

Meeting Again (Man to Reincarnated Princess TG)

By FoxFaceStories

A Commission for AI

Evan is miserable, lonely, and stuck in a dead end job. But everything changes when he realises he is being stalked by a strange man who says he is Evan's royal princely lover from a previous life, when Evan was a princess who was cursed by an evil sorcerer never to be able to reunite with the prince. But when the stalker triggers a spell that turns Evan into a woman, the former man must try to figure out if the man's words are true, and what she intends to do to change back . . . or not.

Meeting Again

I was sick of working. Aren't we all? No one *wants* to work, not really. At least, not those without some passion in what they do: artists and the like. God, I wish I'd followed my teenage dreams and gone to painting school. I loved painting when I was a kid, hell, right up until I was a teen. But painting doesn't pay the bills, or keep the water running.

So instead, I work at a tinned tomato factory.

Yep. I'm the guy who stands next to the conveyor belt with gloves and mask on, sorting out the gross messes of the good tomatoes and the bad before they get further pulped. Sometimes, when I'm feeling really refined and elite, I get to the guy overseeing the can fittings. The place stinks. You don't think of tomatoes stinking, but in that concentration and with a higher failure than you'd imagine, they certainly do. But the stink isn't the bad part, even if it's hard to wash off back at your shitty little sixth floor apartment that sits below a chronic masturbator and above a family of five packed in like sardines. No, the bad part is just how *depressing* the whole place is. It's all concrete and steel and automation, the posts all separated out so that human contact is barely existent. Just rote work for hours on end, reducing you to an organic machine who is bored out of his goddamn mind.

So yeah, I was sick of working. Sick of a lot of things, actually. It's bad enough being stuck in a dead end job, but it's worse to be so depersonalised. For much of my life I'd felt like a stranger, only able to express myself in art and colour, and now even that was taken from me in the grey industrial hub I was forced to live in. The fact that I had been lonely for a long time didn't help. Most people when they see me guess that I'm in my mid-thirties. Mid-forties, if they catch my thousand-yard stare after a long shift at the tin-tomato factory. But in truth I'm only twenty four years old, in the technical prime of my life. But between the tomato stains that never leave my damn skin, the horrible acne that comes from the shitty air quality in the factory, and my own poor diet due to the low, shitty pay, I've aged prematurely. I

swear, I used to be complimented on my whole black-hair-with-bright-blue-eyes combo. It got me my first girlfriend back in high school. She called me 'mysterious.' Now, it just looks permanently greasy and ratty, like the very oils in the air of that place have seeped into my scalp. Let's just say there's a reason I haven't had a girlfriend in years, and it's not been for lack of trying, though I haven't tried much lately. What would be the point? I sort the bad tomatoes from the good on an endless conveyor belt to nowhere. A fitting metaphor for my life. About the only thing left to me during those long shifts is my imagination, where I can conjure up all sorts of fantastical realms, full of valiant knights and gorgeous princesses, or true love and romance, of chivalry and magic. The stuff I used to draw and paint vividly now exists only in my head, and I'm too embarrassed to tell anyone about it. Anyway, who would I tell?

But all of this is a preamble. A preview of my shitty, sucky, dead-end life. Because the thing is, one day things changed in a real big way, and not in a fun one. At least, not at first. I'm doing much, much better now, but I won't spoil the end of the story. Stories, and how they're told, are important. And this one begins after a no good, bad, terrible shift that left my hands stained black with rotten tomato juice. It begins with two things: the first being my imagination, and the second being my very real stalker.

At least, I *thought* he was a stalker when I first noticed him. He turned out to be a lot, *lot* more . . .

I had just finished my Friday shift and was looking forward to the weekend. Not that I tended to do much on weekends; I only had a few friends and they had all moved interstate to get out of the nowhere shithole I was stuck in. The few acquaintances I had were just run-down drinking buddies to catch a beer with after work and try to forget how miserable our lives were. Still, I'd been saving up some money to get some new paints for my watercolours. My apartment may have been small, but there was just enough space for my art and my creativity, though it was barely a side-hobby these days. I had in my mind an image of Princess Raelyn on the great fields of Yllith, her blue dress fluttering from the wind that rang across the great steppe. In the distance, barely perceptible, a long rider would approach. The valiant Prince Henric, come to meet his love, and spirit her back to his land and away from her torments. It was all in my head, of course, probably bits stolen from *Lord of the Rings* and other fantasy classics, but it was a powerful image all the same. The kind I dreamed of. The kind that flooded my imagination during a boring shift of sorting bad tomatoes from the good, and then the walk back to the apartment afterwards.

So that's part one of this introduction; my imagination.

Part two, of course, was the bit I began to notice far too late. I was turning a corner, the evening light giving away to darkness in the industrial suburbs, when I was finally pulled from my imagination. I was just considering a potential antagonist to add to my inner canon - a necromancer or wizard perhaps, who could be striking not in water colour but in lead pencil portrait - when I suddenly was hit with the eerie sensation that I was being watched. Not just watched, in fact, but followed. I increased my pace, and very carefully looked around behind me. It was looking to be a cold night, so it was difficult to discern who was following me, only that they were wearing a grey coat of some kind, one that covered much of his or her form.

No, it was definitely a *him*, just judging from the broader shoulders and stature.

I was probably being paranoid, at least that was my thought at the time. I quickened my pace further, but then the figure began to move faster as well. I deviated from my usual route and they followed, by which point my heart was starting to race. I wasn't a small man, but wasn't a big one either, and this figure looked to be a little bigger than me. Besides, who knows what he had on him? I tried to think of what to do, and decided that I needed to at least face this person, and see if it was just some practical joke. I swivelled on the spot, at which point the man halted, his face shrouded in shadow. For just the most fleeting moment I felt a glimmer of recognition.

"Do I know you?" I asked, and it was an honest question.

The figure was silent, hesitant. Their body language had changed completely, and they took a backstep.

And then suddenly they turned and walked away, back into the shadows of the city.

They must have had the wrong person. That's what I thought at the time. I returned to my apartment, showered off as much of my tomato stench as I could, and got to work on my paintings. Time passed easily as I worked, and I didn't even realise that it was nearly midnight when I finished my piece. It was not the intended one, but rather an image of Princess Raelyn up close, her face beautiful and elegant and yet defiant. Yearning to be with her lover, and sincere in her belief that she would again.

It was one of the best pieces I had ever drawn, and when I slept, I dreamed of her.

The weekend passed ordinarily and with some boredom. I could only afford so much paint, and my little apartment only so many paint *fumes*, so when I wasn't participating in my art I was either daydreaming, reading one of my many second-hand fantasy books, or simply working out my budget for the week, which was quite meagre. I returned to work with the same damned resignation I seemingly always carried by that point, though I couldn't help but notice that it seriously looked like some of my black hairs were going a bit grey prematurely

at the temples, from stress or the pollution of the factory. It matched the bags under my eyes, and the dryness of my lips. I looked, in two simple words, *run down*. There was a reason that coffee was one of my major expenses.

As usual, I shut my brain off at work, lighting up my neurons only to look more attentive before the brief gaze of a passing manager, or more commonly to imagine fantasy worlds and fictitious individuals to populate them with. The land of Hytheria remained my proudest work; it was dotted with continents and wild spaces like the Fey Fields and the Jagged Spires, and neighbouring kingdoms and city-states like Jaharis and Mithradatia, which were full of magic and intrigue and courtly wonders. For the first time in a long time, the end of the day came earlier than expected in my mind, and I left in, if not high spirits, then some kind of spirit at least.

That was until the stalker returned. They were still in a dark cloak, still following my pace, still inquisitive in their body language without being totally threatening. Still, it put me greatly on edge, and I picked up my pace to a full job. The figure let me run away. I slept and dreamed of my fantasy worlds, of Raelyn and Henric's forbidden love, and of a villainous wizard type with long dark hair and an unknown name. But now the dreams were being spoiled, my nightly escape intruded upon: the cloaked individual was in there too.

"*Evan,*" he said in his dreams. "*Wake up, Evan. You must wake up.*"

I did, shaking away my confusion, and went to work. And yet each night the stalker followed me. I was no fool; I contacted the police after the fourth time. There was little they could do, but after a patrol car came around, the man who was following me disappeared for a while.

But only for a while.

I began to notice him elsewhere. He no longer followed me home, but I saw him out on the street in the morning or during the day looking up at my apartment. I caught him waiting at the bus stop I usually used to get into the centre of town (me not being able to afford a car). I even saw - and this was the most terrifying thing of all - at the arts and crafts shop I often visited for my supplies, as well as at the second-hand bookstore where I collected my novels. Those two weeks were increasingly frightful to me, and my sleep suffered as a result. The distant realm of Hytheria was stolen from my nights and my working imagination, replaced with a fear of who on Earth would be stalking me and why.

I had always been a fairly passive individual. Perhaps *resigned* would be a better way to put it. But a man can only be pushed so far, and the authorities proven so useless, before a passive individual becomes an aggressive one. I decided to confront this mysterious figure, whenever I saw him next, and demand he leave me alone.

I got my chance two and a half weeks after my strange follower had first appeared. I very nearly reneged on my promise to myself, because it was, once again, when I was returning home to my apartment in the evening. I had not seen the stalker in over a week on this route, and his return startled me. He was approaching more quickly this time too, moving with alacrity to catch up. It scared the living shit out of me, and so I moved quickly. He followed, but didn't let up, and for the first time the figure spoke.

"Please! We need to talk!"

"Stop following me!" I croaked, sounded far more nervous than I wanted to. "I don't have anything you want."

I moved through an alley in the hopes it would dissuade him, but he followed anyway.

"I am sure now. I am sure you are the one!"

His voice was surprisingly young, probably in the mid-twenties or so like me. It sounded borderline regal in nature, and once again I was reminded of something, or something, that I must have known a long time ago but since forgotten. It was uncanny. I couldn't dwell on it, though, because when a mysterious stranger following you in a dark alley proclaims that you are 'the one' then it's high time to get the hell out of Dodge, as far as I was concerned.

So I began to run.

"Please! If we can only talk. Please, I know this will make me sound mad out of my mind, but we know each other! We have known each other a long time ago, in another world!"

I dodged out of the alley and crossed the street. The city's central park had seen better days, but at least it was well illuminated, if empty. I fumbled with my phone as I moved, trying to call the police. But my digits were still a bit slimy from the work at the factory, no matter how many times I had tried to wash them over.

"Goddmanit!" I complained. "Someone fucking help me!"

But there was no one present, and the figure was gaining ground, still pleading for me to stop and talk. It was terrifying, and my heart felt like it was about to explode in my chest, but after a long day of work I was getting winded, and I wouldn't have the energy to confront him if he kept catching up. So I stopped at the duck pond where all the benches say, and turned around to face him. Me, Evan Masters, who'd never been in a single fight in his life.

"Stop right fucking there!" I declared. "I've got mace, and a knife. And a gun."

The gun bit was going too far. I very clearly did not have a gun. Still, the figure paused, and I could just barely make out his face, which was young and handsome and square-jawed. He put his hands up, and for a moment I thought this crazed man was pulling

out a weapon. Instead, he removed the hoodie of his coat, revealing his looks entirely. He was indeed handsome - for a dude, obviously - but I was unprepared for how atypical for a stalker he looked. I had imagined someone ghastly, perhaps with physical deformities or sagging jowls or aged looks. You know, the stereotypical sort of thing. But instead this man looked like something right out of my overactive imagination; a princely figure who just happened to be wearing a concealing coat. His hair was blonde and surprisingly light, almost platinum in colour. Almost. His eyes were not blue, at least I didn't think they were: while he was standing near one of the park lights it was still difficult to discern entirely, but they might have been slate grey. He had a strong jaw, and an almost pensive expression, as if while he was in mid-twenties and clearly in good health, he nevertheless possessed wisdom and experience well beyond his years. His eyebrows were pushed up in an expression of concern, and he extended one hand out to me, though we were over ten feet apart, in an almost courtly manner, half-bowing.

"Please," he said, in that voice that seemed to harken back to another time, another age, "I mean you no harm, you who presently call yourself Evan Masters."

"Don't take another fucking step!" I said. "I meant it, you fucking stalker creep!"

He went rigid, stood tall again. His expression only became more concerned.

"I thought . . . you really don't remember me, do you?"

Again, that voice. That slight glimmer of reflection in my mind. It was quickly stomped out, though. "I have no fucking clue who you are. I'm just a guy who works at a tomato factory, okay? I need you to leave me the hell alone. You've got me mixed up."

He was silent for a moment, and it made me realise just how nervous I was: my blood was *coursing* through my arteries, *ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump*.

"I thought perhaps you had started to remember as well," he said, his voice stalwart and strong, brass without being baritone. "The way you looked at me several times. I tried to be in places you would remember, but I wasn't sure it was you at first, Raelyn."

At the word 'Raelyn' my jaw dropped.

"How do you know that name? Have you been in my fucking apartment? Who the hell are you and what do you want?"

"I am Henry," he said. "Henry Dart. But my name *was* Prince Henric Dartannion of Kingdom of Jaharis, in the land of Hytheria, many years go and an entire plane of existence away. I have not seen your apartment, though I know where it is. I felt too much of an intruder slipping into your life and trying to ascertain if you are indeed the one already, I refused to enter your sanctum and trespass upon your sacred privacy."

The man was a nut, that much was clear to me. At least, that's what I thought at the time. But the fact that he somehow knew words and terms and places and people from my imagination, from the land of Hytheria that only existed in silly little scrawls in lost journals

from my teenagehood and paintings in my apartment . . . it was terrifying. Terrifying and confusing.

“You must have been in my apartment. How the hell do you know those places and names? Those are things I made up. I never published anything. Have you - have you been going through my goddamn trash or something?”

He scrunched up his face at that, appearing almost prudish. “I would never, not even in *this* life. I may be a humble retail worker, but my eyes have been opened. The dread wizard’s magic is starting to fail. Now, after so, so long I can finally remember who I am, and far more importantly who *you* are, and who you should be, my Raelyn.”

“Stop saying that,” I said, edging back. “My name is Evan Masters. Why are you calling me Raelyn? She’s just a fictional princess in my imagination.”

“She’s not!” the man insisted, taking a cautious step forward. “She is very real because she is *you*, Evan. We were not meant to live in this world, or in this time. We were star crossed lovers, you and I. You, the Princess of Shalar, rival kingdom to my father’s own, and I Prince Henric. We met upon the steppes, don’t you remember? You were out riding, disobeying your father’s wishes, when your horse threw a shoe and took off. I found you, and for a time we did not know one another in this neutral ground, so we began talking. And then, we began meeting in secret. And then, we fell in love.”

The painting I had most recently completed hung heavy in my mind. The image of the steppes in all their beauty, the raven-haired princess gazing into the distance as the valiant blonde prince approached. In the painting, I had made her dress a dark ocean against the vibrant green of the windswept grass. How could he possibly have known about that? I had finished it only the previous night, and it had no written detail.

“What were the steppes called?” I asked.

His answer was immediate: “Yllith.”

I stammered, not knowing what to say. He gave a confident smile, as if he had won a case, having succeeded in bringing the jury around. Another step forward, and this time I didn’t step back.

“You can’t have known that-” I started.

“Unless I were a mind-reader, or unless I were there. But I *was* there, as were you. Is it any wonder that you dream of another life, my love? Of an escape back to who you are meant to be? I too dreamed of this other life, and it haunted me. I thought I was going insane, but slowly the curse of the wizard began to break, time having weakened its bonds upon me. Your father did not want us wed. He feared the joining of our two kingdoms, and a Jaharan having power over Shalar. He gained the service of a foul wizard, and it was he who ambushed us at our meeting place when I came to spirit you away and elope with you. We were slain that day, but his dark magic went much further and fouler than even that

murderous act. He cursed our corpses, our very essences, so that we would never find happiness, nor our homes, nor our true forms ever again. We would be reincarnated across different worlds, none of them our own, in different forms and lives that would be filled with misery. Such was your father's hatred not only for me, but for you for 'betraying' him. We have spent lives as rodents, insects, and other scuttling things, as victims of war and disease, as unjustly accused prisoners and put-upon serfs. We have even been monsters: minotaurs, medusas, things that lurk in the dark and are feared by men. But never feared or loved together. Always apart, always different, and always haunted by how unnatural our existence seems to be. Always dreaming of another life that we had lost."

He took another step. By this point, my breath was coming faster. This was all crazy talk. I should have run by that point. Fled all the way past my apartment and out of town and never looked back. But there was something so intensely familiar about the man, and his words were rocking me to my core. How could he know all of these things?

"Raelyn, I speak the truth," he said softly, looking at me with eyes full of passion. "You are my one and only. In this latest lifetime, I have been a retail worker, constantly abused and mocked and belittled by awful customers, my life full of malaise. Our sufferings often have a theme, and I know that your own life has clearly been hard in its own way."

I thought of my work at the tomato tin factory. 'Malaise' was an understatement. Still, his words were impossible. His story sheer ludicrousness.

"Look, I don't know how you know all of this, Henry, but you're deluded. I think you might be mentally ill. I'm no princess - you can see that - I'm just a sad as shit lonely guy with a miserable fucking life and a crazy guy in front of him who is starting to make me very, very nervous. I need to go, and you need to never follow me again, or I *will* make sure you are locked up for stalking and harassment."

His dismay was immediate and obvious. "I can't convince you. I don't blame you for not believing me, Raelyn-

"Evan," I insisted, gritting my teeth together.

"Evan, then. It is a fantastical story. Just a few months ago I wasn't even speaking like this, out of step with this time and age. But then my memories returned with the weakening of the mage's foul magic. And so, I have one last resort to make you understand that I am who I say I am, and that you are indeed a princess, and my one true love."

He reached into his pocket, sending a shiver down my spine. But it was not a weapon he produced, but a printed sheet of paper. He held it as if it were an ancient artefact however, like some kind of weathered scroll one would expect to see in a fantasy show or whatever.

"Look, if you don't back off right now-

“I’m sorry about this,” he said, “but you’ll just have to trust me, Raelyn. You always did before. I’m asking you to trust me again now.”

And with that, he began to speak in a series of strange intonations, in what sounded like not just another language, but a language that was truly out of this world. I began to move away, but to my shock the paper in his hands actually began to *light up*. It was only a regular printed A4 sheet, unfolded from where it had sat in his pocket, and the print looked like it had come from a computer. But the *words* held a power, for as he spoke they seemed to melt off of the page like wax, becoming golden emblems of light that poured over me. I was stuck fast to the ground, unable to move as these sigils of light entered me, scrawling strange runes upon my arms before dissipating entirely. They were warm. Not hot, or painful, though perhaps a little discomfoting. But certainly enough to freak me the hell out, because I was trembling in terror.

“S-stop! What is this? Some kind of trick! Let me go!”

But still he changed, and still the strange light poured into me, through me, enveloping me in a substance I couldn’t understand. It was like something straight out of my dreams, and again there was that flinch of recognition that I couldn’t quite understand. Finally, it finished as he stopped speaking, and the light dissipated.

“Now,” the man calling himself Henry and Henric said, “the magic will take time to settle, but if you stay here with me I will be able to guide you to-”

I turned tail and ran. I don’t think I’ve ever run faster in my entire life, or that I’ll ever run that fast again. I certainly can’t do that now, ha!

I was coursing with adrenaline by the time I got home to my shitty little apartment. I was no longer trapped in a malaise or misery, just a deep-seated confusion mixed with horror and disbelief. Magic - actual magic - had poured into me, and there was no mistaking it. It made it hard to look at my various paintings, doodles, and drawings around the room, and certainly my fantasy book collection as well, knowing what I had just experienced. With shaking hands, I locked the door and then the latch, closed my blinds and curtains, and grabbed my phone to call the police.

Only to stop. They wouldn’t believe me anyway, would they? I’d be dragged off to the damn loony bin. The fact that I looked like a crazy person with my prematurely aged and stained features would only make me more suspicious. But then who could I even turn to? My folks weren’t around anymore, and I didn’t have friends in the city.

“I just need to rationalise this,” I mumbled to myself. “Figure out what’s happened and come to some sense over it.”

I looked at the painting I had done of Princess Raelyn, with her raven-black hair and soft yet icy eyes. She was fierce and beautiful and innocent all at once, determined in her love. I found myself drawn to that painting, the one I had felt oddly compelled to create. I placed a hand upon it and experienced a strange affinity that was beyond words. Still, I managed to resist the feeling long enough to scoff.

“No way am I really you,” I said. “I work in a canned tomato factory. Hell will freeze over before I end up being prin-NGHH!!!”

I was immediately hit with that odd warmth again, only now it had risen to a great heat within my stomach. I doubled over, nearly smashing the painting over before I gathered myself. There was a pressure in my core, and it was expanding quickly, arcing out to extend through my limbs and up into my brain. For a moment I was terrified that I was having a heart attack or stroke, but then my skin began to glow - *actually* glow.

“What - no. No, no, no! What is it doing?”

I quickly found out, because right before my eyes my arms began to shrink down, reducing not only in length but in thickness, the skin losing its calluses and marks and blemishes and stains - so many stains. The same was true of my legs, which shunted down a couple of inches, leaving me shorter. I gasped as my entire being began to glow and this was followed by the eradication of all my body hair bar what I could feel in my underwear.

“Oh G-God! What the f-fuck!? He didn’t say he was going to turn me into her! He’s turning me into a f-fucking princess!”

If I was being a bit premature in my proclamation, the next series of changes removed all doubt. I clung to the painting, barely able to keep on my own two feet, when suddenly those very feet - and my hands - also changed. The experience was strangely pleasant, which only made me panic further, as my hands lost their stains and warts and cracked nails, and instead shifted to become demure and beautiful, with long nails painted a dark blue.

“Ambulance!” I shouted to myself. “Ambulance!”

I grabbed my phone, fumbling with my altered hands, even as further changes came over my body. Different parts of me tensed and pushed and pulled. My hips stretched out like taffy, while my waist pinched in. My hair slid down the back of my neck and continued over my shoulders. My face warped and shifted, the skin going briefly numb before regaining feeling and then some: all of my skin was beginning to feel soft and sensitive, bereft of anything but the lightest of hairs. I moaned as my rear became just a little more pronounced, while my lips - previously quite thin - became full, especially at the bottom lip. It was like nothing I’d ever experienced before, and with each change the heat rose within me, the golden light glowing every brighter. It was terrible. It was incredible. It was alien in every possible sense.

And yet it was as intensely familiar.

“Wh-why me? Why is this h-happening? I j-just want to f-fucking paint! I didn’t want any of thisssss - Ohhhhhh! Ahhhhh!! MHHMM!!!”

Something *bloomed* within my lower stomach, as if a new organ was lurching into being. My belly became slim, but something gave it the smallest natural pooch. I tore at my shirt and trousers, removing as much of what I was wearing as possible. My voice was going ever higher, ever sweeter, almost musical in its quality, and this was accompanied by the further extension of my increasingly silky black hair.

“Stop it! Damn you, Henry or Henric or whatever the fuck your name is! I’m not a princess! I’m not - oh my God.”

The whole time I had been changing, I had also been staggering past numerous paintings and portraits and pencillings of my art, most of it from what I had assumed was the entirely fictitious land of Hytheria. But now I had come to my bedroom, and was standing before my full length mirror. I didn’t have the light on, but my golden glow was sufficient enough. It masked my features, making me more of a living sketch of light. Barely so more than a profile - but a profile was enough. In fact, a profile was *worse*.

Because in that moment my profile, my silhouette, matched perfectly to Princess Raelyn of Shalar in my head, the very same outline that had been half-sketched on paper just two days before. The same princess who my stalker had claimed me to truly be, and had somehow transformed me into.

“No,” I whispered to myself. I very nearly stepped closer to see myself fully, but held myself at bay. The pressure in my chest was growing, and I could feel my nipples expanding on my now-naked chest. It was enough to make me terrified, especially as they began to *bloom*. I staggered on my feet, trying not to moan in a strange sense of bliss and discomfort as the twisting sensations extended down to between my thighs. I was becoming a woman. There was no other conclusion to be reached. Somehow, my stalker was convinced I was a princess long lost to him, and he had magically cast a spell to make me have her body. The weight grew on my chest. Something opened up inside me, tunnelling towards my genitals. I was reaching the end of my changes, and soon I wouldn’t even be a man at all. I would be a woman. I would be a princess. I would be . . . no!

“I’M NOT RAELYN!” I screamed in a refined, female voice.

I was immediately hit by a wave of lightheadedness. Staggering away from the mirror, I collapsed into my bed, eyes dimming. In moments, I fell unconscious, even as the golden light continued to surge across my body and change me.

The dreams I had that night were more vivid than any other I had ever experienced. I was riding on horseback, as if I were rich and well-off and cultured enough to do so all of my life. I was clothed in a beautiful blue dress of medieval design, which protected me from the elements while still revealing my womanly figure. Yes, in this dream I was a woman, a raven-haired lass of only twenty years old, with stormy eyes and disposition, who was travelling across the great steppes of Yllith to meet her princely love. And, as is often the case with dreams, there was nothing strange about this. It felt totally real, and totally right. I was Princess Raelyn of the Kingdom of Shalar, one of the most beautiful women in all the lands. And my heart belonged to the handsome, dashing, kindly prince of my own father's rival realm. I made my horse gallop ever faster, intent on meeting him. I needed to see my Henric, and plant my lips upon his. I needed to wed him.

I awoke from that dream slowly. Often, my sleep was rather terrible, at least back then. Between my coffee addiction, my tiredness from work, my overactive imagination and general depression, I pretty much never got my full eight to nine hours, and always woke up several times in the night. This time, however, I had slept all the way through, the sunlight that showed beneath the blinds was full from the midday sun. I felt *magnificently* well-rested, and for a number of long seconds I simply luxuriated in the sensation so the first good sleep I'd had in a long, long while.

That was, until I shifted a little on my side, and noticed a few strange things about my body. My mind was just waking up, so the curious sensation of two fleshy weights on my chest, one pressing down a little on the other, took a bit to register. The same for the general softness of my body, or the fact that my short hair was somehow covering one entire eye while also slipping back over my shoulder blades. I slid a hand down over my hip, and found it much more generously *rondure* than it had ever been. The same was true of my rear. And then I lowered a hand between my thighs and -

“What the fuck!?”

I ripped off the covers of my doona and sat up, causing part of my chest to jiggle heavily in an uncanny manner. I was met with a sight that should not have been. Right there, sitting on my chest and obscuring part of my lower body, were two breasts. They were not small ones either, though perhaps it was simply perspective that made them look so large. Certainly, they had a defined weight and presence to them. I had to push back incredibly long strands of black hair to take in the full sight of those pert breasts with their lovely pink nipples, though they didn't seem too lovely on me!

“Oh God. This is a dream. This is my imagination.”

I clasped my throat. My voice had changed. It was now a mezzo-soprano, sweet yet powerful, the kind of voice that could be haughty and commanding, but soft and vulnerable. And it was *very* vulnerable right now.

“I even sound like a lady.”

I held my hands up before me, and they too had changed, becoming lithe and feminine, with perfect nails that had been polished a subtle blue. Hesitantly, I lowered one between my thighs again, and winced as I did not encounter my manhood but rather a feminine slit. I had a vagina. A pussy. A damned pussy! I slipped my fingers insider and-

“Nope! No way! Not doing that! Not even looking at it!”

I got out of bed, pinching myself repeatedly to wake myself, which only confirmed that I was indeed awake and in reality. My mind raced with memories of the previous night with the stalker, and the strange things this Henry/Henric had talked of. The spell, the golden light, the dreams of *being* Princess Raelyn, somehow.

“I can’t be. I just can’t be.”

But I approached the mirror nonetheless. Everything about my body felt strange to me: my hips swayed gently. Not in the manner of a supermodel or movie star, with their exaggerated sexy manner, but with a sort of refined feminine elegance. A courtly manner, was the thought that came somehow to mind. My breasts bounced as I moved, and I placed my hands on them to stop the sensation. They filled my palms rather generously, though thankfully not *too* much. I shivered at their unexpected sensitivity, which left my larger nipples stiff and erect. Even the feeling of my hair swaying against my bottom hung heavily on my scalp, while my perspective had shifted also. I had never been incredibly tall, but five-foot-nine was not small either. Now, I had easily lost three inches of height. I couldn’t have been taller than five-foot-six or so. A woman’s height. There were other factors too: a lower centre of gravity, a weaker musculature, even the way my chest rose and fell with each troubled breath. I was still human, but it was like trading in a car for a different model. It was the same thing, and yet totally different.

And yet, impossibly, something was also familiar about it as well. The vestigial remnants of my dream came to me. The body of Raelyn in that dream had felt so similar, though I had been wearing clothes . . .

“Oh my God,” I said, as I beheld myself in the mirror. “I’m . . . I’m . . .”

There was no other word for it.

“I’m *beautiful*.”

The woman in the reflection, frazzled and terrified and unkempt as she was, still possessed a radiant beauty that would capture any man’s attention, and more than a few women’s as well. Even naked and bereft of courtly dress, she looked cast out of time from some medieval castle. Her eyes were icy blue, pale and brilliant, while her hair was dark as moonless night, the colour of the darkest raven messenger. It was long and silky and straight, hanging in an impressive curtain all the way down to her bottom, which itself had a nice curve to it. Her lips had a natural fullness, and her cheekbones were magnificent.

Moreover, she still had the cherubic cheeks of youth, giving her a heart-shaped face. She was paler than I was, and had no stains or blemishes on her face bar a beauty spot above her right lip. Her cheeks were thus rosy in a cute way. She couldn't have been older than twenty. Certainly, she at least *looked* like she was in her twenties, unlike the Evan-me.

"Just like my painting. *Exactly* like my painting," I said in my soft, royal voice. "It's her. Princess Raelyn."

The painting of her face in the other room even held a similar expression, though her hair was done up in a courtly manner and she had lipstick and jewellery to enhance her already-incredible beauty. For just a moment, I wondered what it would be like to be 'done up' properly, then I ejected such thoughts from my mind.

"God, what am I thinking? And what was that shit about 'moonless night' and 'raven messengers'?"

I shook my head, accidentally setting my new boobs a-wobbling. The magic had changed more than my body, but I refused to give in to whatever these other thoughts were. I returned to inspecting my body, the rest of which was positively delightful . . . were I not *in* it. I had a classical hourglass figure, that was for certain, with wide hips that would be perfect for childbearing - not that I ever intended on doing *that*, my God! I had a slight natural pooch to my belly, the kind that would be seen as totally ordinary in the ancient world or middle ages. The rest of me was quite slim, and I was relieved to see that my breasts, while not unimpressive, were not immense either. Perhaps C-cups. Big enough to be a nice palmful but not massive by any measure. In many ways, my looks were that of a classic princess, albeit a naked one.

"Except it's *me*. It's fucking *me*. I can't go to work like this! I can't even pay my bills like this! What the hell do I do!?! Damn you, Henric! Damn you to the Black Mountain!"

I paused.

"Wait, to the what now?"

No, I refused to entertain what that meant, or why I had said it. Instead, I focused on being practical. I had somehow been turned into the gorgeous raven-haired woman (colour of moonless night and yada yada) from my dreams, and it was all the fault of some crazy creep with a magic scroll (or spell on an A4 sheet, or whatever). I had to find him, make him turn me back, and put this all behind me.

I'd rather live as a miserable male tomato tin factory worker than be turned into some dream dame, that was for sure. Even if, as I checked myself over in the mirror a second time, I had to admit I was indeed *very* beautiful.

Magic was stupid. At least, that's what I thought at the time. I have different opinions now, obviously, but at the time of this story's occurrence I was not just angry over being turned into the form I wear quite proudly now, but at the fact that *nothing else had changed to accommodate me*. It was - and I use my former way of speaking quite intentionally in this recording - absolutely fucking mega-inconvenient. My underwear was simultaneously too loose around the crotch (the crotch I was very much avoiding looking at) and too tight at the waistband. My shirts were far too loose everywhere except my chest, where they were just a little bit tight thanks to the growth of a pair of tits. The fact that I didn't have a bra was a nuisance: I had always been pragmatic, so it was frustrating that I didn't have something to contain my new 'girls', which meant my dollar coin nipples were noticeably denting against the thin fabric, rubbing against it with every jiggle. Did I say they were sensitive before? Yeah, they were sensitive.

I had no idea whatsoever what to do with my hair. It was far too long, and so the simplest solution was simply to cut it. And yet when I went to the bathroom to do so, something very strange occurred: I simply couldn't do it. I took a shower instead, getting the smell off my body - mostly from the sheets, I no longer reeked of the factory - and spent some time exploring my new form. I was still not entirely willing to go all the way with my new vagina, but I did at least prod and poke it, which was an utterly alien experience, let me tell you. One thing was for certain; my circumstances were now so weird that I didn't feel miserable and sick anymore. This body was healthier, but it was also just so radically different it had snapped me out of my funk. I did play with my breasts a little, letting them bounce and jiggle, pressing them together to form cleavage.

"I have fucking cleavage now, Jesus," I remember saying.

I cleaned off my body, admiring the smoothness of my skin, and it was only as I left the shower that I realised I had wrapped my hair expertly in a towel, just like a woman practised in doing so all her life.

"What the shit? How do I know this?"

A sudden flash of experience came over me. Attendants dealing with my long hair. My royal mother helping me treat it. My own practice in organising its many strands into an elaborate courtly bun, or weaving it into a long braid or series of plaits while out on horseback. The flash ended, and I suddenly knew *exactly* how to deal with my hair.

"No," I said, gulping as I stared at my reflection in the mirror. "I'm not Raelyn. I'm not. It just can't be."

I didn't want to believe it. Gods, I was so resistant back then. Understandably so, really. After all, I'd spent many, many reincarnated lives being used to misery and the mundane. Something magical had happened, and it scared the shit out of me.

I left my apartment in the early afternoon. It wasn't a shift day, being Saturday, but after the weekend I was set to return for my awful Monday shift. I wasn't looking forward to it, but I needed the minimum wage, and I needed to get my identity back. I was wearing men's clothing - there was no other choice - which meant that my pants were far too baggy. I had to roll up the hem of the trousers just to not look completely ridiculous. The shirts were fine since I wore a loose hoodie over them. It concealed my boobs and my nipples. The shoes were another matter: in the end I'd just inserted scrunched up paper to 'seal the gaps.' It wasn't comfortable, but until I could work something out I'd have to make do. I didn't want to buy anything new for myself: I was too dirt cheap poor already, and had no desire to fuck myself over financially any further than this strange circumstance already would. My one concession to my new femaleness was that I had down my hair up in some pretty braids, which not only reduced the sheer length of my hair down my back, but actually looked very beautiful. I told myself repeatedly that I didn't like it, though. That it was necessary.

Suffice to say with the benefit of hindsight, I think it was the first turning point of realisation. I kept admiring and checking out my wonderful hair in every mirrored surface as I passed. I was not usually a vain person, but the combination of seeing an entirely different person from who I used to be *and* one who was astonishingly beautiful was hard to ignore.

I wasn't sure how to contact Henry/Henric, but I had certain ideas. I decided to head to *Lanners*, one of my favourite second-hand bookshops, and where the supposedly crazy man had once followed me and nearly initiated a conversation. Being a Saturday, there was a reasonable amount of foot traffic around the lesser mall where it was situated. I found myself looking about, as if seeing the world through new eyes. People were looking at me too, including men, though not as much as I had feared. I was a looker at that point, there was no doubt of that, but I was quite covered up, including the greater part of my beauty. Still, a few men made comments as I passed that made me flinch.

"Nice eyes, princess."

"Love them big blues."

I walked faster, a habit I had been getting used to more and more often. My smaller body didn't have the pace I wanted, but I moved beyond them nonetheless. Already I had been given my first taste of how women were treated in this world.

"Just like back in court," I mentioned to myself. "Though at least my would-be paramours only *whispered* it out of respect."

An instant flicker of some other woman's memory entered my mind in that moment: a ridiculous man from the city-state of Nazeer, his skin so pale it was like he'd never even seen the sun's rays. He smirked his lips up at me when he saw me in my resplendent dress,

his eyes instantly darting to the tasteful cleavage I had displayed. He was much too old for me, but Father was insistent that it could prove a good political match. I practically *chased* the man away from our castle, incensed by the way he touched me, by the garlic taste of his breath, and his rude manner in general. I was no swordswoman, and never would be, but I had steel enough on my tongue to slice his ego to ribbons.

The flicker ended, and I was left staring into the distance.

“Are you alright, miss?” someone asked me.

I blinked. “No,” I responded honestly. “Sorry. I have to be going somewhere.”

I shuffled off quickly to *Lanniens*, cursing under my breath: “Fuck fuck fuck fuck. What the hell was that? A memory of Raelyn’s? Some of that was from my imagination, but other parts . . . why does it feel so damn real?”

I made it to the store, and began perusing to take my mind off of it. The fantasy section usually gave me a great deal of comfort, but this time it only brought further glimmers of another time, another *life*. Swords and sorcery novels showed me brief images of men training in the yard. Somewhat handsome men - a thought I didn’t want to really explore at that point. Other more fantastical novels showed wizards and sorcerers, and it put an ugly feeling in my gut, as if I should be intensely wary of such types. As if I were *betrayed* by one personally, the very one that Henry spoke of. And, of course, there were the sub-genres of fantasy, such as fantasy romance. I was never into more gothic elements of that narrative, but the ones displaying princesses, of love across boundaries spoke to me now more than ever. I lifted one, which was titled *Heaven’s Boundary*, and it displayed a red-haired princess being embraced by a richly-garbed prince in an open field. I had no idea if the book was good or not, but it made me think of my dream again. The intensity of those feelings. The warm sensation of Henry’s embrace against my slender frame. The knowledge that he would protect me.

“Has he charmed me with magic, or something?” I whispered to myself. “Is he making me feel this way?”

I put the book back down and stepped away from the fantasy aisle. It was then that I saw him; he had just entered the store, and his handsome grey eyes (yes, I was very much noticing the handsomeness of his eyes even back then) were looking about for me. He appeared nervous. Tense. Before I could think of how to approach him he spotted me with a mixture of relief and hesitance. I signalled angrily for him to hurry up and get over here and explain himself.

“My Raelyn,” he said, looking at me with a look I can only describe as awe. “I had almost forgotten your astonishing beauty. Dreams and remembrances fail to capture it.”

Despite myself, I blushed a little. Flickers of warm words and honeyed compliments came to me in a variety of combinations. In this Raelyn’s life, only his romantic words truly

touched her heart and felt true. Gods, if I could go back then and experience this re-meeting in full I would! As it was at the time, I bit my lip and focused on how damn annoyingly tall he was compared to me now.

“Don’t crack onto me, Henry, or Henric, or whatever your name is.”

His confusion grew. “I thought . . . but you’ve changed. You have your body back. Are your memories not returned as well?”

I grabbed him by the sleep and pulled him into a quiet corner. “You mean the weird flickers of hypnotised bullshit or whatever is I keep getting? I look at ordinary things and I get these flashes of some other life; your doing!”

“No, you’re own!” he said in an excited but hushed tone. “It is your memories returning to you, my love. I swear it.”

“You expect me to believe that? You read out a magic spell and suddenly I’ve got goddamned *tits* and a *pussy*, all thanks to you?”

Henry blushed a deep shade of red. It was certainly cute, though I wasn’t used to thinking of men as ‘cute’ just yet. I chalked it up to female hormones. Which, as I’ve discovered since, *are* pretty powerful.

“I never heard you use such language, Raelyn.”

“I keep telling you, I’m not fucking Raelyn. Besides, didn’t you say you were some sad lonely retail worker or something? How come, if you are supposedly reincarnated, you’re just talking all flowery and shit now?”

“Because I have *embraced* my original self as my memories returned. It has been a process taking months. I guess I’m a fool for thinking it would happen quickly for you, just because I was able to put together a spell from my old archmage Nerothis. Your body is as it should be-”

“Yeah, about that,” I interjected. “None of this makes sense to me. I don’t believe for a second in reincarnation, but magic is clearly real. So what’s up with you supposedly keeping your body but I became a dude? Explain that.”

“I can explain *everything*,” he said. “It will just take time, and hopefully return all your memories to you . . . and our way back home. To our real home, in our own real time. Perhaps . . . we could get a drink together? This is hardly the place to-”

“A coffee,” I said. “A coffee and maybe some snacks. I’m starving, and *you’re* paying since if I you don’t change me back soon, I won’t be able to make money to afford biscuits, let alone meals.”

“Turning back would not be-”

I jabbed him in the chest, and was hit by a flash of doing so many times while explaining to the love of my life *exactly* why he should not presume to try to court me in the

same manner as the other men I had turned away, *especially* given how little he knew of women.

“Don’t patronise me, my love. I mean, fuck! Stop this mindgame shit. I meant to say that you *will* turn me back. You goddamn will. I’ll hear you out first, though, but only if you agree to turn me back as soon as able.”

With a heavy expression he nodded. “I promise, my love.”

“And don’t call me my love either, no matter how good-looking you are. And ignore that I said that!”

Thankfully, someone in the store shushed me before I could be any more of an embarrassment to myself.

“I bought you some clothes,” Henry said awkwardly as we drank our coffees outside at the park, where the benches afforded some privacy. He handed me a bag, which I took reluctantly. “I had to guess your sizes. I’ve not had many relationships in this life, and thanks to the curse they all ended painfully, but I think I got your general measurements in modern terms right. I have a good memory from that time beneath the moon by the Seluna River.”

Another flash, another romantic memory. A shared kiss. A descent into the waters where I showed him I could swim, and surprisingly well. But it *did* require that I go down to my undergarments, which would have been most scandalous, were anyone to ever find out about us. We had kissed passionately that night, but went no further than a brief exploration of our bodies, still partially clothes. I wanted to go further, to push back against the rules imposed upon me and my body, but Henric was insistent: we would marry first, and then no one could stop us, or protest the consummation of our love.

“I remember it,” I said, taking the bag. “If it was me. Jesus, or by the Black Mountain, I don’t know anymore. This is all so insane. What did you get me? I see dresses, shorts, some shirts, underwear. A bra. I don’t think I’m a D-cup.”

“I had to guess. There are other sizes there.”

“Thanks, I guess,” I said. It wasn’t the worst gesture in the world. I needed clothing that fit, after all.

“You can change into it now, if you wish. There’s a public restroom just around-”

“I’d rather just hear the story. The full story. All the details and everything. I need to know what’s going on, Henry. You’ve shown up after stalking and scaring me for two weeks, then turned me into a woman, and then claimed I was your lost love. You can imagine I’m freaking the fuck out here, and now that I’m a girl it’s making me even more emotional thanks to all these new hormones. So stop mincing and dancing about and get to the point.”

To my surprise, he actually chuckled. "Still ice and fire when it comes to your bluntness, my Raelyn. I could tell your essence when I saw you, but the life you were given in this reincarnation was clearly intended to beat it out of you. I'm glad it did not fully succeed. But I will tell everything now, and leave nothing behind."

He did so, including the twisted rules of this supposed 'curse' that had infected us for countless reincarnations, as well as how he had slipped out. The wizard that my father - Raelyn's father - had hired on was named Targoth. The foul dark wizard had imposed a number of chaotic conditions upon our curse that would mean we would never be compatible with one another, even if we did manage to break the memory-suppressing effects of the spell and recognise one another's auras. As such, we were often the same gender, or of different species, or separated geographically, though never too far - apparently proximity of some kind kept the spell running due to our own love's connection. In effect, this could have been one of the elements that weakened it - who could have foreseen modern travel methods allowing such rapid changes in distance? But Henry had his own theories too, that finally our reincarnations had landed in a world so lacking in magic that even spells from other realms were weakened. Or it could have been something else he wasn't certain of. All he knew for certain was that he had begun dreaming of this other life, and slowly his memories had returned. Thankfully, his other cursed reincarnations were mere glimmers. All the better, given that one life had been as a desert-based lizard. Still, his story at least explained why I was a man in this cycle, and that perhaps I too had been coming slowly to recognise my true self in my dreams and paintings. Regaining my body was just the final opening of the door that brought these 'imaginings' to greater potency.

I had finished my coffee and ordered several little cake treats by the time he had finished explaining. I had never ordered these before, but more flashes were 'reminding' me of this other life, where despite my slim elegance and beauty I had quite the sweet tooth in need of regulation. It made Henry chuckle to see, and I couldn't help but chuckle with him: his laugh was infectious (and still is). But in the end I had to sigh in exasperation.

"Okay, okay, so this is starting to make sense to me. Maybe it's even true, I don't know. I'm not totally convinced that you didn't douse me with some magic charming spell to turn me into your perfect submissive bride or something."

He looked wounded. "Do you feel submissive? Do you feel as if I have taken away your independence and passion? I would never!"

"Well . . . no, I guess you haven't. I can still call you a fuckwit, for one."

He nearly snorted his drink out. "That is so . . . unprincess-like."

"Well, I don't look much like a princess, or feel like one, except . . . except when I get those flashes, and remember. It's like this whole other life just out of reach."

"It will come back to you," he said, "if you let it."

At that, he placed his hand onto mine, resting it there in an intimate fashion. It scared me, how comfortable it was. How protective. I let it rest there longer than I thought I would have, then pulled it away.

"Well, you've told me your story. And mine, I guess. Maybe. I don't know. Like I said, I don't feel much like a princess outside of my dreams. All of my life, I just thought it was my imagination. It's why I painted so much-

"You paint?"

I gave a sheepish grin. "A lot, actually. It's basically my only hobby. That and reading."

"I adore reading also, though I am not much of a painter. I remember you adored it as Raelyn too. Your watercolours . . ."

"When I painted that moonlit river. I just remembered. God - or Gods - this is all so confusing and freaky. I don't *want* to remember all this though. I'm not meant to be a woman, at least not in this life. Maybe I am cursed, and maybe the curse is breaking. But my name is Evan, and I'm a man. Having this light voice, these boobs, having to sit down to pee, being able to get pregnant, it's too much! You need to turn me back. Now. I'm - I'm sorry."

Henry looked crestfallen. Despite being in modern clothing, he really did look out of place in them. It was as if this was the kind of valiant prince who needed to be in shining armour or royal garb. Perhaps it was my new memories messing with me, but I wanted him to be in his green tunic again. It looked . . . very nice on him.

"I understand. I won't push you, Raelyn. Whenever I did, you pushed back mightily, I remember!"

I laughed at that. There were a few new memories already surging up into my mind, chief among them when he insisted on making me eat spicy food from his homeland and I chased him with the serving spoon after I had nearly vomited up the overwhelming chilli spice.

"You're not wrong."

"But I can't do it yet. The magic takes time to reconstitute. I swear I am not lying. I am not a magic user by nature, though spellmaking is at least in my bloodline. I will do my best to prepare a way to change you back, but it will take at least two more days. Then . . . I hope your mind will be changed. If not, then at least there is hope for the next life."

I sighed. "So I'm a woman for a couple more days. I guess I'd better try on these clothes. And get your number."

He grinned mischievously. "Is this you asking me out for a date?"

"This is me asking you to contact me normally and not like a freaky stalker, Henric. Henry, I mean."

“I’ll take it,” he said, and despite everything, I smiled with him. Soon it would be all over, and I could just use this craziness as inspiration for my painting. But a small part of me was wondering about this former life of mine, and wanted to know more. Raelyn’s life seemed so much more vibrant than Evan’s. It made me wonder if there was ever a scenario in which I would accept ‘going back.’

I spent Sunday as a woman, which included wearing a woman’s clothing and even wearing a woman’s makeup and hairstyle. It was uncanny, how easily I was able to make my appearance not only feminine, but deeply lovely. It scared me a little, particularly since the makeup had been my own individual purchase, and some cheap jewellery as well. I put the blame on the memories: Raelyn may have had a wild heart in some ways, but she had also been quite proud of her appearance, and that pride was now part of me.

The bra was difficult work - Raelyn never had to wear one, after all, it was far more modern - but I found myself drawn to wearing the dresses, particularly the blue one Henry had bought for me. He hadn’t done too badly: it was a little loose around the shoulders, but went well on my hips and flowed nicely around my ankles. Not showy, though a hint of cleavage was displayed that didn’t feel all too bad to reveal. What I was most surprised by was how quickly I adapted to being a woman, and even wearing the makeup and jewellery of one. I went out into town on my own, just walking through familiar places in an increasingly familiar body.

Everywhere I turned seemed to bring forth new (or rather, *old*) memories for me. Children laughing and playing reminded me of the many children in court running about with their wooden swords and spears. A clothing store reminded me of my great cupboards in Shalar, filled with brilliant dresses that I simply loved trying on, even if I knew it was vain. A pair of police officers brought forth memories of my royal guards, Raymith and Cataline, both of whom were firm friends that I nevertheless worked very hard to escape from. It was utterly overwhelming.

“I’m not Raelyn,” I began to mutter like a mad mantra. “And even if I am, I’m not her any more. I’m Evan Masters. I’m a fucking nobody. A dude who works at a dehumanising factory and paints in his spare time. A lonely miserable nothing, sure, but that’s *me*. I can’t be a princess. I just *can’t* be.”

And yet I was even *walking* like a princess: chin up, back straight, my movements elegant and refined, and with my hands upon the sides of my dress to adjust it as I walked. It gave me the appearance of nobility I had certainly never possessed in this life. Other people

actually shifted out of my way, even taller men that would have battered aside Evan Masters with ease and no care at all just two days before. It was, strangely, rather empowering.

“You look absolutely radiant, by the way,” someone said as I passed. It was an older woman, and her compliment made me beam and blush at once.

“I appreciate your kind words,” I said in my sweet accented voice, and without thinking I gave a slight curtsy before moving on.

“Gods and the Black Mountain,” I said to myself. “I’ve got one brain and two minds and they’re both squabbling. I need to talk to Henric. Henry. Ugh, whatever!”

We agreed to meet the following morning at sunrise. I had to turn back, of course. I simply had to. I had a whole life here. Sure, it was a shitty life with no prospects or friends or family, but it was what I was used to. It was, in its own sad way, a source of comfort in its pathetic predictability. Also, and this was truly saddening, in many ways I didn’t *believe* I deserved a better life. Sure, the weirdness of being a woman - a princess no less - was its own dissuading factor, even if having boobs was kind of fun, but the idea of a better life filled with love and hope and stylish colourful dresses and a kind man to call my partner was just too alien to comprehend. You might as well have asked me to live as a fish (and I had done just exactly that, it turned out, thanks to the curse and my previous reincarnations).

In the end, I went to bed. I slipped into a nightie - the fact that Henry had bought me one was kind of sweet - and enjoyed the feeling of its silk against my soft skin. Actual silk! The so-called prince had gone right out, and that made me blush too. That, and his incredibly jawline and fierce eyes.

“No way,” I told myself, “I am not crushing on the hot prince. No fucking way. This is just female hormones and my princess past life, or whatever.”

But the thought of him did linger. His stalwart gaze, his strong yet kindly voice, his wide shoulders. God, those shoulders are incredible. And the forearms. Very underrated part, the forearms of a man, particularly when he rolls up his sleeves to practice swordplay (including *that* kind of swordplay, ha!). I tried to get to sleep and be ready for the new day when we met once more in the park, but instead I found myself tossing and turning, making strange mumbles under my breath. My body was flushed with heat, and it was getting hard to resist having just a little play of my new features. I wasn’t attracted to women anymore, at least as far as I could tell, but I *was* attracted to the idea of womanhood, of experiencing what it was. Memories flashed through my mind of when I first discovered how it felt to experiment with my body, and even more how I yearned for Henric’s touch. Breathing softly, I

began to tease my nipples and play with my lower folds, slowly inserting my fingers into my waiting wet tunnel.

I won't go into scandalous detail. I am, all things considered, a princess of high renown and standing. Suffice to say that the pleasure I experienced that night surpassed even the new memories I was continually experiencing. With each touch, each gentle caress and stroke, I delved further into the psyche of Raelyn, this woman I had once been. I recalled Henric's humour, his gallantry, the way he flexed his shoulders before mounting his horse, and the way he lifted me when carrying me across the Swamps of Nemeir. The brush of his goatee against my face as he kissed me, and the way we laughed when, in a moment of passion, my bodice literally ripped open as if daring us to take another step. The laughter turned to something else, and we barely stopped ourselves.

I didn't stop myself in my bed, that was for sure. My voice went all the way to soprano when I cried out in pleasure, and that's all I'll say about that for now. I was thinking about Henric that entire time. Not Henry, but *Henric*. The charming, valiant prince who crossed the great Steppes of Yllith to meet me, and continued his romance with me in secret. Who trained to be a warrior each day, but unlike so many other young men vastly preferred peace and a good book, something we shared in common.

And I remembered when we were killed, as well. When Targoth caught us, ready to elope upon that great steppe, and struck us down. Henric had jumped in front of that first bolt of arcane power, and been killed stone dead right before me. In the aftermath of my bodily bliss came a sorrow of the soul, and I spent a long time crying as the memories came. I didn't fight them anymore, but welcomed them. I didn't know who I truly was, or who I would be after the sunrise tomorrow, but I was tired of being scared of change, or at least the possibility of it. Henric had died trying to save me in another life and time and plane of existence. I owed it to him, and the him in the present, to at least try being Raelyn

Or perhaps it was just the hormones at the time, who knows. My female body is *very* receptive, especially when it has Henric on its mind.

It wasn't a perfect sunrise. Far from it; the sun wasn't even visible. The weather had turned unexpectedly sour, and it was pouring down. Henric - and this should tell you a lot about him - had even purchased me a raincoat, and while it was a little too big on my dainty figure, it helped protect me from the elements. Certainly, a strong gust of wind had a bigger effect on me. Ordinarily I would have been at the factory by that point, sorting good tomatoes from the bad like some kind of braindead automaton, and it occurred to me that even with the foul weather and pouring rain, *this* was preferable to going back to work. My intention had been

to send them a text explaining that I was sick. Instead, I had simply . . . said nothing. Done nothing. I had just not turned up. Perhaps they never noticed I was missing.

To say I was nervous would have been the damn understatement of the century. I was terrified. I had no idea what was going to happen to me, what I would do or choose. I had been a woman only a couple of days and already so much of it was naturally coming back to me. There was no denying in my mind that I had indeed been Raelyn, and every so often I received a flash of other lives too, though thankfully not much. Just enough to know that I had been reincarnated in misery again and again, all to keep me from Henric. From the man I had once truly loved, and was beginning to feel - at the very least - some strong passion for again. Sexual passion also; I'd woken up after dreaming of him yet further, in far more compromising ways, if you take my meaning.

But that was another life. I needed to see *Henry*, the man who I had only really had a few conversations with, and had so disastrously turned me female, and find out if *he* was the same person. I needed to know him in this current time, and not just rely on memories.

He was waiting for me where we'd had our first actual conversation, when he'd read the spell. He held his umbrella high, and it was big enough to protect the both of us. He moved to embrace me when he saw me, only to halt with uncertainty.

"I wasn't sure if you'd actually show up, Raelyn," he said. "You look beautiful in the rain. I remember once you told me that-"

"-That rain is only miserable to miserable people," I said. "I remember it too."

He smiled, and it was a charming smile. Real knight in shining armour stuff. "You remember then? Everything?"

"Mostly everything," I said, "and more coming back to me each hour. It's . . . a bit much to take, to be honest. Raelyn and I share a lot in common - it only makes sense - but she wasn't one to swear, and her taste in books wasn't as fantasy based as mine, I guess because she *was* from a fantasy universe. And she hated pork. I *love* pork. We don't share everything in common."

"But I see you share her sense of beauty."

I was confused for a moment until he chuckled and indicated to my face. "You're wearing makeup, my love."

That made me blush. I hadn't even thought about it. It had seemed the proper thing to apply. In fact, that morning I had changed fairly easily, wearing a cute dress and coat, grey over red with an equally red scarf, that fit snugly over my form. I had walked through the rain easily, as if it were my own element.

"Um, well, I guess I do. Share her sense of beauty, I mean. You, um, look pretty good too. Fuck, I'm not good at this. Raelyn - the original me - would have been a lot better. She was really good with compliments. You know, stuff like, 'you fit that jacket most wonderfully,

Henric, almost as if you were born to it. Certainly, it gives the impression of a warrior's shoulders from the stuff of legend. Careful, a woman could find herself swooning dangerously often to see you like that.”

Henry laughed, and I with him.

“Well, that wasn't bad at all, my fair maiden! If a bit more forward than your old self. Well, I guess I'm a bit less up front and open, aren't I? Once, I would have barged straight to you, explaining everything to my lady love. Now, I have this anxiousness that follows me, a fear that things will go wrong. It took me two weeks of hesitant following and investigation, and even then, you were the one to initiate talks with me, where once I was the valiant and brave prince.”

“Well, it was pretty brave in a way, risking a bottle of mace.”

“Not the mace I'm used to, for sure.”

“Oh, that is a terrible pun! Ah, I just remember that your puns were a constant thorn in my side! You ruined a perfectly good escape into the hedges where we could have made out hardcore - *enjoyed some light passion*, as we might have put it - because of a rather tasteless joke about 'nicely trimmed bushes.’”

He winced, but again we broke into laughter, this time enough that we briefly got soaked in a heavy fall of rain as the umbrella wobbled above us. I had to clutch to him to avoid getting any further wet, and he did not pull away. Neither did I part from him, when he righted the umbrella above us. For a while, we continued to laugh softly at nothing at all, both of us enjoying the comfort of the other, me refusing to admit it, and him refusing to make me acknowledge or to spoil the moment. He had some sense, at least. Then again, it was *me* who'd always been the more restless and wild one. The one he'd managed to tame.

“This is nice,” I managed to work up the courage to say.

“It is worth a thousand lives of loneliness just to experience again,” he whispered.

I scoffed. “Oh, so *I'm* the one that speaks all flowery and gives great compliments, and suddenly I hear - Henry? Henric? Are you okay?”

He was crying. Soft, many tears that fell down his cheek and blended with the rain. Without even hesitating I gently wiped them away, looking up into his gentle face.

“I'm just . . . in awe that I have this moment again, my Raelyn,” he said. “I know you wish to turn back. I know that, in many ways, we have also changed as people since that first lifetime. The other reincarnations may be largely forgotten, but we are here and now endowed with memories of Evan and Raelyn, Henry and Henric. I know that makes us different. But even if I only have this moment in the rain with you, here in the greenery that always reminds me of our first meeting, then at least I will have that.”

I won't lie, my heart melted a little. It was hokey, it was cheesy, it was corny. It was old school as hell. But it was genuine. It was sincere. It came from the heart, and no one had

ever talked of me like that, not ever as far as I could remember from my life as Evan. It thawed something in me.

“What if . . . what if I don’t turn back?” I asked.

His eyebrows raised, and there was hope in his voice. “You wish to stay like this?”

“Yes! No! I have no idea!” I laughed again, this time a little manically. “This is just . . . so very much. One day I’m working in a dead end job, the next I’m told I’m a reincarnated princess, and then turned into one. Thanks for that by the way.” I jabbed him in the ribs for good measure, not that I could ever do any damage. “But if I were to stay like this, boobs and all-”

“They are a very perfect pair of breasts.”

“Why thank you,” I said, pressing my chest against him for good measure, and sampling the strange but lovely feeling of them squashing against his firm muscle. “I’m rather coming to fancy them. They’re quite sensitive.”

Now it was his turn to blush, and change the subject back to where I’d first steered it.

“Well, if you were to stay, we would have to find a new life for you, of course. For both of us, really. Together, if you’d like that. That is, if the prophecy doesn’t work.”

I cocked my head. “Prophecy? You didn’t mention that the other day?”

“I didn’t want to alarm you or anything. Every curse has its counter effect that ends the curse. It’s part of the magic. For a spell designed to keep true love apart, the countercurse is obvious . . .”

I worked it out immediately. Perhaps, on some level, I already knew. Raelyn certainly did, in the moment she faced down Targoth and listened to his vile taunts. As she cradled her lover and promised him that even if it took a thousand lifetimes, she would be with him again.

“A true love’s kiss,” I said.

“Yes. That would end the curse completely. No more reincarnations. Our next lives after death would be a whole new adventure, but we would, potentially, find a way back. To our times, to our lives, to our kingdoms.”

“And to each other,” I said, putting it all together. “As if none of this had ever happened to us.”

“Though it did. We would be changed. Even with our memories, we would be-”

“Starting again,” I said. “Sorry, I keep interrupting you.”

He beamed. “You always had that habit back then, too.”

“Well, I was a rebellious princess. Practically a stereotype.”

“And I the charming prince.”

“Do you think we could ever be like that again? I mean, hypothetically?”

He held me for a long time. The rain continued to pour down, leading to a heavy mist, and it made us seem like we were the only two people in the world. I had felt like the *only* person in the world, really, for a long, long time. My population had doubled.

"I believe we can try. I want to try, if you do," he said. "But I have already pushed you too far. I can change you back, and I will always know that I had this moment with my Raelyn again. To say goodbye, properly."

"Or," I said, "there is a true love's kiss. If such things even work."

"And if you truly do love me, which I know I must not demand of you, especially so soon."

The rain lightened, just a little. I swallowed. I keenly remember that my brain was filled with a million flying thoughts, all at war with one another. The next step was terrifying to consider, and yet I knew I had to take it. I knew I had to try. What life was there for me otherwise? But then, looking back, even if my life was truly satisfactory, I think I would have done what I did anyway. Part of me knew that I couldn't deny my real self which had laid dormant for so long inside me, only able to escape in the form of my paintings.

"Well how about this?" I said, turning an idea over in my head. "We kiss anyway. Just a regular kiss. Nothing about forcing it to be true love, or even love. We just . . . kiss. Like we did in another life. And if it works, it works. If we feel something, a connection, then maybe we can go from there. But if it doesn't, then we part ways, I go back to being some sad sack at the godsdamn tomato tin can factory, and at least we got to say goodbye and move on. But if there is something more . . . maybe I'd be willing to see what happens next."

Henry swallowed, nodded. He too was clearly turning over the thought in his mind.

"That sounds like a good idea, Raelyn. I do very much love you, you know."

"I know," I said, placing a hand on his chest. "But I'm a bit of a hot mess right now and it's hard to know my own thoughts. Let's find them out together, shall we?"

I cupped his face in my hands, and with a great deal of build up, we finally kissed. It came so naturally to me that when I closed my eyes I could have sworn I was back in my original life, out in the wilds with my forbidden prince, embracing his touch. The umbrella fell to the side as we embraced, but neither of us cared. The rain soaked my hair and coat, but all that mattered was the taste of Henry's lips, the feel of his skin against mine, his strong arms protectively encircled around me. It was everything. It was comfort and security and passion.

It was, I realised at that moment, love. True, absolute, giddy ridiculous love. The kind that made my legs wobbly just to think about. I was finally returned.

I was finally Raelyn. How could I ever go back? Why would I ever want to?

We finally parted after a minute and an eternity, his hand on my left cheek, his gaze intense in its love. My own eyes watered now, and not just from the rain.

“Raelyn,” he whispered to me.

I kissed him again. “It’s me,” I told him. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

I was wrong, of course, for at that moment the rain faltered and stopped. It *froze*. Everything did. The world became a snapshot, a photograph stopped in time. We looked about us in confusion, but then even the photograph melted away into a blazing luminescence. For the merest moment I was afraid, but then he placed his hand in mind and I knew that come what may, I’d finally found a way out of my miserable lot and reconnected with who I was supposed to be.

And then suddenly the world was back again, albeit a very different one. The Steppes of Yllith were just like in my dreams, wild and expansive, with the distant forests of the Kesserine Reach in the far, far distance. The sun was warm, with just a light wind upon our backs. We were between our two kingdoms again, and we were ourselves once more; me in my resplendent blue dress, Henric in his princely tunic, sword at his sword. For long moments we simply gaped at the world around us that we had finally returned to. The last trickle of memories brought it to full life for me.

“We’re back,” Henric announced. “Finally, finally, we are returned my love.”

We kissed again, passionately and for a long time. I wanted almost to go further, but Henry stopped me before we got to any real bodice-ripping.

“First,” he said, “there is a wizard to take care of. He should be arriving from behind that rock any minute now.”

He brandished his sword.

“And this time I’ll be ready. Find shelter, my love, one last piece of dirty business, and then you and I shall be wed together. And not by elopement: we will return to my kingdom of Jaharis. Father will not approve, but I will *make* him see the light, especially when evidence of this assassination attempt upon us comes to light. He will have no choice but to accept. That is . . . if you wish to wed me.”

I chuckled, even though I knew the danger had not yet fully passed. “Did the kiss not give it away already? I would marry you a thousand times, Henry! Now hurry up and be my shining knight, there is no way I’m sorting tomatoes - or looking at them - ever again!”

With a laugh, he ran, and I sought cover.

The rest was a quick and dirty business.

As I said at the start of my story, I certainly came around to things. From being a miserable, lonely man to a beloved princess of a wondrous kingdom, it was quite the turnaround. Even with the restoration of my memories, it was a jarring transition, and I certainly had to prove

myself to the court of Jaharis, though my nature won out in the end. The fact that Henric was so deeply smitten with me perhaps smoothed things over, and that it finally gave Jaharis an edge over Shalar, particularly when details of the king's attempted murder of his own daughter came to light. It was enough to almost topple the kingdom entirely until he abdicated in shame. *That* was most satisfying for me to hear.

But I had other things to focus on. We had spent countless lives reincarnating in misery, unable to hold or love one another. And as such, Henric and I had a *lot* of catching up to do. When we were finally wed, me in my gorgeous royal dress and him in his fine royal garb, I practically *dragged* him to the bedroom, whereupon I barely let him come up for air. Yes, it was certainly a different experience being the woman in that scenario, but it didn't take long for my incredible lust for my husband to see me through, and soon I was wailing in pleasure as he took me again and again. It's no secret of the kingdom that we were, and have been ever since, an incredibly passionate pair.

That passion has had its fruits, of course. My dearest son Evan was born exactly nine months later, and it was a wondrous thing to feel life stir in my belly where before I had felt so empty in my previous life. He was not the first, either. Isabella followed two years later, and now five years on our third child stirs within me now, disrupting my sleep but bringing me calm all the same. I love them all, and am happy to play my part as mother to a royal lineage, but damn if I don't look forward to returning to my horseriding and travels. It was, after all, how Henric and I met. Besides, I never quite want to return to pure mundanity. Not again. I plan to travel with my husband to other kingdoms when he has important business, and see this world I was denied for so long.

For now, at least, I have my wonderful children, and my true life, and my paintings. I have never stopped painting. Once, it was my window into another world. Now, it's a way for me to remember the person I was, and how far I have come. Far better than any tale recorded down for posterity like this one, I think. Words cannot capture transformation so fully. But perhaps these words are necessary too, bound as they are and squirrelled away in the Great Library so that only the most adept of seekers will one day find it in decades or centuries hence. For now, you have my paintings, and the many clues hidden inside them to find this retelling. I trust you have done so well, and seen the beauty in them as well.

They are the stuff that dreams are made of.

The End