrained from throwing it at her ungrateful sister who'd shown nothing but curled lips and distaste for weeks. Instead, she simply dropped the bread next to Fern's sparsely-filled bowl. It made an unpleasant noise, hard crust hitting wooden table-top.

Fern made a retching noise as she snapped the bread in half. No soft tearing, no warmth rising, or the tantalising smell of cooking filling the cold kitchen; only stale food—only what Illia could afford.

"Don't eat it," Illia sighed before starting all over again. She'd axed through wood only yesterday yet that felt easier than cutting this bread. A cringe was always waiting in her bones at what pitiful meals she provided.

“And then I’ll starve to death,” Fern countered. “Or is that your plan, dear sister? One less mouth to feed?”

Her tether short when it came to her sister, Illia set the knife down on the board, levelling a look at Fern. “If you starve to death, or catch some illness from what I manage to put on this table, then it is your own fate. When did you last help with a catch from the river, or sold an old trinket in the hopes of buying a decent meal? When did you last try to barter for medicine for our uncle? Answer me that, Fern, and then you can retch and complain.”

Anger flickered over Fern’s features that had once been soft and kind. “I am not the one who burnt down our home, Illia. You’d do well to remember that.”

“And that’s why you won’t help now? Because you’re punishing me? In that, you punish yourself. Your stubbornness only serves our miserable demise even more.”

Fern snarled at her before picking up her bowl and dumping its contents right back into the pot Illia had been working over for the past half-hour. “I can find better coin for a better meal,” Fern hissed before grabbing her cloak.

Her heart pounding, Illia watched her sister go. Anguish washed over her as she considered where, exactly, her sister would find that better coin. Those soft features now hardened still served her. Her full mouth, wide eyes, and small nose were what attracted better money.

Guilt tied a knot in Illia’s heart despite Fern making her own choices. Illia had previously asked her to help sell old, salvaged items from their house for a better life for the three of them. What Fern decided was to sell something far more sought-out and the coins she earned served only herself.

A dreadful unease swept through Illia as she considered her sister’s words; I am not the one to blame. They always found their way to being her winning argument. Teeth grinding, Illia went back to hacking through the bread. She scooped a ladle-full of soup, sending guilty gratitude upward that her sister had given up her portion, and walked into the next room.

Her uncle sat before the fire. Bandages wrapped around his eyes; burn scars ran the length of his arms where he grasped the armrests of his chair. Bile rose in Illia's throat as she approached him and crouched at his side. Her sister's words echoed a mantra in her mind. She set the food down next to him.

"I hear you both, you know," her uncle murmured, his voice croaked and thin from the coughing. The fire's smoke had wound its way into his lungs and left a lingering illness in his body. One that no physician would see to or tend because they didn't have enough money.

A course of tonics was all it would take. Several vials of medicine to clear her uncle's lungs and he'd be free, better, able to help. Theft had crossed her mind—had crossed her mind for Fern to get it—but Illia had a conscience. Too good of one. If she was caught, their fate would worsen further.

"It wasn't your fault," he said, bringing her focus back to the dying fire, the chill in the room, the threadbare curtains. Illia stared at the embers resting in the fireplace and wondered how the fire had eaten all the wood she had cut yesterday. The axe lay next to the hearth, forever a calling that she could leave the hut, she could hunt, kill, provide a better meal without money.

She'd tried it once and had emptied the bare contents of her stomach onto the forest floor. She'd left the poor squirrel dead, unused, its life taken for nothing. She hadn't been able to bring herself to skin it, and any vendor would ask for money to do the task.

"The fire," Illia whispered. "It was my fault."

A blink, and she remembered. That one day, Illia had indulged in selfishness, and it had cost her. Alongside the flames, the smell of overwhelming smoke, the heat of the fire on her skin, she remembered the tainted memory of kisses. Of touches. Of whispers in the night as she'd snuck that farmer's boy into her bedroom.

A careless misplacement of her foot, and she'd knocked a candle over, right into her heavy curtains, and the inferno had razed all in its path.

The four of them had escaped but not unscathed. The fire had caught her uncle, searing his sight, burning his lungs, his skin. Fern had roared in rage before lunging for Illia, forcing her face into a puddle of mud. She remembered the screams, the unforgiving words spit from her sister's mouth, the smoke filling every crevice in her own lungs.

The farmer's boy, looking on in horror. By the time Fern had let up from yanking at her hair and shoving her face into the ground, he'd left.

"Illia." Her uncle's voice was soft, prying her from the horrific memory of knowing what she had done. The fire had spread so quickly. It had destroyed so much so mercilessly. "My sweet niece."

His hand cupped her chin but she pulled away, pushing to her feet. "I'm tired, Uncle," she said.

"You're weary," he corrected, seeing right through her. "You're guilty."

"Fern blames me. Why don't you?"

Her uncle's smile was weak as he turned his bandaged face towards her. "Because I have known much worse horrors."

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That night, Illia slept deeply. Even guilt found its way to her in her dreams, telling her she deserved much less. Still, sleep was the only relief she got.

"You are poor." At the sound of a voice, Illia's eyes flew open, bolting upright as she looked around her room.

"You are weary." Squinting in the darkness, her vision blurred but snagged on one tiny dot of light. It floated in the corner of her room, right above the old rocking chair. She watched as the light bobbed in the air, seeming to grow brighter and bigger.

Then she blinked—and it was gone.

Yet what replaced it snatched her breath away. Long, pale fingers wrapped around the back of the chair, a figure with inhuman height leaning towards her. A top hat dipped low over eyes but ghostly pale lips pulled back into a smile. The whole figure glowed, brightening up her dark room. It wasn't the smallest room in the hut but this... thing's presence filled it wholly.

And it looked so otherworldly she barely had time to cry out. Her chest tightened, her throat constricting. No, she couldn't shout out but the figure made no move towards her. It—he?—only leaned casually on the chair, letting it rock slightly.

"Illia." The voice was distinctly male, drifting through the darkness. "Don't scream, or shout, or raise alarm, otherwise this gift will fall apart. I'm not going to hurt you."

Unbidden, Illia couldn't help but think of her sister, of the men who beckoned her when she paraded about. Her eyes widened as she took this in: the thing wasn't quite a man, not entirely human.

"Who are you?"

A long hand lifted to wave off the question. "If you mean to call my name, you can't. It belongs to another realm, another language."

He said his words so simply that she laughed for a second. Another realm. There was only this world. Yet... The way he glowed, his proportions, his whole presence... It wasn't normal.

"Why are you here?"

"The sprites have seen your suffering, Illia," the voice said. "And it is time."

"Sprites?"

An image flashed through her mind. It is time. She imagined him leaving her room, dragging her behind him, waking up her uncle and Fern and marching them all outside the hut. She imagined blood spilt, prone bodies, lifeless. An end to their poor life. An end to their lives. An insulted laugh curled through her room, like he knew her thoughts.

"Quite the opposite, Illia," he said. "At the age of eighteen, those who believe, and those who possess hope, get a gift from a sprite. It comes for one night upon their birthday." He lifted his hat slightly to give her a pointed glance.

Birthday. Today was her birthday. And it was true; in the distance, if she strained, she could hear the chime of the clock tower, marking midnight—a new day. Her eighteenth birthday. Illia had completely forgotten. The sprite's lips curled as if in sympathy, like he knew what had become of her and her family.

He lifted his hands and brandished them as though he was performing a trick. “Any wish of yours is my command.”

Her mind raced, wondering how she still believed or had hope when there was so little left, but the sprite let out a withering sigh.

“We visit those with purity still in their hearts,” he explained. “Pure, like the ice-covered world we come from. Innocent, like the snow that falls around us, infused in our land, manipulating our own magic.” The sprite pulled back from the chair, standing to his full, alarming height. “And when her birthday comes, a sprite of another kind will visit your sister.”

At his words, light burst in her chest at the thought of her bitter sister still harbouring hope. Still clinging onto something that resembled another chance.

“Another kind?”

“A darker kind, one born from the blackest night, to match the lost direction in your sister's heart,” the sprite clarified. “She will come to no harm. Like you, she will be granted one wish.”

Feeling foolish and led, Illia swung out of bed, pressing her bare feet to the wooden floorboards. They felt the same. The room felt marginally colder but everything was the same. Hesitantly, she took a closer step towards the sprite. He wore a full suit of white, faint lines barely showing where fabric ended and his skin began.

She took her time thinking over what she would wish for. Illia had doubts it would happen but for a second, she let herself believe.

Opening her mouth, she began to speak her wish but the sprite stood up abruptly, killing the words on her tongue.

“I cannot grant wishes of providing you with magic of your own, to manipulate minds, or bring back any lost soul.”

Illia shook her head. None of that mattered. She had no desire for the affection of another, or magic, or to bring back anyone from death.

“I wish for my uncle to be healthy again,” she said. “I am carrying my family alone and I cannot do it any longer. I need my uncle, I need his help, his lungs are—”

“I know of your family’s situation,” the sprite interrupted. “Is that your final wish?”

Feeling sure, Illia nodded. “Yes.”

The sprite’s face fell in disappointment. “Is that all? No fancy surroundings? No wealth, or a repaired bond with your sister?”

Wealth was to be earned, Illia believed that. Fern could love her again but resentment would still live in her heart for how they lived. No, everything could be good and honest if her uncle was up and well again.

“I wish for my uncle to be healthy,” Illia repeated firmly.

The sprite raised one spindly hand and snapped two fingers together. Beams of light shot from his hand, stretching through her dark room, racing outward, to where her uncle slept in his chair. When Illia looked back at the sprite, he was so faint she barely saw him. Yet she saw the curve of a smile.

“Have fun,” he said, his voice so quiet she imagined she dreamt it. And when he fully disappeared, Illia wasn’t sure she hadn’t dreamt the conversation. But just to check, she opened her door, meaning to go to her uncle. Orbs of light floated an inch above the floorboards. The pitiful hut shined with a ghostly illumination.

Illia followed the orbs, expecting them to take her to her uncle, breathing even and deeply in his sleep. When she reached the living room, the fire had died out, her uncle was not in the chair; the orbs continued out of the door, slightly ajar. Perhaps he’d taken a walk, if her wish had come true. She hesitated, glancing behind her. The hallway glowed all the same. She could turn back, return to her room, convince herself this was all a dream.

She could—

The door creaked open; long fingers beckoned her forward and, with no other explanation or reason to turn back, Illia followed it. Her hand trembled as she pushed the door open.

And gasped.

The once-barren, dead garden was blanketed in a beautiful, glistening layer of snow. Snowflakes tumbled from the sky, decorating the ground, dancing on a wind that didn't seem to touch anything else. Delicate floating lanterns hung from strings right above where a crowd of people danced together. White and blue skirts brushed the snow that bore no footprints even as people moved.

Illia reached out a hand, catching drifting pieces of snow. The snowfalls she had witnessed in the hut had seemed threatening. Now it was magical, glistening, harmless. Illia watched in speechless wonder at the wintery scene.

“You bury your desires down in your heart, convinced you don't deserve them.” The voice was the same as the sprite from her room. Illia closed her eyes, fully convinced she was dreaming, but the voice continued. “But I saw it all when you wished. You want so much more. You want to be loved, appreciated, and celebrated. And so you shall be. Happy birthday, Illia.”

Warm breath fanned over her neck as she let out her own soft inhale. Illia opened her eyes; the scene was still there, still white and beautiful, captivating against the dark night sky. Enthralled, she took a step out of her door, only to feel a weight on her body that hadn't been there before. Taken aback, Illia saw the billowing white skirts falling to the floor, felt the bodice covered in delicate lace and silk. And outside—it was not cold despite the snow. No shawl was required, and the dress left her arms bare.

A hand reached for her; she took it, and was spun into the scene.

As soon as she stepped onto the snow, laughter bubbled up in her throat. Soft music floated around the partygoers, surrounding Illia as she twirled out of one set of arms into another. She gave little thought to who these people were; she recognised nobody but they all looked at her like she mattered. After Fern's harshness and her uncle's lacking sight, Illia's heart sang for this. She yearned for it.

A reasonable part of her tried to reach for her guilt, a notion of selfishness for this beauty and celebration, but there was nothing there. Only bliss resided in her heart. Only unburned happiness greeted her.

With each new partner, Illia's ears rang from the birthday wishes. There were no gifts but she didn't need them; this strange dream was the best gift of all. The weight of carrying her family lifted from her shoulders and she found herself tossing her head back and spinning around, arms outstretched.

A man in the same white suit as everyone else stalked the perimeter of the dancefloor. Illia couldn't take her eyes off him even as she was swept into another embrace and spun around. Her skirts fanned around her, the gaze of her new partner intense and loving. She saw that love, felt it, yet could not stop looking at the man at the edge. He watched her. With each second, it fell into place.

The sprite who'd granted her wish. Here, more real than he'd been in her room. He looked young, his skin smooth and lips pulled back into an inviting smile as he strode for her. Like her dance partner knew who approached, they melted back into the crowd, as the sprite took their place.

"Your name," Illia whispered, "I don't know it."

"It won't matter when this is over."

"I would like to know the name of the man who gave me the best gift I've had in a long time."

The sprite laughed and said, "Then you'll never know." He began an intricate dance that her feet somehow knew to follow. One hand rested on her waist, the other clasping her hand. "Because I'm no man."

"You're a sprite," she stated, remembering how he said his name couldn't be called in her language.

"Indeed."

"Give me a name, any name, to call you by. Just for tonight."

The sprite looked at her with a look she couldn't define. He cocked his head at her, and she noticed his hat had gone. Silvery hair tied at his nape, a few loose strands falling to his shoulders, framing his face. Soft snow fell around them, sprinkled in his hair. She'd never known winter could be so beautiful.

“Do you like what I’ve given you?” the sprite asked.

“Yes,” she breathed.

The sprite considered her for a moment. “You can call me Morpheus.”

Illia started, a falter in their dance. “The God of Dreams.”

“In some legends,” Morpheus said, a small smile on his lips.

“And in yours?”

“Well, it is not my real name. I’m only borrowing it, so my legends—the sprites’ legends—doesn’t matter.”

“Dreams don’t last.”

“Neither will this,” he said, but she already knew that. Beautiful things were not made to last. “When dawn arrives, this will fade away slowly.”

Illia went to say more, wanting to understand this gift she’d been given but Morpheus vanished before her eyes. In his place stood someone else with eyes she’d long-forgotten the look of. The warmth in them meant more than any ballgown or heart-wrenching music.

Her uncle. His arms were stable as he danced with her, spinning until she laughed at the impossibility of it all. His eyes, bright and clear. His breathing, steady and even. His legs, holding him up after not feeling strong enough for so long.

But panic suddenly seized her, breaking through the mirage of the night. If this night was a gift, and as was her true wish of her uncle’s restored health, would that wish vanish? Her uncle smiled reassuringly at her. “I can feel it,” he whispered. “I can feel the strength in my blood, I can feel the repair in myself.”

Illia hoped that it was merely enough that he felt it. Soon, the doubt and worry was washed away with more dancing, more magic, more of what Morpheus had infused her dream-gift with.

This was hers, and hers alone. Hours in, when the night was still dark, the music lulled, the crowd gathered together.

Her uncle lifted a glass full of clear shimmering liquid, his smile wide and relaxed. “Can I ask you all to toast to my niece, whom we celebrate on this night? May this night relax your worries, Illia. Let this night show you that you have nothing to fear and everything to love and wish for.”

Their cheers and calls of her name was a different kind of music to Illia’s ears.

And when the dream ended, Illia barely noticed. Back in Morpheus’s arms, she let him twirl her beneath his arm but he kept her going round and round, like a wooden spinning top, until everything blurred together. Illia laughed and laughed, still hearing the cheers, feeling admiration and the weight of her skirts.

She closed her eyes, still feeling the sprite’s hand in hers.

And when she fell from dizziness, she landed in a hard bed.

It was over so soon but the feeling of the night remained on her skin, refusing to be removed easily. Illia didn’t want it to be gone. She wanted to hold onto the night forever. Dawn broke through her window, urging her to get up. With the dream gone, her previous worries had come back.

There was breakfast to be made, work to do, Fern to deal with, her uncle to—

Her uncle.

Illia flung herself out of bed, racing from her room and into the living room. The fire roared, a new pile of wood next to it. Her uncle’s chair was empty. For a second, Illia let herself hope. Tears stung her eyes as she closed them, hoping that above all possibility, her wish had been granted.

“It’s about time you woke up. I’ve been working since before dawn!”

At the sound of her uncle’s voice, strong and firm, Illia opened her eyes. There he was: framed in the doorway, that axe in his hand. His shoulders rose and fell in exertion, evidence of his work. Snow covered them like a lingering reminder of the night.

Illia’s tears broke free as she ran towards him, wrapping her arms around him.

“I thought—I worried that—”

“That it was all a dream?” her uncle asked.

Illia pulled back, surprised that he remembered. He winked at her, his mouth pulling up into a half smile.

“Most of it was, but you wished selflessly and honestly. You saved me, Illia.”

“What is the commotion—Oh.” Fern stopped in the doorway, looking shocked at Illia hugging their uncle, who stood proud and confident.

Their uncle pulled Fern into the embrace. “We’ll be okay,” he promised them. “We’ll all be okay.”

And, as Fern liked to complain, she still pulled away and grumbled, “I’m hungry.”

“If you would like to start helping out your sister, I caught us some breakfast. Maybe you could walk to the market and buy us some eggs, Fern.”

At the berate, Fern pulled back, a sneer on her face. Illia couldn’t help but laugh at her sister’s disbelief at being told what to do.

“Excuse me—”

“It’s about time you started helping Illia out.”

Her uncle gave her a knowing smile over Fern’s head. Illia smiled to herself, slipping her hands into her pockets. Instantly, her hands grasped what lay there. A single snowflake on a silver chain. Knowing it would prompt too many questions from her sister, Illia left it there, knowing what it meant, and the gift she had been given.

The gift to live, for one night, unburdened before she embarked on a new, better future.

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