

## The Reality War

by  
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*Magic!* Bertwold thought, grinding his teeth and staring at the castle wedged neatly -- and quite impossibly -- in the heart of the pass. *Nothing good ever comes of magic!* Beside him, Lumpkin, his crew chief, mined his nose abstractly, evincing no interest whatsoever in the castle.

The two men stood at the juncture where the road turned from gravel to dirt. All work had ceased; picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows lay in the long grass next to the idle road crew. Behind them the paving machine huffed in a quiet rhythm, its bellows rising and falling, as if it were a beast drifting off to sleep. The digging and grading machines had already been shut off and lay like giant, inanimate limbs on the road. Bertwold had fashioned them thus -- in the shapes of human arms and legs -- to assuage the King's distrust of machines. But now their very forms irritated Bertwold, reminding him of all the hoops he had already had to jump through to win the Royal contract.

And now this.

Clasping his hands behind his back, Bertwold stared miserably at the castle.

Its outer walls were fashioned of basalt, rising seamlessly from the ground to a height of nearly ten rods. Each corner boasted a square tower surmounted by an enormous ivory statue. Curiously, all four of the carvings appeared to be of *imperfect* figures, each lacking one or more limbs. The statue on the nearest corner was missing a head and sporting two truncated stumps where there should have been arms. Within the castle itself, visible above the crenellations of the walls, were apical towers of coloured emerald and ruby glass; and between them, the tops of ovate domes that shone with the lustre of gold and sparkled with the cool radiance of silver. Thin, attenuated threads, the colour of flax, (walkways Bertwold reckoned, though they were empty) wound round and

connected the buildings in an intricate pattern that was both complex and beautiful to behold -- and, he thought with a slight degree of irritation in his engineer's mind -- altogether impossible.

"How long has it been there?" he asked at last.

"We're not sure, boss," Lumpkin said. "It was there when we came out this morning to start work."

"Have you sent anyone to ... " Bertwold hesitated, not sure exactly what might be appropriate in this case. "... to, ah, ring the bell?"

"Well, no, sir. I tried to order a man to do it, but they're scared of its magic, you see...."

Turning to Lumpkin, Bertwold tapped him on the chest with his forefinger. "Then you go find out who lives in that thing, and what they're doing there. You, personally. Don't send a labourer." Lumpkin opened his mouth, as if to say something, but Bertwold cut him off. "Or I'll find someone else who's hungry for a promotion." Lumpkin clamped his mouth shut. "In the meantime, I'll get the men back to work. We're still at least half a league from the castle, and there's plenty of road yet to lay. As far I know, there's nothing in the contract that prevents your men from working in the presence of the supernatural."

Lumpkin, now a shade paler, nodded and swallowed hard. Spinning on his heel, he stumbled away, the gravel crunching under his bootsoles.

Bertwold sighed. He had not counted on this when he had won the King's commission to build the greatest road the land had ever seen. He looked at the castle, imagining the pass as it had been yesterday and the day before, and every day before for as long as men remembered, a wide, inviting V of sky that gave onto the tablelands beyond.

Why would anyone want to drop a castle there?

Lady Miranda peered through the arrow slit. *Ants*, she thought, watching as a clutch of figures emerged from a tent and scattered, busy with their unfathomable, pointless tasks. *Insects*.

She looked at her right hand, then at her left, and pursed her lips. Between the two there weren't enough fingers remaining to end this quickly. Perhaps if she asked Poopsie....

*No*, she thought, *he'd never agree*. He was still off somewhere sulking. It had been as much as she could do to convince him to move the castle from that horrid swamp to where they were now, even though he'd undershot their destination by over a hundred leagues. If she had been the one with the talent for moving it would have been done right; but hers was transubstantiation, of little use in such endeavours. She knew he should have offered his entire leg and not just the shin, for the gods were capricious and not entirely to be trusted. But that was Poopsie, always trying to cut corners, to save a finger here, a toe there, and

ending up paying a much higher price for it in the long run. She'd wanted to warn him, but had, with difficulty, held her tongue. Now he'd have to go an entire arm or the other leg to unstick them if they ever wanted to leave this absurd spot.

And they must.

The mortals would never leave them alone until both she and Poopsie had been whittled down to their trunks. Humans *were* ants, swarming over their betters and bearing them down by dint of sheer numbers. Crush a hundred and a thousand would return. Their thick-headedness was simply incomprehensible.

Like the one who had disturbed her sleep yesterday morning. Lumphead, he had called himself. Lumphead, indeed! A thoroughly nasty, bug of a man. Imagine, the nerve, asking *her* to move the castle! *Never!* she had shouted, outraged at the impudence of the request, though it was the very thing for which she wished. How dare he! Her anger rekindled for an instant as she remembered his effrontery -- and how she had reacted instinctively, without thinking. Then she smiled, recalling the startled look on Lumphead's face as she had reached out and touched his nose, and broccoli had sprouted in its place.

It had been worth her little toe.

Bertwold tried hard not to stare at Lumpkin's nose.

Instead he watched his three sappers wrap burlap around the explosives before carefully packing them on small, two-wheeled carts. Another coiled varying lengths of fuse around his shoulder.

"Ready, sir."

Bertwold nodded at the fusilier who had addressed him. "Then let's get on with it."

"Yes, sir!"

The men lifted the handles to their carts and began jogging along the dirt path towards the castle, the wheels raising small clouds of dust. *Ha!* Bertwold thought as he watched his men draw closer to the base of the wall, *Let them magic their way out of this!*

Lady Miranda's beauty was legendary. At least in her presence.

Studying herself in the mirror, she daubed an exact amount of rouge beneath her eyepatch. She frowned, then turned her head so that her face was in profile, her patch blending in with the dramatic shadows and angles of her sculpted features. She had changed into a slinky black velvet number that matched the colour of the patch. *Yes*, she decided, *perhaps I can use it to good effect.* The patch certainly added to her air of mystery, making her flawless skin appear even more striking. Picking up a silver-handled brush, she began stroking raven hair that fell to the small of her back. She smiled. *Ya still got it, baby*, she thought. Then, with just a slight degree of irritation: *Lord knows I might need it*

*soon*. She sighed. Certainly she'd been careful, very careful, to dole out her magic in small doses over the years, saving it for only the most pressing occasions. Her appearance had, after all, been her saving grace: it was how she'd attracted Poopsie -- and his countless predecessors. She'd managed to remain relatively whole while her suitors had whittled themselves down to slivers of flesh to gain her favour. But Poopsie had reached the point where he was becoming more and more reluctant to do so. He, along with his ardour, was thinning out. That's what had landed them in this cursed mess in the first place.

The mirror chimed, snapping Miranda out of her reverie; its surface shimmered like a wind-blown lake, distorting her reflection. A moment later a pasty-faced cherub wearing a headset appeared where her reflection had formerly been. "Ladyship," it intoned in a thin, reedy voice. "The bugs are restless." The cherub disappeared and was replaced by a scene outside the castle. Several figures toiled along the road, dragging wooden carts behind them. The view narrowed, drawing in on the men. Visible, some rods behind, and exhorting the men on loudly, was that hideous Lumpy fellow whose nose she'd transformed the previous day; and beside him stood another man, a head taller, and broad of shoulder. A breeze flicked his locks of golden hair restlessly in the wind. Miranda ordered her mirror cherub to zoom in.

She sucked in a breath. He *was* a big fellow. A towering, bear of man, arms locked defiantly across a barrel chest, a scowl twisting up his face. And a striking face it was. Eyes grey as sea mist, nose long and straight, cheeks prominent and sculpted like her own. And four perfect, fully-formed limbs. Miranda's heart skipped a beat. *Why*, she wondered with no small amount of bitterness, *couldn't more immortals look like that?*

"Milady, the ants draw nigh ...."

A V creased Miranda's brow; she shifted her attention back to the figures dragging the carts. *Explosives*, she suddenly realized with distaste.

She expelled a sharp breath and cursed loudly. They would be at the gates in a few minutes. It was too late to find Poopsie.

Gathering up her skirts, she dashed out of her sitting room and down the stairs, taking them two at a time and emerging in the courtyard. She ran over to the front gate and knelt in the dirt, her velvet gown forgotten. Placing her palm flat on the ground, she concentrated on the two remaining fingers of her left hand and began chanting under her breath. Almost immediately her fingers stretched, then liquefied, soaking into the earth and transmuting the hard-packed, washed out dirt to a lumpy beige mass centred around her palm. It glistened in the sunlight. The transmutation grew, milk-white circles forming in pockets on its surface. It continued to spread, now moving away from Miranda, following the path under the gate and out towards the men trotting up the road.

Bertwold watched the sapper slip and fall. The man tried to rise, but the more he struggled the further he sank into the ground. He managed to drag himself up slightly on the protruding edge of his cart, but his efforts only mired the cart deeper. He wiped his face with the back of his arm and spat something from his mouth. "*Oatmeal!*" he screamed.

"What did he say?" asked Bertwold.

"Ootmal," said Lumpkin, his voice altered since his nose had been turned to broccoli. "The rood's ben tooned to ootmal."

"Oh," Bertwold said. "I see."

Two of the men -- along with the cart -- had already slipped beneath the surface. Another had managed to half-swim, half-crawl to safety at the side of the road where the ground was firmer.

Bertwold stared at the castle and ground his teeth.

A moment later there was a muffled roar. The oatmeal road exploded upwards like a fountain; it showered down in thick droplets splattering all those who had gathered to watch, a large lump narrowly missing Bertwold and plopping wetly atop Lumpkin's skull.

Miranda reached the ramparts just in time to see the ensuing explosion. She laughed aloud as the oatmeal rained down on her enemies. *Chew on that, silly mortals!* she thought. *Vulgar food for vulgar pests!* That big one didn't seem quite so haughty now that he was wearing a suit of oatmeal.

Miranda felt exhilarated, alive. And something else, too. A strange, yet not wholly unpleasant, tingling. Perhaps this was just what she needed. Nothing like a bit of an excitement to shake the dust from your bones.

She clambered onto the thick ledge of the crenel so she would be visible to those below. Then she waved, looking directly at the big man, laughing and knowing her laugh would be carried clearly on the tongue of the wind to those annoyingly perfect ears ....

There was no denying she was beautiful.

Bertwold stared through his brass telescope at the infuriating women. She sat on the parapet, brushing her hair as if nothing were amiss, acknowledging his presence by blowing him an occasional raspberry. *Cheeky impertinence!* he thought. He was angry at her -- and angry at himself for finding that damned eyepatch so fascinating!

"Weel?"

"Well, what?" Bertwold answered irritably. He stepped back from the telescope, and made a mental note that, at a more discreet moment, he would suggest a thorough steaming might help Lumpkin in the preservation of his wilting nose.

"Whoot shuld I teel the mun?"

Bertwold turned. Some of the crew were playing cards, others stood in small groups, talking in low voices. Bertwold stared at a digging machine, its oak bucket cupped in the shape of human hand, resting uselessly on the side of the road.

"Assemble the men," he said. "I have an idea."

Bertwold stood behind the machine, pleased that its design and construction had proceeded so smoothly. It had taken only a day, remarkable, really, when he thought about it. Perhaps his men shared the same agitation to get on with things that dogged him; or maybe they were just anxious to complete the road and return to their families. Whatever the case, the guilds had worked co-operatively for once, and would have posted their first injury-free day had it not been for the knifing.

Bertwold walked the length of his new machine, checking the work. Inside the frame from the levelling machine, they had placed the arm from the digging machine, hinged on a massive, metal pin. Bertwold nodded at the end of his inspection, deciding it would make a passable catapult.

He surveyed the castle wall with his telescope, settling on a spot midway between the towers.

The men stood ready.

Bertwold barked an order and three bare-chested men bent to the task of turning a large windlass that drew the catapult's arm lower. A ratchet snicked in time to the men's grunts. When the arm would go no lower, a second crew wrestled a round, black bomb into the cupped palm at the end of the arm. Lumpkin, who Bertwold had placed in charge of the catapult, jotted a few quick calculations on a pad he held in his hand, and directed the men to angle the cart ever so slightly. A moment later, he turned to Bertwold and said, "Weady, Sur!"

Bertwold nodded.

"Fur!" Lumpkin shouted at a burly man holding a mallet.

The man raised his eyebrows in a quizzical look.

"Fur, I said!"

"Beg your pardon?"

"Fire," Bertwold said quietly.

"Oh," the man said, then turned and knocked the ratchet stay free with his mallet.

The arm flashed upwards, and the cart jerked sharply, its wheels momentarily lifting off the ground. Bertwold watched the bomb arc towards the castle.

It struck near the top of the wall and exploded, the thunderous sound rushing back to them a second after the flash. A section, just above the point at

which the missile struck, slowly tumbled backwards and out of sight, leaving a small, but noticeable gap, like a missing front tooth.

The men cheered, and Bertwold turned to look at Lumpkin. Though it was hard to tell, he thought he could detect a smile of satisfaction beneath the green mass of broccoli.

"Aieeee!" shrieked Miranda, dancing backwards when the wall tumbled down, narrowly missing her and burying Poopsie, who had been seated in the rose garden. "Aieeee!" she said again. Then, recovering her composure, she stamped her feet in indignation. *How dare they!* she thought. *The insolent insects!* "That's it!" she said to the rubble heap that had been Poopsie, "Now, I'm really mad!"

"Now, now, Miranda, better not to get yourself worked up." Poopsie's voice was barely audible from beneath the debris. "They're only doing what mortals usually do. Let's think about this thing rationally ...."

"No!" Miranda shouted as a large section of the fallen wall began to stir, loose dirt and stones trickling off its edges. "I will not let this go unpunished!" The chunk of wall floated upwards, then hovered. Another piece began to shift.

"Please, Miranda, before you go throwing away perfectly good body parts on a pointless gesture." Poopsie's voice was clearer now, and Miranda recognized the wheedling tone. She knew it was his own precious body parts he was really worrying about. "After all, we're the ones who landed in the middle of their pass. It's not as if they came here just to raze the castle." A geyser of dirt and stones shot from the hole and fell to the ground, forcing Miranda to hop back two more steps.

"Are you taking their side?"

Poopsie clambered from the pit as best he could on his one good leg, covered in dirt but otherwise unhurt. "No, dearheart. I'm just saying you have to see it from their point of view." The stone slabs suspended in the air dropped back into the hole with a *whump*.

"Hmph," she said. She eyed him closely, wondering what part of himself he had sacrificed to escape the rubble. He shook his head like a wet dog, and dirt sprayed out in all direction; it was then she saw his left ear was missing.

"Just give me a moment to gather my thoughts, and I'll move the castle like you wanted," he said.

There was another thunderous explosion and part of the castle wall to Miranda's left cascaded downwards, shattering the glass roof of the aviary. A flock of brightly coloured birds, including her favourite gryphon, took wing, rising over the wall and scattering on the wind.

"I've decided that I like it here," Miranda said. "I think we should stay."

"Stay? No, don't be silly." Poopsie bent down and placed his hand on the ground at Miranda's feet. "Brace yourself," he said.

But before he could do anything, Miranda had seized his hair, and in an instant, and at the cost of her big toe, had transmuted him to a parrot with a tiny wooden leg.

"Awk!" Poopsie squawked, flapping his wings and hopping about on his one good leg.

"There!" Miranda said petulantly. "Now you shan't be able to work your magic until I release you!"

Another explosion rocked the castle, and Miranda stepped up to the wall, placing her palm on it.

"Awk! Miranda, wait!" Poopsie screeched, but it was already too late, for her long raven locks were melting away as she worked her magic, running down her cheeks and neck like trails of blackened butter, leaving streaks that shone darkly in the sun.

Bertwold watched as a fourth projectile misfired, shattering uselessly against the wall and dropping to the ground in a curl of smoke. Already there were two large gaps near the summit of the wall and a irregular tear where the third bomb had hit beneath the tower. He did a quick count of the remaining ammunition -- fourteen missiles -- and decided that it would be sufficient to finish the job. He ordered them to concentrate their fire to the right of the largest breach.

"Fur!" Lumpkin shouted.

The bomb tore up and away, dwindling to a small dot. It struck -- but much to Bertwold's consternation, neither fell nor detonated. Instead it stretched the dark surface of the wall as if it were made of rubber. A moment later, the wall snapped back in their direction and the black dot began to grow rapidly.

*Oh, oh*, Bertwold thought.

Lumpkin bolted down the road, leaving a trail of florets in his wake. Bertwold overtook him just before the bomb struck.

He was pitched, head over heels, into a deep ditch they'd been using as a latrine. A series of rapid explosions followed. The ground shook beneath him. Dirt rained down, then smoking bits of debris, sizzling as they extinguished in the fetid water. A moment later a dark cloud boiled around him, choking him and making his eyes water. He struggled to his feet.

"Sur?"

Bertwold blinked back tears.

"Butwuld?"

The smoke dissipated, and Bertwold could make out the blurry face of Lumpkin who stood on the bank above him. Lumpkin's clothes were singed and torn, and the tip of his broccoli was blackened, but otherwise he seemed unharmed.

"The catapult?" Bertwold asked grabbing Lumpkin's shirt and bunching



the material in his fist. Then, before Lumpkin could answer, Bertwold pulled himself up the shallow embankment, throwing his foreman off balance, so that, with a yelp, he tumbled into latrine.

Bertwold staggered up the slope of the bank. Before him, where the catapult and stockpile of ammunition had been, there was an enormous, smoking crater.

"Got them!" Miranda lifted the hem of her gown and did a little jig. "Maybe now he'll understand who he's dealing with!"

Poopsie shook his head ruefully, ruffling his feathers, scratching behind his left ear with his tiny wooden leg. "I wouldn't count on it," he squawked, and flapped onto Miranda's shoulder. "Please, Randy, just change me back and I'll get us out of here. Let's leave before something serious happens ...."

Miranda shooed him away with a wave of her hand. She crossed her arms, and her expression hardened. "No. He started it. Now let him finish it -- if he can!"

"What are they doing?" Lady Miranda wondered aloud. For the last five days the annoying humans had left them in relative peace. Poopsie chewed quietly on a cracker, but refrained from commenting.

Miranda leaned forward between the merlons of the parapet, about to drum her fingers in consternation when she remembered her digits were all gone. It only added to her pique.

"Awk, Randy," Poopsie's squawked in her ear, "they're not worth the effort. Awk, awk! Let them be."

Miranda winced; every time Poopsie talked he was sounding more like a parrot. And it was getting harder and harder to coax him from the trees.

"Awk! Change me back, and let's be on our way. Awk!"

"No," she said. "Not until this is finished." She gave him another cracker.

What were the bugs up to?

She stared down the valley at the mortals' camp and shook her head in bemusement. They'd dismantled all their their limb-shaped construction vehicles. At first, Miranda had thought they'd given in, and were simply packing up to leave; but instead of slinking away, they had erected an enormous pavilion and dragged the disassembled parts of the machines underneath its broad canvases. Miranda bit her lip so hard she drew blood. The pain surprised her, made her curse softly under her breath at the waste of a perfectly good blood wish. *It's their fault*, she thought, her anger slowly rising as she dabbed at her lip with a lace handkerchief. *And they shall pay.*

Bertwold admired his latest invention.

It had taken them the better part of a week to build the thing. In the process, they'd had to cannibalize every single construction machine. And they'd also exhausted their supplies. For the last two days his men had worked on empty stomachs and Bertwold had spent almost as much time mollifying their growing discontent as he spent overseeing the construction work. But it had been worth it, he thought. This was the best machine he'd ever built.

"Fire up the boilers," he said to Lumpkin.

At Bertwold's words, Lumpkin jumped. He looked drawn, and more than a little nervous, and this Bertwold could understand, having seen the other men eyeing Lumpkin's nose hungrily. Bertwold's own stomach rumbled. For a moment his vision misted over, and he could only see the yellow of a rich cheese sauce running over green of broccoli, and his mouth began to water ....

He shook his head to clear it.

Focus, he admonished himself. You'll need all your wits to operate the machine.

"Awk!" Poopsie flapped his wings, screeching as he circled the room in agitated motion. "Awk!"

"What is it?" Miranda sat before her mirror; she had spent the morning in the cellar, rooting through old trunks, trying on wigs.

"Follow me! Follow me!" Poopsie shrieked. Then he darted beneath the door jamb and flew out of sight.

Miranda leapt to her feet and sped after him, out onto the parapet where he perched, his little wooden leg tapping an agitated tattoo on the crenel.

"Look!" he squawked, pointing a wing.

Miranda turned. Her jaw fell open.

The roof of the human's pavilion had been rolled back, revealing a huge machine fabricated in the form of a man. It was sitting up, as if it had just woken. Steam curled slowly from vents in its neck. As Miranda watched, there was a piercing whistle, and the machine rumbled to its feet, towering over the camp, its face now level with hers. With a grinding noise it teetered, steadied itself, took one lurching step, then another, walking in an exaggerated gait, moving cautiously along the edge of the oatmeal swamp, heading towards the castle.

Poopsie hopped on her shoulder. "Quick!" Poopsie screamed in her ear. "Change me back! Change me back! I'll get us out of here! Awk!"

Miranda raised her arm to bat him away, then stopped abruptly. "Okay," she said. She plucked him from her shoulder with her good arm -- the one with two remaining fingers -- and he yelped, a strangled sort of sound that Miranda felt vibrate through his windpipe. She closed her eyes and concentrated; her arm began to dissolve, to fuse with Poopsie.

He grew.

Already larger than Miranda, he continued to grow with each passing second as her arm disintegrated. By the time she was up to her elbow he was a forty foot-high parrot, his wooden leg the size of a small tree. When she finally withdrew, only a small flap of flesh left where her arm used to be, Poopsie's head extended past the castle's highest tower.

"Now!" Miranda shouted, pointing to the man-machine. "Get him!"

Poopsie blinked, once, twice, and cocked his head. His eyes were dull and remote, and Miranda could no longer detect any sign of human intelligence in them. "Poopsie?" she asked. "You there?"

Poopsie screeched, an ear-splitting reverberation that shook the castle down to its foundations. He launched himself from the parapet, his wings beating so hard that Miranda was nearly blown from the wall. He swooped past the machine, and dove towards the clutch of workers in the encampment. At the last second he banked and climbed into the sky, a tiny figure with a bright green nose struggling in his talons. In seconds he'd dwindled to a small dot on the horizon.

*Oops*, Miranda thought.

As if enraged, the man-machine leapt forward, its whistle shrieking in anger.

The parrot was monstrous, huge, large enough to knock even this machine over.

Bertwold watched it dive towards him and he froze, his hands on the levers, unable to move. It grew larger and larger, until he could see nothing else, and he covered his eyes, waiting for the moment of impact that would topple him to his death. But nothing happened. Or at least nothing dire. The machine rocked gently as the parrot swooped past. When Bertwold lowered his arm the eyeholes showed only empty sky. He pulled a lever, and the head swung round a full circle. But the bird was nowhere to be seen.

"Right," Bertwold said. "That's it for you!" He reached for a lever.

The motors roared; steam vented in screeching whistles. The machine jerked forward, breaking into a mechanical trot. Then it lurched sickeningly. Although the engines continued to bellow, the machine had come to a standstill.

Bertwold grabbed another lever, pulling sharply on it; the machine roared even louder, and this time he could hear its metal joints squeal deafeningly under the stress. A rivet popped out of a plate above his head and shot across the chamber, ricocheting off the opposite wall and clattering noisily to the floor. Bertwold eased up on the lever, and the machine seemed to sigh; then it settled on an awkward angle, the landscape ahead of him tilted a few degrees. *What the ....?*

Bertwold unstrapped himself and took two quick steps to the right eyehole. Far below, the machine's feet had already disappeared, swallowed in the

golden-brown, lumpy earth.

Bertwold cursed aloud. In his anger, he'd forgotten about the rotting oatmeal!

He dashed back, and worked furiously at the controls, but no matter what he did, no matter how hard he pulled or pushed the groaning levers, he couldn't free the machines' legs. His beautiful new machine continued to sink. As he sweated and cursed and sweated some more, the landscape rose, bit by infuriating bit, before him.

Bertwold stood beside his machine, just beyond the edge of the deadly oatmeal. Only the machine's head was visible, its chin nestled firmly in the brown morass. Bertwold felt like crying. Instead, he continued to brush oatmeal from his jerkin in as dignified a manner as he could muster. It left sad brown streaks wherever it touched.

Down the road the encampment was deserted; his men had abandoned him. *One giant parrot and they fled like frightened children.* Bertwold shook his head. He had expected better of them, especially of Lumpkin, always faithful Lumpkin. *Oh well,* he thought. *Wherever he's gone, he's probably better off now.*

"Haloooo ..." The voice startled Bertwold. It was a woman's voice, a mellifluous, lilting tone that made his blood quicken. It had issued from behind the castle gate. "Is anyone out there?"

Bertwold turned and cleared his throat. "Yes?"

"Um," the voice began, "I'm in a bit of a fix. I was wondering if you could, ah, possibly give me a hand."

Bertwold strode up to the gate. In its centre was a square peephole that was shut. "What sort of help?" When there was no answer, Bertwold said, "Why don't you open the gate?"

"I'm afraid I can't," the voice said. "You see, that's my problem."

"Then at least open the peephole so I can see who it is that I'm addressing."

"Oh, well, if you insist!" The voice sounded annoyed, almost petulant. There was a rasping sound followed by a grunt. Then the small wooden square swung inward. Bertwold's heart faltered. Framed in the opening was the beautiful face he had watched through his telescope, although now a wig sat askew atop her striking face. Bertwold gaped; the woman blushed. Then she inclined her head in a fetching manner, hiding her eyepatch in half-shadow. Bertwold sucked in a sharp breath.

"I'm afraid I can't open the door," she said in a forlorn voice that rent Bertwold's heart. "I'm trapped." She stepped back and he could see that she had only one arm, and that arm had no fingers. "I managed to pull the bolt on the peephole with my teeth, but the gate is barred." She gave him a melting look.

"I'm afraid you'll have to find your own way in."

Bertwold's heart sang in his chest.

Fall was nearly played out, and winter would soon be upon them; large flakes of snow drifted down and settled on the ground. The pass, paved road and all, would soon be closed until spring. Miranda stared at the castle, at her castle, and the causeway that had been cut through it like a tunnel, and felt a brief, almost imperceptible, flash of something that might have been anger.

But it passed quickly.

As if sensing her agitation, Bertwold reached out and put his arm around her shoulders. She turned and smiled at him.

It had been his idea to come back here, and she could see it troubled him no less than her. The way he had looked at his machine, or the head of it, anyway, that poked above the ground in the midst of the inexplicable broccoli patch. It was, she thought, quite clever, still widely regarded as his best work, something of which he could rightly be proud.

"Ready?" she asked and he nodded.

They walked back to their carriage. When she reached out to open the door, he closed his fingers over her wrist. "Problems?" he asked.

She drew her brow up in puzzlement.

"The cold," he tapped her arm. "I was worried about the temperature. How's it holding up?"

She flexed her arm, curling her fingers, all five of them, into a fist and released them. An almost inaudible whirring followed her movements. "Works perfectly," she said, reaching out and pulling his head to hers until their lips touched lightly. "Just like magic."

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