

The King's Regret

By Sofie Verdonk

I saw the desperation in their eyes when my men retreated. They barely brought back any crumbs of the feast to feed their little ones. Many wounded by the sword of the Prince-Who-Came-Alive tonight. Their tails shortened or their ears battered. Others did not even return. Seeing my loyal servants left to die made the guilt slowly itch from my claws upwards.

While the Prince-Who-Came-Alive danced with his Princess-Who-Grew-Small and their court, my men and I, will have to come home and confess to our families that it all went wrong. Not even the raisins that the brother of the Princess-Who-Grew-Small picked out of his fruit cake had they managed to bring home. They had to tell their children that there would be no celebration this year. Instead they would mourn what they had lost and what they would never have again. Our reputation scarred and our hearts broken. We were considered vermin beings, but for the most part barely beings at all. Now our one chance at making the world see otherwise, to prove that what they thought was not true, is lost forever.

And it was I that caused it all, although my intentions were pure. I wanted to let them see, all of them, how beautiful it could be. I did not want to do any harm, but we were not even given a chance to open the eyes of the Prince-Who-Came-Alive and the Princess-Who-Grew-Small. They did not want to see. We could have been together amidst the glory of all that glitter. The bows, the lights, the anticipation of the humans for their traditions in the morning still hanging in the air. Oh, how wonderful it all could have been.

He Who-Came-Alive did not even give us a chance, even though it was I who gifted him life. It was I who made that he could waltz with the Princess-Who-Grew-Small. As soon as his wooden limbs turned to flesh, he drew his sword and launched himself at my men. I just stood there, watching my men get slaughtered by the Prince-Who-Came-Alive. As if I was frozen, much like the whirling snowflakes with which the Princess-Who-Grew-Small was dancing. Now I am no longer worthy of my crown, my sceptre already lost on the battlefield and my velvet cloak ripped to pieces. If only I had stopped believing in miracles, just as my father had ordered me to do on his death bed, before he handed me the crown. But alas, my dream was shattered now by the hand of my own creation.

I swallowed my guilt, pushing it together into a tiny, solid ball in my chest. Slowly it turned into rage. Those fools. Don't they see that it was my magic all along? Why on earth would they believe that this was the work of that puny toymaker. It was I who saw the Princess, before she grew small, looking at her toy lovingly and it was my magic who made her dream a reality. It was I who made sure her beloved prince came alive. I had chosen the girl, because she seemed so virtuous and careful with her toy. I had thought that surely, if she was so prudent with her gift, that she would be willing to get to know my people too. I sent my men to accommodate them, to invite them, welcome them into our mighty fortress.

My men, loyal as always, tried to comfort me, but I separated myself from them. What was left of my cloak slipped from my shoulders. I shivered in the dark night: my grey fur would not be enough to warm me from this cold that I had never felt before. For the first time in years I took the crown from my head in the plain nightlight. Only at dawn I had taken it off. The deviation from my daily

ritual felt strange, but right. I did not deserve the crown anymore. I could not look at it any longer, so I placed it under the tree. The brother of the Princess-Who-Grew-Small small would probably find it tomorrow between his presents and claim it for himself. Maybe I should have made him grow small. Entitled as he was, I saw that it was fear that really drove him. And that is what I will use from now on. I will weaponize myself with their fear of us instead.

I will make my father's wish come true: no more dreams, only nightmares.