



THE STORYTELLER

Brent ducked into the alleyway, leading an entourage of children away from the market to a makeshift stage. He hopped up on the boxes and peered over his audience's heads, waiting for the guard to turn away. Once the path cleared, Brent ushered the children closer, bending his knees to reach their level.

"You ready for a story? Cause I got a good one." He grinned, his audience rapt, and continued, "This is a story about someone you all know: Madame Gonzo!"

"Madame Gonzo!" one child proclaimed. "She's the nice old lady who runs the market square!"

"She gave me a lemon cake yesterday!" another added.

“That’s right! But, did you hear she had a granddaughter? There’s a story—a rumor, I mean, that Madame Gonzo’s granddaughter was born with a flower blossoming on her head.” Brent focused as the children’s faces lit up. “Haven’t you heard? I imagine not! Old Madame Gonzo once had a granddaughter, and well, a beautiful white flower crooned towards the sky at her birth. Her mother, the pernicious witch Angelana, never named the child, but Old Madame Gonzo called her Rhodana, like the song you sing in school.

“The story goes, on a sad-sad note, that the Evil Witch Angelana killed her daughter. But I believe Rhodana is alive! Wouldn’t that be something? Wouldn’t that be—”

“Mr. Harley!”

Brent shot up. “Cap—Captain Carver!”

The captain grabbed a fist full of Brent’s curls and dragged him back into the market, “What have I told you, boy?”

“No stories,” Brent muttered.

“I’m sorry?”

“Under statute 19-10-20-B, storytelling by the general populace is prohibited on the counts of hearsay, rumors, malice, and destruction.” Brent winced as Captain Carver dug deeper into his hair. “All those over the age of twenty-one will be sent to Newbird’s Pit.”

“And how old are you, Mr. Harley?”

“I turn twenty-one after Year Birth.”

“Then think about where you want to end up.” The captain tossed him onto the pavement before marching towards the cadets on the far side of the square.

Brent clutched the ground, digging his fingers into the dirt between each of the cobblestones while clenching his eyes shut. He cursed once, pleading that no one watched; of course, they did. How could they not? How many times had he been tossed to the side after another story? He wasn't even twenty-one yet, so why did it matter?

Because of your stamp. As he sat up, Brent rolled up the sleeve of his coat past where a leather bracelet clamped around his wrist. Beneath it sat two black triangles, connected like an hourglass, upon his wrist. He ran his finger over it, tracing up to the back of his hand where another stenciled image of a single triangle, like a shadow of the stamp on his wrist, rested beneath his knuckles. No one ever noticed this one, not like the black stamp on his wrist, but its mere presence wore heavily on his heart. With it, he lost his ability to love, assigned to another for an empty marriage.

His attention drifted to the wooden fence on the eastern side of the market, blockading Newbird's Pit, the domicile's shantytown harboring all those subjected

to vagrancy. It extended down the road to where the Senator's Gardens stood as the precious gem of Newbird's Arm, and up past the square towards the stairs of the Temple of the Effluvium. As the watchful eye of the Order, the Temple gazed upon the town with its ruby embezzled Year Glass, counting down the final moments to the New Year.

Probably two days. When the sun hits the pinnacle in the sky, and the Effluvium is the highest. There we will sing...and a king will —

Shite. Stop thinking up stories. It's no good for you.

Brent rose, coming face-to-face with the lovely Jemma Reds—her hair the color of her name, and brown eyes as scornful as her scowl.

"Jem," Brent gulped. "Hi. Sorry. I—I was...I mean the children wanted a story and I—"

"What am I going to do with you, Brenton?" Jemma tugged him away. A stenciled triangle identical to the one on Brent's hand garnished her hand. "At this rate, you're going to end up in the Pit before I come of age. Can you not contain yourself for a fortnight?"

"What does it matter? Neither of us wants this."

Jemma pinched the bridge of her nose as she led Brent away from the center of town. He hunched his shoulders to hide his face, digging one of his hands into his pocket. People watched. The captain always made a

scene at the mere mention of stories, and even with his departure, his stringent words hung in the air. The stamp on Brent's wrist only helped to make him a moving target. The moment he passed his first birthday and his eyes failed to darken from silver, the Order marched onto his family's doorstep. They stamped his wrist black and cleansed him, to protect the Effluvium—the binding mist of life, death, and everything—and keep demons from latching onto his back.

The Effluvium haunted the landscape, descending from the mountains and encapsulating the fields, sifting over the river through town, and decorating the land with malcontent. Dirt spiraled from the roads, and with each gust of wind, the trees trembled.

"Miss Jemma," a shopkeeper called as Brent and Jemma walked past. "Good day to you. A pleasant day, no doubt."

"And in the arms of the Effluvium, and from the mountain, it will continue," Jemma acknowledged. She approached the shopkeeper, "Good wares today, I hope. I heard Grover's Marsh avoided another plague this season, so their citrus should be impeccable!"

"Ay, is true Miss Jemma," the shopkeeper beamed. "A new crate of lemons arrived this morning."

"Could I—" Brent mumbled, reaching for a coin in his pocket.

"We don't serve your kind here," the shopkeeper snapped. "Go back to the Pit like the rest of ya vags."

"I'm not—"

"Brent, go," Jemma hissed. "I'll see you later."

"A'ight, fine..." Brent exhaled. He should've been used to Jemma's bluntness by now, but he couldn't help holding out that perhaps she would open her heart.

"Miss Jemma, you are so noble to love a vagrant like him," the shopkeeper remarked. "Not many could handle a man with a black stamp."

Love? Is that the story they're going with now? Brent shook his head.

He plodded into the heart of the town square, ignoring the glares of most shopkeepers. Old Madame Gonzo waved to him from the wicker chair on her porch. On some days, he sat with her and watched the world go by, listening to her so-called *facts*. But were facts not stories of a different nature? Local legends, old wives' tales, rumors, and facts; why did they chastise Brent for similar tales?

Brent waved to Madame Gonzo as he kept moving. Eyes watched him, and he swore murmurs followed with disgust. The orneriest of the guffaws and shouts came from the steps leading towards the Temple, where a group of cadets sat smoking. Heralded by Christof Carver, the captain's son, the cadets threw their dead

smokes at him, yelling to get into the Pit. Brent hid in his shoulders, flinching as one of Christof's smokes hit him in the face, scuffling along as fast as he could towards the edge of the market.

Remember the time you got all those smokes stuck in your hair? Brent brushed his curls back and restrained a nervous laugh. Bria spent all those hours removing them. What a tale...imagine if my head lit on—stop it! No stories!

Brent shut down his thoughts and diverted his gaze towards a merchant selling wicker baskets. Beside the merchant, his daughter placed flowers in a child's hair, smiling. Brent's heart skipped. The lovely Bria Smidt, with eyes darker than her skin and dimples in her cheeks punctuating her smiles, always stopped him in his tracks. He still dreamed of the nights they walked together through the Senator's Gardens, talking and laughing, smiling and kissing.

Things were different then.

"Brent!" she called as she put the last flower into the child's hair, "You alright?"

Brent shrugged.

Bria frowned, sending the child on their way, before walking over to Brent and placing her hand on his arm, "So no."

"I'm a'ight, really."

Bria saw through it. "I saw Captain Carver make a scene. He's been picking you out more and more lately."

"I'm turning twenty-one soon. I guess I gotta...I mean, I need to start behaving."

"You mean stop telling stories?"

"Yeah."

"That's stupid, though! You love telling stories." Bria kicked the ground. "You should just run—"

"I can't."

"I'll—"

"Harley! What're you doing?" Cadet Christof Carver shouted, marching across the plaza. He mimicked his father's walk, his chest puffed outwards while stomping his feet.

"I'm just...I'm talking." Brent turned, though Bria's fingers stayed on his arm. "I'm allowed to do that, right?"

Christof's nostrils flared, "Not for long."

"Leave him alone. He's not doing anything wrong." Bria glared up at Christof.

"You shouldn't be talking to him, Briannabella. Doesn't look good for you either."

"I said go away, Cadet Carver!"

Christof grabbed her wrist. "You shouldn't talk to me like that, doll. Just 'cause I'm stuck on you now doesn't mean I'll always be."

"I don't care!" she protested, tugging away, "Let go of me!"

"Please stop!" Brent held his hands up and brought his hands to his head. His throat tightened, the anxious gong in his head starting to vibrate as he took a step backward. "I'm—I'm leaving, a'ight? There's no reason to fight. I mean, please...don't."

Before anyone replied, Brent backed into the market. The mist from the mountains had grown heavier around him, but that was far from unusual. Sometimes, Brent wondered if the mist had a way of knowing when someone needed it the most, to become invisible, to hide their sorrow.

Once upon a time, a sad monster lived in the mist. It knitted a cloak out of the fog and walked at night with the clouds. The townsfolk spoke—

He shook his head, and the story vanished, just as he tripped backward into someone.

"Oh! I'm—I'm so sorry. I didn't mean..." He turned. "I'm sorry—"

A pale woman draped in black gawked back at him. She opened her mouth to say something, but as soon as she breathed, a fog trickled over her, and she was gone.