

HEROICS SAMPLE

A VILLANOUS HEROICS BOOK

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*The people who make mistakes. The people learning who they are
one day at a time. The constantly evolving.*

This one is to you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Please note that this book contains issues of misgendering, ableism, discrimination, and violence. Please take care of yourself.

A VILLAINOUS HEROICS BOOK

HEROICS

LOU WILHAM

CHAPTER ONE

RAIN PATTERNED FROM ABOVE, SOAKING THE BLACK HOODIE that J had forced Sol to wear for "stealth". Mythikos stretched out below them. The lights shimmering in the city's puddles and off raindrop-streaked windows, made it look magical, and ominous all in one go. Sol still didn't understand the strange desire to blend into the shadows that J had. It was like she thought if no one saw them then they wouldn't connect Sol back to the crime. Which was just plain silliness as Sol all but signed his work these days, and Soliel Tsuki was supposed to be dead besides. Killed in a failed attempt to flee while on the way to the hospital. The news said so, and the everyday citizen believed it—they all knew the news couldn't lie—not that they *cared*. What was one more dead Unseeleie? But Sol wanted certain people to know he was still out there in the world, trying to set it to rights. He wanted the crooked politicians and the power tripping Hero Alliance to know that he was watching them. That he saw what they were doing, and he was going to expose them at any cost.

He wanted to *matter*. He would give *anything* to matter to this city, even his life, he supposed...

The billboard behind them fizzled and blacked out, casting Sol and J into darkness.

"Well, that wasn't supposed to happen," Sol said with a lightness to the words that didn't ring true. There had been a plan. There were fail safes. This stupid fucking billboard was the one right outside of Councilman Tor's big expensive penthouse. He'd see it from his window when he looked out while enjoying his midnight glass of overly expensive whiskey. Which tasted like absolute swill; Sol would know because he'd broken into the place to figure out which billboard was the best one to hit so they could scare the metaphorical, and probably literal, shit out of the man.

"I hate it when you say shit like that," J grumbled from where she crouched beside Sol. Her wide shoulders tensed up underneath the matching black hoodie she'd thrown on before they left.

"These things happen." They didn't. Not to Soliel Tsuki. Son of the late Adelia Tsuki. Partner in all things to Colette Jericho. Not to *him*. He was meticulous in his planning. He had always been exactly where he wanted to be, and nothing had ever gone wrong. *All right*, almost *nothing*, he amended, brushing his fingers over the scar that ran down the front of his throat. But that wasn't the point. Sol shrugged J's intense gaze off when it prickled at the back of his neck. "Just keep an eye on the street, and let me know if anyone notices."

"Maz and Dominic are down there. They'll let us know if anyone is staring up here for too long. Just fix the fucking thing before we wind up on the news." *Again*, went left unsaid, but Sol heard it anyway.

Sol grunted at the reprimand, his fingers tapping probably too hard against the tablet balanced on his knee. The rain made the touch screen slick, and his fingers were starting to prune from trying to get the damn billboard back online.

"It's 11:58," J's voice whispered too close to Sol's ear, and her breath was hot on his cheek.

"Okay well maybe if you weren't breathing down my *neck*, I could get this done."

"Is it the breathing down your neck that's the problem, or is it that you just don't know how to work that thing?" J snorted, the sound undeniably fond to Sol's ears.

"I'm turning off my fucking hearing aid if you don't shut up so I can work."

J made another sound in the back of her throat, like an annoyed puppy, and turned away to watch the window across the street. If they weren't in the middle of the cold rain, with Sol trying to figure out what the fuck had gone wrong with a simple billboard take over, he might have cuddled her into his chest, and pressed a kiss to her head. But they were in the rain, and this billboard was being an absolute bitch.

Sol reached into the pouch on his belt, pulling out a packet of glowing powder. "Take this and sprinkle it on that service panel over there," he said, sprinkling a little on the tablet.

"What is it?"

"It'll create a connection to the billboard so I can access the stupid thing directly, and get it back online. It looks like Pickle's virus has completely knocked it off the main server." The explanation was muttered mostly to himself, but Sol knew that J would hear it even over the sounds of traffic below, and the rain above—werewolf hearing and all that.

"What if it corrupts our network through your device?" J twirled the packet around in her fingers, watching the way the glowing contents shifted around in the envelope with narrowed green eyes.

"It won't. It's fine. I just need to see what error it's kicking back. Now, be quiet, and let me work. We've got like..."

"70 seconds," Maz supplied helpfully into the com on his hearing aid. "That gives you two idiots exactly ten seconds to get down off there before Tor sees and calls the heroes in." They did *not* want the heroes involved in this; Mythikos' "public safety" force would be less than thrilled to see one of their own hacking into a billboard alongside someone who they'd personally told the public was dead.

"No pressure," Dominic chimed in, his tone light.

"Right. No pressure." Sol rolled his eyes, before flapping his hand at J to do as she was told. She did, but there was a begrudging grumble in her throat that Sol didn't have to hear to know was there. "Thanks a lot, both of you."

"Anytime!" Dominic sounded like he was having a grand ol' time, and that just made the whole situation that much more frustrating as a little spinning wheel on the tablet spun and spun and spun. He'd rather be back at headquarters with Rachel, watching the feeds for the public's response, not that Sol could blame him. None of them wanted to be out in this rain. But as always, Dominic was making the best of it. So annoying.

"When did everyone on my fucking team become a bunch of critical ass—"

"50 seconds," Maz said.

"Shut *up*, Maz!" Sol's friend, and the first person he'd recruited to Eventide after it had formed could be a real pain sometimes. He loved her, but she just never seemed to realize when enough was enough.

The spinning wheel disappeared a second later, the backlit screen blinked, then a little pop-up window appeared that just said, '\//H1T3_R4BB1T'. Sol cocked his head, narrowing his eyes on the error message. "Huh. That's weird."

"I hate that one more than 'that wasn't supposed to happen.'" J muttered, moving to peer over Sol's shoulder to

look at the screen. Her hood slipped a little, long blond hair spilling down to brush at Sol's cheek.

"I'm with J, that one's worse." Dominic's tone was still light, like he was laughing despite the situation they were in.

Which might have been better than the sweat crawling down Sol's spine in spite of the cold rain soaking through his clothes and into his binder. It could be nothing, he reasoned. Just a weird system glitch. Magic and technology didn't always work together as nicely as people hoped they would. But... but Pickle didn't make mistakes like that. None of her viruses had ever kicked back an error code. Ildri's motto was "glitch-free is the way to be." And the pixie had had centuries of figuring out how to combine tech with magic, she wasn't an amateur. Sol tried to tell himself that there was a first time for everything. That even Pickle wasn't infallible. But his stomach twisted with unease. He pushed those thoughts aside. Now wasn't the time. He could deal with this `\\H1T3_R4BB1T` error later.

"Everyone's a fucking comedian in this organization, I swear." Sol breathed out slowly, forcing himself back to focus on what he was doing. He exited the error window, and went back to the program, then a couple of taps later and the billboard flickered back to life, nearly blinding him and J.

"Fucking hell," J cursed under her breath.

The slideshow started up quickly thereafter. Photos of Councilman Tor meeting with some shady looking folks, accepting gifts, smiling, and laughing, and looking all too chummy with someone that looked like they belonged to Mythikos' underground. And then documents. Nothing that anyone could read from the street, but Tor would see them from his window; he'd know that they knew. And any passersby could download the file to their own device if they so chose, just by clicking on an alert that would be sent from the infected billboard. It would be a real pain in the ass to

undo, likely take at least an hour, and by then at least a couple hundred people could have seen the information packet.

Simply put, Councilman Tor was fucked.

"We're live, people!" Sol laughed, turning carefully where he squatted on the little ledge in front of the billboard to peer into Tor's window. He could just see the outline of the man silhouetted through the glass, but that shape wasn't moving, hardly looked like he was breathing in fact.

"Time to get gone." J came over to grab Sol by the collar of his hoodie, and pull him to his feet, readying to drag him back to the ladder down to the roof. All it really did was dislodge the hood from where it had kept Sol's face hidden.

Sol tilted his head at the figure on the other side of the glass, digging his heels into the metal beneath him so J couldn't pull him along. He lifted one hand, and blew the figure a kiss.

"Press is on their way," Pickle said into his ear. "The drone is just around the block, Dusk. Remember to smile!"

"Stop encouraging him!" J growled, her hand tightening in the fabric at the back of Sol's neck. But it was too late, Sol heard the buzzing of the drone as it rounded the building.

It stopped, idling before the billboard as it seemed to contemplate what was flashing before it. Sol gave the little camera a jaunty wave, then turned to bow, one arm extended to draw the drone's attention back to the billboard which had cycled to an email chain between Tor and some unnamed account.

"All right, they're on it. They've started downloading the packet off the billboard's system. Time for you guys to make your exit." Pickle's voice was just barely audible over the sound of her typing in the background.

"I hear sirens," Maz said.

"Fuck!" J tightened her hold on Sol, and dragged him back

to the ladder. Seemed she was done playing around. "Do we have a route, Pickle?"

"Working on it. Maz and Dominic are already on their way back, but I'll take you two the roundabout way."

Sol pulled the hood back up over his head, his eyes flicking around to see if the news drone had decided to follow them. It hadn't, it was still hovering in front of the billboard.

"Don't worry about that thing, I made sure the packet was big enough it'd give you a clean break." Pickle's words were soft, but sure. A comfort as Sol's heart started to race.

"We may have to split up." Sol moved to the edge of the roof, looking down at the street. The rooftops would be the quickest escape, but the heroes had started utilizing drones in the year since Jericho had broken Dusk out of a Hero run transport. Sol took no small pleasure knowing it was because of his own notoriety.

"No." J's teeth glinted in the lights of the surrounding buildings as she snarled at him.

"No need." Pickle assured in that soft, soothing tone of hers. The one that kept J in line, and Sol's nerves settled. "I've got you a route, and control of the cameras along the way. I sent it to your phone, just in case we get cut off."

"What if we need to diverge?" Sol crouched to jiggle a drainpipe to test its sturdiness. J glared at him, but didn't say anything against it. They both knew they couldn't go back down through the building. There was too much chance of them getting cornered in the enclosed space.

"Reboot is standing by on the other channel." Pickle sounded like she was smiling, but Sol decided he didn't have time to think about that. Nor did he have time to imagine Pickle and Reboot working back to back to get them the fuck out of there, and back home.

"Who's Reboot?" J asked, her voice a hiss through the

comes instead of right at his ear as Sol started shimmying his way down the drainpipe.

"You'll meet her," Pickle said with a choked off chuckle, "eventually."

And then the line fell silent so Sol and J could focus on getting down the side of the building into the shadowed alley without breaking anything or falling to their deaths. Sol pulled out his phone, and lead the way back to the street, where the heavy work traffic of Mythikos would hide them. He felt J's presence at his back, a few people behind. Separating them to add an air of casualness to their sedate pace.

The rain started down in earnest a moment later, and then everyone around them opened their umbrellas, and J and Sol disappeared entirely from the view of any drones or cameras above. It was almost too easy to escape after that, through the foot traffic, down a back alley, through a mostly empty shopping mall, and back out onto an abandoned street in Ilygroth.

J was pressed in close to Sol on the train back toward the outskirts of the city before Sol let himself breathe easily again. He reached out to thread his fingers through J's, and was happy to find J pressing her palm back into his. Letting warmth seep in from everywhere they were pushed together in the overcrowded train—a comfort he hadn't known he needed nor wanted before a little over a year ago when J came back into his life.

"I feel like we're playing fucking whack-a-mole," Sol mumbled under his breath, the words too soft for anyone but J, with the sharp hearing of a werewolf beside him to hear. He was heavy with them, weighed down by the certainty that this would never end. Because ultimately no one gave enough of a fuck to make it end. "We take one out, and two more pop out of the ground like fucking daisies. We'll never fix things this way."

J sighed, leaning over to rest her head on Sol's shoulder. She reached up to turn the com off, so the others wouldn't hear them, and waited for Sol to do the same.

"Here's the thing," J said when she was sure they were alone again, but for the hordes of Mythikos citizens obliviously going about their day around them. "It's probably going to be like that for a while."

Sol ignored the way the words seemed to drag him down, making him tired. It wouldn't matter, he knew what he needed to do. But... well, he *was* getting tired. It had been a long couple of years, and still the corruption of Mythikos was so thick, he was swimming in it. Like nothing he did made a difference.

"We can stay. We can stay and fight. Try to save them all. We can try to make this place better..." J let her words drift off, her breath slow, and even, calm. Sol slowed his own breathing to match hers, keeping the panic at bay for just a bit longer.

"Or?" he breathed, only half wanting to know the alternative, because it would be enticing. Whatever thing J thought they could do instead would sound a hundred times better than what they were currently doing. He didn't even have to hear it to know.

"Or, we say fuck 'em, and save ourselves." J shrugged, letting the words settle between them like they were a genuine offer. Like they were a choice that either of them had. Sol knew better though. That was never going to be an option, not for them. They wouldn't be leaving Mythikos, not until they were done.

"Is that really an option?" Sol asked, even as he knew that it wasn't.

"I'm good with whatever you choose." J leaned her head to brush her nose against his cheek, letting out a soft, pleased rumble. "We're a team"

"You're sweet." Sol smiled.

"You tell anyone that, and I'll fucking smother you in your sleep." J grumbled, but there was no heat behind the threat, and they settled for a long moment into the sway and the bustle of the train around them. The noise of people getting on and off the train, muttering about their day, and humming softly along to whatever was on their headphones lulled Sol into a daze, and J stayed silent, giving him the space he needed to truly consider her offer. Not that there was much to consider. It was a forgone conclusion that Sol would spend his life trying to save the people of Mythikos, or die trying, for all that they seemed to notice.

"So... what'll it be?"

"We're not going anywhere," Sol sighed, hating himself a little for his own resolve. "So long as Dusk can still make a difference—"

"Fine. No need to get all uppity about it. It was just a question." J shifted uncomfortably beside him on the hard train bench, but didn't say anything else. Instead she let Sol sit with the offer. Let him mull it over. He was still doing that when they reached the last stop on the line, almost to the wilds beyond Mythikos. They couldn't leave, no, but maybe there was something more they *could* do right where they were. He'd have to talk to Pickle about it once they'd cleaned up.

CHAPTER TWO

"THERE'S GOT TO BE MORE WE CAN BE DOING," SOL SAID, lifting his hand to push the teal hair back from his face as he paced in front of Pickle's workbench.

"We're doing what we can," Reboot's soft voice came from the phone on speaker next to Pickle. Sol wasn't sure why Pickle had decided to call her, but Pickle had said this was a conversation for the whole family, and he wasn't about to argue with either of them, it had only ever gotten him into trouble before. He'd learned early on that a person didn't argue with the people in charge of finding an exit, or erasing records; the tech crew was to be respected at all times, especially Reboot and Pickle.

"It's not enough!" Sol slammed his hands down onto the edge of the workbench, making all the metal bits and bobs clatter against its steel surface, in an attempt to hide the way they were starting to tremble. It didn't hide anything. If anything, it made it more obvious, he realized too late.

"Dusk, you need to calm down." Pickle's voice was sharp, her blue eyes following him as he paced from one end of the metal table laden in gadgetry to the other.

"I am calm!" She was right—of course she was, Pickle was always *right*—he needed to calm down, but he couldn't seem to. Every part of him was vibrating with the need to *do* something, fight back, attack, break something, anything!

"Soliel." Reboot's tone was soft, but reprimanding, making Sol stop in his tracks. "Take a breath."

Sol let out a long breath, his shoulders sinking with it, then ran his hands through his hair to get the bright teal stripe out of his face. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell."

"We understand that you're upset. And we understand why," Reboot said soft, and soothing, just as her voice had always been. Her tone gentle, and kind. It made the thing that had gripped Sol's chest in a vice, loosen. She was right. They needed to remain calm about this. They couldn't go rushing in unprepared. And he trusted Reboot and Pickle to help him come up with a plan that would get things moving. They had been at this much longer than him, after all.

"Now that everyone is done yelling." Pickle pushed her goggles up onto her head, brushing her pink and blue hair out of her face like a headband. "I have an idea."

"You do?" Reboot and Sol asked at the same time. Although Reboot sounded suspicious, and Sol, surprised.

"Of course I do."

"And you didn't bring this up to me before... why?" Reboot's tone turned sharp, and Sol could imagine her narrowing her brown eyes, nose crinkling with irritation.

"Don't get mad, love," Pickle offered placatingly. "I wanted to bring it up at a family meeting so I could get everyone's opinion."

"Uh huh." Reboot's tone had only grown more suspicious, and Sol didn't envy the dressing down Pickle would get for this little stunt later.

"And I knew if I brought it up to just you, you'd veto it

before Dusk could even hear it." Pickle winked at Sol, and Reboot let out a long breath that sounded like a groan. "Does that mean I'm not allowed to tell him?"

"Is there any way of stopping you?" Reboot grumble.

"Not really?" Pickle laughed, her face scrunching up with the happiness of it.

"Proceed," Reboot said, resigned.

"Perfect." Pickle perked up, grabbing a tablet from somewhere off to the side, and turning it on so the screen lit her face from below in a ghostly blue. "So, there's this Councilwoman named Guinevere—"

"We're not kidnapping a councilwoman, people will notice," Reboot cut in, her words sharp, but Sol was already leaning in closer, his feet taking him to stand in front of Reboot so he might get a look at whatever she had pulled up on the tablet. *Let people notice*, he thought. He wanted them to notice, to stop and think about what was going on, and ask the important question finally, the one that not even his live broadcast had gotten people to ask... *Why?*

"Of course not, don't be silly, honey. Besides, Guinevere is actually a halfway decent person. But she *is* being manipulated by an underling. An assistant named Cordelia Gareth, who supervises what information passes Guinevere's desk, and therefore—"

"What she signs off on, get to the point." Sol leaned over the workbench, careful of Pickle's gadgets to get a better look at the screen she was looking at. She was keeping it tilted close to her, likely to build suspense for her big reveal.

"Gareth is single. She's not in touch with her family. The only people who would even miss her are those at Guinevere's office."

"And if we send in a letter saying she's sick..." Reboot sounded like she was smiling.

"Exactly. They'll be none the wiser." Pickle was smiling,

the expression eating up her face so there was hardly an inch of pale skin untouched by it.

"Okay, but why this assistant? She doesn't have any real power. How do we know she even works with the other council members?" Sol wrinkled his nose, fingers tapping nervously on the metal workbench. "She just might be a shitty person."

"Except she lives in Heritage Heights." Pickle tilted her tablet so the display would turn, and Sol could *finally* get a good look at Gareth's file.

Sol whistled, shaking his head. "I don't even think council members can afford that place." He'd only ever ridden past Heritage Heights; it was the kind of place where the ultra-rich of Mythikos holed up away from the world. Its height disappeared into the clouds, and rumor had it that each floor had a single owner, and was outfitted with a swimming pool, a tennis court, and even a beach someone had managed to magic in. It was a haven. Certainly, no assistant should have been able to afford it.

Pickle nodded, her smile inching further up her cheeks, going a little manic round the edges.

"So where's the money coming from?" Reboot asked, her nails tapping on whatever desk she was sitting at. And *that*, that was the question he'd been taught to ask when he was just starting out. He remembered Reboot sitting him down in front of a tablet, leaning over his shoulder, and telling him to follow the money. That was the one rule of Mythikos: money talked.

"Same place Pendragon's was, when I looked at his accounts. And by the amounts she's receiving... she's higher up than Pendragon was." Pickle slid her finger over the screen to show Sol the bank records, and his brows show up.

"We can't be sure that she knows anything." Reboot sounded like she was frowning.

"No, we can't. But we can be reasonably certain that she at least knows the others under her in the organization who work within the council. They might not know who she is, but she'll know who they are." Sol tapped his chin in thought, his mind already running down all the paths this could take them. So many options. So many choices. So many possibilities! "If I were this person, I'd have someone invisible to keep an eye on all my people. Someone they wouldn't look twice at."

"Right. And who would think that someone pushing papers and getting coffee is the one who could actually turn them in to their boss?" Pickle's voice went up an octave in her excitement, leaning over the bench toward Sol.

"It's exactly what I would do." Sol nodded eagerly, Pickle's excitement infecting him, ratcheting up his nerves to an eleven.

Reboot sighed loud enough to make the speaker crackle with it. "Fine. So what's your plan?"

"Oh, that's easy." Sol grinned at the speaker, his fingers wiggling to take the tablet from Pickle where she sat back in her seat, her fingers drumming against the metal workbench with soft thumps. This was what he'd wanted, a way to stop playing whack-a-mole and start ripping the weeds out in clumps. Pickle had given him the opening, now he just had to run with it.



"I DON'T LIKE IT." J sniffed, scrunching up his nose. His bright green eyes narrowed on the table. Plans littered the available space with every detail Sol thought they might need. It hadn't taken him and Pickle long to settle on the details, not once he had brought his discontent with their current circumstances

to her. The most arduous part had been in convincing Reboot to go along with it, but once he and Pickle got excited about something Reboot always had a hard time saying no. So really, that had been easy too.

"Yeah? What else is new?" Maz rolled her eyes. One would have thought that after a year of working together J and Maz would have gotten over whatever hurdles were in the way of them getting along. One would have been wrong. Sol desperately hoped for peace between his significant other, and his friend, if only to make missions less stressful, but thus far he'd had none of it. Both J and Maz seemed incapable of letting the inborn prejudices of werewolves and kitsune drop long enough to have a civil conversation. It was a pain in the ass. It was a headache. It was giving Sol *grey hair*.

"It is a little off brand for us." Rachel shifted nervously beside Dominic, her hands fidgeting in front of her. She was anything but new, having joined up just before the mission to pull Sol out of that hero transport a year ago, but she still acted like a rookie anytime they asked her to go out into the field. Like she was sure someone would look at her and realize that of course the wraith was up to something. Still, when they needed her, she was always there in a pinch.

"Exactly. We don't kidnap people." J nodded, running a hand through his blond hair to keep it back from his eyes that for the first time in weeks were free of any kind of makeup. More and more Sol watched his significant other hiding behind the shield of his other gender. Tucking himself behind kohl rimmed eyes, and red painted lips like they could protect him from everything that was out to get them in the world. Sol could understand it. He could understand the need to slip into a stronger, tougher, more confident self. Just how he did with Dusk.

"We'll put her back." Sol shrugged. His fingers tapped at his chin in thought. He didn't see where it mattered if one

corrupt government official went missing, especially one who was essentially just a peon, or at least that's what he was telling himself. "Probably."

"See. It's the probably that worries me." J's shoulders slumped, his weight leaning more heavily on the hands he braced on the table, pressing himself forward into Sol's space. Sol met his green gaze, and almost immediately regretted it. The intensity there, it was... well, it was nothing new. But fuck if it didn't pin him in place all the same—prey caught in a predator's sights. "Eventide doesn't kill people. *Dusk* doesn't kill people. Not unless he has to."

"Well if she tells us what we want to know, then we won't have to." Sol tried to keep the tone as nonchalant as possible, but he knew that J would sense the anxiety tingle like a live wire over the bond between them. J knew, of course he knew, how the idea of this didn't sit right with Sol. But they had to do *something*. They couldn't just keep knocking down one threat at a time because it wasn't *doing* anything. Nothing was *changing*.

"If. And that's *if* she even knows anything to begin with. This is all speculation based on bank activity. You all don't have any actual proof. This is just guesswork. You don't *do* guesswork, Sol."

"I understand where you're coming from," Sol said, his arms crossing over his chest. "But we can't keep playing this game where we take one down and three more pop up. If we're going to make any real changes in Mythikos, we need to know the extent of their organization, and we need to start taking them down en masse. We need to show the people that this isn't a couple of bad apples, but a systemic issue that goes back for decades."

"And what happens when she tells everyone that she's been to the Eventide hideout? What happens when she says she's seen our faces and she has sketches done up? What

happens when she leads them back to us?" J's eyes narrowed even further, his shoulders going stiff.

"She won't. Pickle and I have already set up a safe house far away from our usual places. When we're done with her, we'll just abandon it. There won't be anything for them to find afterwards. And we'll knock her out to get her there." Sol tilted his head, pointing to a paper on the table. "That's her schedule. She visits a tea house every evening on her way home from work. We've already gotten Rachel a position there."

J grunted, but didn't point out that Sol hadn't addressed the issue of Gareth knowing their faces. It didn't really matter to him if she did. In fact, he *wanted* them to know his face. To know who it was that would be coming for them when they did something to hurt the people of Mythikos.

"What if they don't let me make her tea during my probationary period?" Rachel's voice shook a little.

Sol's eyes narrowed, his mood morphed into something harder, more fierce. Dusk. The villain, coming to the surface and unwilling to take no for an answer, even from his own people. They didn't have time to go back and forth on this, and he was done talking about it. "Do none of you have faith in me and Pickle? Because if you want out, now is the time to do it. Walk right out that door and we'll never ask anything of you again. You can go back to your civilian lives. But don't come crying to me when the heroes pick you up and throw you into a cell on the Isle. I don't break out cowards."

The group as a whole made soft sounds of discomfiture, shifting on their feet as they avoided Sol's eyes. They had to know he meant it. He loved them all like family. He would do anything for each and every one of them. But he didn't have the time or resources to help people who weren't going to help him in turn. It was just a fact of life at Eventide.

J clicked his tongue in contempt, but he pushed off from

the table, and shifted his gaze back to the papers strewn about the table. "So Rachel will dose her. That gives us a window of a half hour or so to scoop her up off the pavement, and get her back to the safe house."

"Right."

"And once she's back there, who will she interact with?"

"Just you and me. No one that we use to interface with the public. I can't risk them being exposed when they still have to be out gathering intel."

"So you want *me* to scoop her ass up off the pavement." J grunted, his eyes narrowing again in annoyance, brows pinching together at the center. "And drag her for how many blocks to the safe house?"

"I'm sure you can handle one fairy, can't you, Lettie?" Sol smiled, his eyes squinting with the force of it. "You won't be going far. There's a hotel being refurbished a couple of streets over, construction has halted."

J raised a questioning brow.

"The funds for the project seem to have been... *misplaced*." Sol gave an innocent little shrug, tucking his hands into the pockets of his slacks. He wasn't fooling anyone, he knew that. Everyone in the room knew he was far from innocent, but it was nice sometimes, to lean back into the Dusk that J had known when this all had started.

"Of course they did. I hate you." J's eyes narrowed on him suspiciously.

"I love you too, Lettie!" Sol chirped, resisting the urge to lean into J like a flower seeking the sun. It would be all too easy to ignore the rest of the room and find comfort for his own rabbiting nerves in the sturdiness of J, but there was work to be done.

"I'll go with you, if you need a hand," Dominic offered, raising his hands a little as if in surrender. "I can wear one of Reboot's glammers."

"Fine, but just you. We shouldn't be wasting that shit. We don't know what else we'll need them for, and vampire blood isn't without its limits." J tugged at his shirt, straightening it further. "Come on, let's go check out the route."

Dominic nodded, and followed J to the door.

"No kiss goodbye?" Sol called after them.

J lifted one hand to flick Sol off right before the door closed behind them, and Sol sighed fondly. "Isn't he great?"

"Yeah... great," Maz muttered.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First off, thank you—the reader—for reading this, and hopefully enjoying *J* and *Dusk* as much as I did. I really appreciate it, and I hope you'll drop a review on GoodReads to let me know what you think.

If you loved this story, and these characters, as much as I did, please check out some of my other works!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born and raised in a small town near the Chesapeake Bay, Lou Wilham grew up on a steady diet of fiction, arts and crafts, and Old Bay. After years of absorbing everything, there was to absorb of fiction, fantasy, and sci-fi she's left with a serious writing/drawing habit that just won't quit. These days, she spends much of her time writing, drawing, and chasing a very short Basset Hound named Sherlock.

When not, daydreaming up new characters to write and draw she can be found crocheting, making cute bookmarks, and binge-watching whatever happens to catch her eye.

Learn more about Lou and her future projects on her website: <http://louinprogress.com/> or join her mailing list at: <http://subscribepage.com/mailemailer>

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C THE GIRL IN THE
CLOCKWORK TOWER
A STEAMPUNK RAPUNZEL RETELLING

LOU WILHAM

CHAPTER ONE

PERSINETTE

THE WASHED-OUT, DILAPIDATED BUILDINGS OF THE LABOR CAMP spread out beneath Persinette as she floated high above it all. Drifting down toward them, Persi bobbed lightly through the narrow alleys between one building and the next, her bare feet several inches off the ground. With not a soul in sight, an eerie silence blanketed the vast vacant camp.

A soft snap drew her attention. She spun to see what the sound was, and all at once the narrow alley was full of people. A sea of dirty, tired, gaunt faces swam below her, dirty arms reaching for her. What seemed like a million bony, pale hands grabbed at her ankles, to pull her down—down into that sea of frail bodies.

Persinette's green eyes jumped from one face to the next as they tore at her hair and clothes. She recognized them, all of them. She'd seen them all before, though never in person. They dragged her lower and lower into the pushing, writhing pit of dirty and too-thin bodies.

. . .

PERSINETTE AWOKE WITH A START, her face sweaty and her breath coming in hard, shallow pants. A scream was on her lips, but she swallowed it down with a dry gulp. “Just a dream, Persi. It was just a dream,” she whispered to herself, taking another deep breath to calm her racing heart. Even with her familiar room in the Tower before her, those faces still swam in her mind, each the same dirty, terrifying rictus she’d seen the first time she’d had the vision.

“Just a dream,” she repeated. But a part of her asked “*Was it?*”

A shrill, angry noise broke the silence of the early morning, startling Persi and setting her heart racing once more. With narrowed eyes, she glared at the offending alarm clock on her bedside table. Beside it sat a piece of crisp parchment that seemed to glow in the soft morning light. In one swift motion of her freckled hand, she silenced the alarm and scooped up the paper. She rubbed at her eyes and read the schedule typed neatly on the page before her.

- 6:30 a.m.—Briefing with Agent Gothel
- 7:00 a.m.—Breakfast

After that, Persinette skimmed the rest. Other than the briefing with Gothel, nothing mattered; everything else was just trivial busywork. She dragged herself from the warmth of plush blankets and soft sheets to the washroom to prepare for her morning meeting.

After sixteen years of living in MOTHER headquarters, the long walk down the bustling corridors, the too-early meeting, the rush of passing MOTHER agents and automata, even the hiss of steam as the door to the conference room opened—all of it was routine. When she’d first been brought to MOTHER at eight years old, it had all scared her,

but Persinette found that over time, anyone could get used to almost anything.

“You’re late.” Even the guttural, admonishing voice of MOTHER Agent Gothel had become commonplace for Persinette. The slender, middle-aged woman with sharp features and even sharper eyes was standing at the head of the table, a clutter of papers strewn before her.

The doors to the room groaned shut behind Persinette, barely missing the long train of her skirt. “I’m sorry, Gothel,” she murmured. Her long lavender hair fell into her face as she ducked her head and tried to make herself as small as possible. Gothel had never let an outright threat fall from her lips, but the implication was always there: the moment Persi was no longer useful to MOTHER, she would be disposed of, as so many others had been.

Gothel’s eyes narrowed on Persinette before she seemed to make up her mind about something. “Now that you’re here, sit,” she ordered, gesturing to the seat across from her. The bustle of Persi’s skirts let out a soft *poof* of air as she hastily complied. “We need an updated list of Enchanted in Province Four.”

Gothel held out a file and Persi hurriedly reached for it, knowing full well what was inside. Still, she made a show of setting the file on the table, opening it, and flicking her eyes over population statistics, maps, and photographs of Daiwynn’s fourth Province.

“We have provided you a map of the area and plenty of pictures. Any other information you may need is available upon request, of course.” The agent’s words were sharp and direct, as always.

Persinette’s fingers conducted their obligatory flip through the pages of the file as she nodded and took in the information she’d been given. She dared not say a word,

however. With Gothel, it was usually better to speak only when spoken to.

The agent gave her a moment before asking, "So, how long will this take you?"

Swallowing roughly, Persi took a moment to think. Whenever possible, she did her best to stretch out the length of time between the Collections she was involved with. She thought—however foolish the thought might have been—that by taking her time, she would give whoever she had a vision of—her target—the chance to get away. Still, even now, some annoying and logical voice in her head reminded her that these Enchanted didn't even know MOTHER was coming for them. Without that knowledge, they had no idea that they needed to run at all. She promptly told that voice to be quiet; she was doing the best that she could, after all. "A couple of months or so. Province Four is rather large," she said finally.

"You have six weeks," Gothel replied sharply, leaving no room for argument. Those cold, dark eyes narrowed on Persi as if perhaps she expected an argument. However, there would be none; Persinette saw no point in it. She would deliver what was expected of her in the time she was allotted, or else.

"Right, then. Guess I better get to work." Persi grabbed the file as she stood. She was already standing to head back to her rooms in the Tower, far away from Gothel's glare.

The agent's voice stopped her before she could push the button to open the doors. "One more thing, Persinette."

Persi licked her dry lips, almost afraid to ask the question. "Yes, Gothel?"

"They want you in the field this time."

"Excuse me?" Persinette's stomach did a sick drop toward the toes of her buckled boots. She'd been prepared for almost anything—just not that. "I can't go into the field, that's not

my job,” she argued. “My job is just to find the people. You and the Steps are supposed to go on Collections, not me.”

Gothel shrugged her slim shoulders, not even bothering to lift her eyes from the papers in front of her. “Those are the orders,” she said simply.

“But...” Persinette frowned deeply. “I’m not even trained to go out into the field! What do they think this is going to accomplish?” she demanded as she spun to meet Gothel’s eyes again. The shock of those orders brought with it a rare instance of bravery and contradiction. Never did Persinette go against orders. Seldom did she even question them.

The corners of Gothel’s mouth pinched with obvious disgust, her eyes narrowing. She seemed to find Persinette’s sudden bout of courage neither amusing nor admirable. “They are hoping this will speed up your process and allow increased Collection rates as you will be out in the field able to disseminate any visions that may occur on the spot.”

What Gothel didn’t say—and didn’t have to say—was that Persinette’s limited results had finally begun to draw attention to her. The higher-ups in MOTHER had noticed, and if they didn’t start seeing better results from her, she would be punished.

Persi nodded so quickly her teeth clacked together, then headed for the doors. Orders were orders, and Persi knew she didn’t have much choice. She was going out into the field whether she wanted to or not.

“You may be outfitted with a stunning pistol, so make sure you get down to the firing range to practice,” Gothel added as an afterthought.

Swallowing hard, Persinette nodded once more eyes fixed on the closed door before her, then smacked the button to open the doors. Out in the corridor, and out of Gothel’s sight, she leaned against the cement wall to take calm her pacing pulse.

“Calm down, Persi. This might be for the best.”

Even as she told herself so, a small, nasty voice that sounded eerily like Gothel reminded her of all the things that could and likely would go wrong.

It took her a few moments to silence the voice and regain control over her trembling knees enough to walk in a strangely robotic fashion back to the Tower. Each step was a struggle, but she focused on the click of her hard-soled boots on the tiled floor as she fled the probing eyes of MOTHER.



ALTHOUGH PERSINETTE HAD NOT BEEN BORN THERE, the Tower was the only place she'd ever really called home. The rooms that surrounded hers housed others of her “kind”: fairies, pixies, werewolves, and even a troll or two. Each was given plenty of living space and the illusion of freedom, but Persinette understood the Tower for what it was—a prison. She and the others of her kind did not *live* in the Tower; they were *kept* there.

Once back in her quarters, she opened the barred windows just a crack. There was no way to get out past the bars—and at night the windows locked automatically—but at least she was able to let some fresh air in. Persinette slumped down into the oversized chair that was perched on the rug in front of the jam-packed bookshelf. She inhaled deeply, pressing the heels of her shaking hands to her eyes to stop the panicked burn of tears.

“Get ahold of yourself, Persi. You can do this,” she scolded herself. The file—which she'd picked up from the chair and flopped across her legs—sat heavily in her lap as she continued to breathe in through her nose and out through

her mouth until her eyes stopped burning and she was in control again.

When her hands were finally steady, she opened the file and let her eyes flick over the printed pictures. Perhaps this could be a blessing in disguise. Maybe she could make this work for her. She could finally have a chance to do something to help the Enchanted, perhaps even stem the flow of faces that regularly haunted her. She could warn them somehow, allow them time to escape before MOTHER reached them.

But how? she asked herself.

She would have to make it look like she hadn't engineered their escapes herself. Like those Enchanted simply decided to pack up and leave. As much as Persinette wanted to help, she also knew that if she were found out, she'd be sent to the camps right alongside those she'd help Collect. Then she'd be no good to anyone. Still, in spite of her fear, she had to help. She knew that with every fiber of her being.

Yes, but how can someone like you help? That nasty little voice asked.

She shrugged the voice off, but still she asked herself: *How? How? How?* Persinette sat there in that overstuffed armchair asking herself over and over until lunch time.

No solution came to her.

When, at last, the lunch bell rang through the halls, she pulled herself to her feet and headed down to the mess hall. Tray in hand, Persinette settled at one of the little tables with a few other Assets, her mind still focused on the single question. *How?*

"You're a train wreck, 11-24-10." The snide words and the sound of her Asset number turned Persi's stomach and ripped her from her thoughts.

A rainbow-haired man with a short, dark beard stood on the other side of the table, two ruddy, brown-haired men

flanking him. His name was Agnes, and he'd never said more than a handful of words to her before that night. Persi shrugged, trying to come up with a lie that would explain away the mussed lavender hair and what must have been a vacant expression. Again, nothing came to mind.

Agnes sneered at her silence. He was beautiful, painfully so—but then, unicorns always were. “Oh look, cat's got the Seer's tongue. Maybe all those visions finally addled her brain.”

Persinette opened her mouth to say something, anything to get him to stop, to get him to leave her alone, but she couldn't get any words past her lips.

“Pathetic.” He snorted with disgust. The two men on either side of him let out soft chortles of laughter.

“I have to hit the shooting range after dinner,” she blurted out suddenly.

A short hateful bark of laughter left Agnes. His eyes lit with vicious amusement at her obvious discomfort. “Is that so? Do you not know how to fire a pistol, 11-24-10?”

Persi floundered for words again. She'd seen Agnes's cruelty toward the others, but up to that point he'd ignored her. The longer the confrontation dragged on, the harder she found it to think at all. Her palms were sweating against the table, slicking the surface. Her mouth gaped—to retort, to cut him down, to show him she was not someone to be pushed around—but the well of words in her throat was dry.

Loud chuckles rippled through the little group. In a moment of sheer panic, Persi stood abruptly from the table and made a beeline for the door of the mess hall. The laughter only grew louder, following her as she ran. “That's right, run, 11-24-10! Get lots of practice running! Or they'll kill you out there!” Agnes shouted after her.

The words echoed behind her, her heart racing and her palms getting even damper.



PERSINETTE THOUGHT of little else all evening. The memory of Agnes's words kept her awake more than the nightmares ever had, and at breakfast the next morning, she had to prop her head up on one pale hand just to keep herself from falling asleep in her porridge.

It took her till lunch to finally shake those words and focus on the task at hand once more. She still had not formulated a plan, however; all she had was a plan to formulate a plan. Which was...a start. Of sorts.

For a plan—or a plan for a plan—she'd need research.

Once she finished eating, she went down to the office that handled information requests. At the front desk sat a scowling young woman with bright blonde hair and sharp grey eyes that narrowed on Persi as she walked up to the counter. "What do you want?"

"Good afternoon," Persi said with a smile. She wasn't sure what she was hoping for—maybe a smile in return?—but what she got was a blank stare that left her feeling awkward and uncomfortable. "I, um, need to fill out a library access request form, please?"

With a cold look the MOTHER agent stared Persinette down for a moment longer before she wordlessly pointed to a rack of forms beside the window and promptly ducked her head back down to whatever she'd been doing before.

"Right. Thanks." Persinette forced her smile wider and looked over the rack for the form she needed. Once she'd found it, she filled it out at one of the longer, counter-height tables. She was so engrossed in the little boxes and spaces for explanation that she didn't notice anyone else in the room until someone peered right over her shoulder—Agnes.

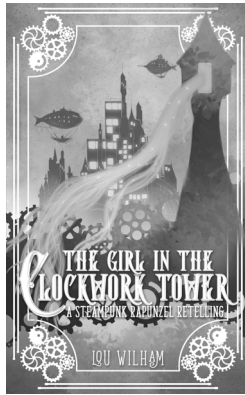
"I don't think a book is going to teach you how to handle

a pistol,” he said coolly. “At least not enough to keep you alive.”

Persinette spun around, sending her long hair fluttering, and fixed Agnes with a look of sheer determination. She was going to do it. She was going to tell him off. This was it! She opened her mouth to speak and...and...and *nothing*. Nothing came out!

Agnes laughed coldly and shook his head. “I’ll leave you to it then, 11-24-10. Good luck.” He gave her a mock bow and strode off.

She stood there for a long moment, still trying to coax words from her mouth, but if any words had formed, the stubbornly refused to come out. Instead, Persinette’s eye twitched, but she forced herself to turn back to the task at hand: getting into the library.

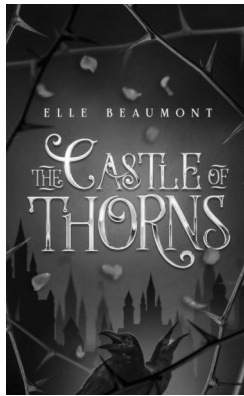


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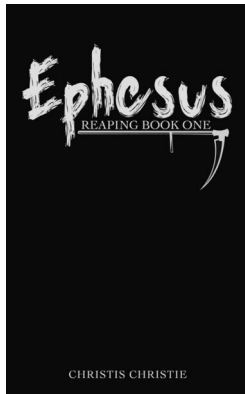
After surviving years with a debilitating illness that leaves her weak, Princess Gisela must prove that she is more than her ailment. She discovers her father, King Werner, has been growing desperate for the herbs that have been her survival. So much so, that he's willing to cross paths with a deadly legend of Todesfall Forest to retrieve her remedy.

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