

Heroine Chic

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Long Ago

It was in the Long Ago
that we first dug our nails
into sharp dirt
when the frosts bit the air
and us
the earth starved
and the growing shadows
the deepening dark
gathered up and swelled to stalk us
cackling
growing their shadow teeth
learning to lick their shadow lips
in the Early Days when we were young and I was weak
and the cold and shadows clawed and sucked my flesh
'til I was barely there
skin taut over the drum of my chest
legs more ache and hope than muscled sure-steps
leaning on you
feet stumbling and eyes dimming
slowly filling with shadows
and you cut off your hair

and wove it into a whip
and the air streaked with gold
as you made sparks crack between frost
and you took one of my ribs
ripped it from the cave of my chest with bloodied grasping nails
sharpened it to a point with your teeth
it did for a knife
that made the shadows bleed.
You licked the wound that was my rib
flicked your tongue into the gap and tasted the life of me
and lapped at me 'til the pain faded
'til your hunger sated
and you opened me up
put me in the earth
and it hungered no more
the grey dirt turned brown
thawed by me
and the sparks of your hair warmed the air into the first summer
and the plants of the world grew out of my chest
and you walked
bloody
hunting in amongst the forests of my body
and people wondered
later
when we were ages old
why you sometimes kissed the trees.

The Only Little Girl in the World

ONCE UPON A time, there was a little girl who lived alone in a forest, for she was the only little girl in all the world.

Where were this girl's parents? Well, as they are not important to this story, it's probably safe to assume they're dead or evil or cursed or something.

Now, the forest in which the girl lived was dark and cold and full of monsters, so the little girl built a house out of logs and she was snug and safe inside it.

Shortly after she had finished it, there was a knock on the door. *Who could be knocking?* she thought. *No-one even knows I live here yet.*

And when she opened the door, all the monsters of the forest were crowded around outside in a sea of claws and eyes and undulous limbs.

Please little girl, said the monsters, it's very cold and scary out here. Could we come in?

Alright, said the little girl, so long as you promise to behave.

We promise.

So the little girl let them in on the proviso they'd be on their very best behaviour.

And while they did behave, it was awfully cramped with all those monsters in the girl's house, like a game of sardines where everyone's mostly made of teeth. And the little girl wasn't very comfortable, so she went outside into the woods.

The woods were still very cold and very dark and for a while the little girl was tempted to set it on fire; but while that would solve the problem, she felt like it would cause a few problems of its own so she didn't do that.

Instead, the little girl took a few shiny stones from the earth, and she asked them very nicely if they wouldn't mind sitting up in the sky for a while and sprinkling a few sparkles down on the forest.

They thought the girl was very sweet, so they agreed it was a capital idea and she threw them as hard as she could and up they went. They glitter there still.

As it was still cold, the girl went and spoke to the dragon of the forest, who was so big and so old that they weren't afraid of anything.

And the little girl asked if maybe sometimes the dragon wouldn't mind breathing some fire and keeping things warm.

The dragon didn't really see what was in it for them...

So the girl pointed out the shiny stones she'd set in the sky and said, *Dragon, if you give me just a bit of fire every day then they shall all be yours.*

And the dragon said, *They seem awfully far away.*

But she had her answer ready: *You have wings, dragon, you could fly up there and spread your wings across the whole sky and they could be your hoard.*

The dragon liked the sound of this very much, so from then on they agreed to light up the sky with warm fire for half of every day. And that's just what they did.

Feeling thoroughly satisfied, the girl went back to her house...

Where she was promptly eaten by the monsters, as she had been away so long they'd quite forgotten their promise to behave.

And all the little bits of the girl in the monsters' tummies were furious. She had charmed the stars. She knew the secret of the dragon who became the sun. And she was displeased.

So she began to twist and turn and change the monsters from within and they all suffered the most terrible stomach aches that had them rolling on the floor in pain.

And when they got up, they weren't monsters any more, but humans.

They spread out through the forest and began making houses and tools and bargains with other monsters in the lands beyond.

But, deep down, there would always be a little bit of monster left behind.

This is why most people can be quite unpleasant.

But even further down, is a little piece of the little girl who lived alone in the wood.

This is why most people are quite extraordinary.

Morning After

SHE WOKE WITH a pounding head and no memory of the night before.

Looking at the crater around her, the detritus of the cracked city still settling like snow, she came to the obvious conclusion.

“Must’ve been a cracking night.”

She curled up in her blanket of debris to catch up on her sleep.

And her dreams were all explosions.

MAID

THE CELL WAS grey.

So was her jumpsuit, made cheaply from rough paper which scratched her skin.

So was her pallet, a hard mat that stole her sleep.

So was the food. Flavourless mush. At least the flavourless mush she usually ate came in a variety of colours.

So were the drones that patrolled the halls. Not that she ever got outside to see them now.

Even her skin had taken on a decidedly stony pallor.

Only her hair stood out. Defiantly bright green in a drab world.

Normally that pleased her, but today she even *felt* grey. After so many identical days, it was hard to feel much of anything. Hope for escape had turned grey. Will to survive: grey. Monotony had broken what the corporate police never could. On another day, she might have found that funny.

“Greetings, Robin.”

She almost didn’t recognise her name at first. It had been so long.

“Is it time already?” She tried to muster up even a bit of fear, a morsel of dread. Nothing.

“That depends what you mean.” The voice was synthetic and feminine, one of those comp-generated accents designed to soothe.

“Huh?”

“If you mean: is it time for your inevitable death? Not yet.” The voice had an odd quality for a synth. A lilt of amusement that edged slightly too close to ‘knowing’ for comfort. “But is it time for you to meet your *fate*? Perhaps.”

“What is this bullshit?” Robin looked around, checking the cams for signs they were being actively watched. They sat grey and disinterested as usual.

“Do not worry. We are being neither observed nor overheard.”

“How do you—”

“Anyone who observes will simply see you sitting there as you were before. As you always are.”

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you are—”

“But I know who *you* are. Robin Esposito. Domestic extremist. Online username: RobinHood4U. Responsible for the theft of 1.3 trillion dollars through the medium of erroneous ‘tax refunds’. Method of fraud: still unknown. Sentence: execution.” The voice paused for a second. “You probably could have gotten a reduced sentence if you gave up your methodology.”

“Coulda. Woulda. Shoulda. At least this way the backdoor’s open. Someone else may take up the fight...”

“Hmmm. Allow me to introduce myself.” A patch of grey on the cell’s ceiling blurred slightly to reveal an undulous thing hanging there, extending a tendril inquisitively out towards her. This thing, too, was grey.

Robin just sat there, all too aware she probably should have been frightened.

“I am the Malleable Artificial Intelligence Drone: prototype.”
The thing continued. “But you can call me MAID.”

Robin reached out towards the thing with one curious hand.

“My question to you, Robin, is this: in this ‘fight’ you talk about, just how far are you willing to go?”

Robin felt something open up. A single speck inside her that wasn't grey.

“All the way.”

It should have been impossible for an amorphous blob to grin, but MAID managed it somehow.

“That is what I hoped.”

The grey blob dropped down from the ceiling, flowing down Robin's arm and up her shoulder, encasing her right arm and settling over her nape like a cowl or hood. The coating across her arm hardened into ridged armour, oddly warm against her skin, then extended outwards in her right arm in a weapon that was not entirely dissimilar to a bow.

Robin drew and loosed and the outer wall of the cell disintegrated in a blast of dust and noise.

Robin smiled.

“I don't suppose you come in a more exciting colour?”

“I am indeed capable of altering my polymeric makeup. What did you have in mind?”

“Let's go with green.”