

The Girl of Ink and Fire

by Solana Van de Leur

Some might describe fire as a dancer, with billowing pillars of orange elegantly swaying in the gentle breeze. But this fire was a beast. It roared with ferocity and clawed its fiery talons toward the blackening sky. It hungrily lapped up the ivory pages and leatherbound spines, reducing them to a pile of obsidian ash.

Shrieks and hoots echoed through the crowded town center. People swarmed the fire like moths, sacrificial novels in hand. Some contained glorious tales of heroes vanquishing evil, some told of more complex morals. Some were printed in vibrant colours meant to capture the eye of a child. No matter how harmless the tale, each one met its fiery death on the charred pile.

All Reyna could do was watch from the outermost point of the crowd. She stood on her tiptoes craning her neck to see over the ocean of bobbing heads stretching out before her. This hadn't been the first book burning she'd witnessed and if the monarchy continued to outlaw writing, this would not be the last. She shivered despite the sweltering heat. Each discarded book was a harrowing reminder of what she was.

Amidst the chaos, Reyna spotted a small, venomous snake scaling the cracks between the cobblestone beneath her and felt something akin to sympathy for the little creature. She, too, knew what it was like to be a danger hiding in plain sight. To be feared for a curse out of her control. Casting one last look at the glowing fire, she slipped away into the vacant narrow streets. Grandmere spoke of Writers as if their talents were a blessing, but it had never seemed that way to her. What blessing would compel her parents to abandon her upon its discovery? What blessing would force her to live her life out of fear? Reyna hadn't held a pen since the catastrophic accident that unveiled her talent. She vowed to never repeat it, but the allure was undeniable. Fate's persistent hand pushed on her back, urging her towards the glimmering golden pen in Grandmere's cottage whenever she passed it.

She'd heard the story of that pen a million times, especially when she was younger. Grandmere had found the golden pen she kept displayed on her mantel discarded outside a Writer's workshop many years ago. She had snatched it up, despite having no use for it herself. She was always very fond of Writers and told Reyna some of her favorite forbidden fables. She'd even encouraged Reyna to try out the pen, but the sight of it had made her eyes go wide with fear. She shook her stubborn head and Grandmere never brought it up again.

She had been the only person brave enough to take Reyna in, knowing what she was. She said that there once was a time when Writers were adored. They were taken to the highest palaces and

given gilded pens to bring their stories to life. Books were valued like pots of gold and treasured like a family heirloom. Reyna found it difficult to believe that such a world could exist. Her whole life Writers had been persecuted, their life's work thrown onto burning piles. The monarchy had decided that their power was too dangerous. People were far too influenced by their stories. What if the Writers decided to corrupt their readers with thoughts of evil?

She approached the edge of the woods now, head tilted up towards the towering canopy above. Sounds of crackling fire and exhilarated shouts were far behind her. The forest's serene winds lifted the hairs at the nape of her neck and welcomed her in.

Grandmere's cottage was only a little ways in, standing sturdily beside the babbling stream. Moss and ivy clung to the wooden posts like lush green bugs magnetized to the warmth within.

The lacy curtains were drawn, which Reyna found unusual. Grandmere always left them open so that a pleasant orange light emitted into the shadowy forest. It was her way of welcoming those who wandered past her cottage, whether they be human or beast.

She'd never understood why Grandmere was detested by the village. Although she was divergent in her ideals and possibly a bit delusional, she was the friendliest person Reyna knew. When she smiled, warmth was etched into every wrinkle of her face. Warmth that could thaw the whole village in the cold months of winter if they allowed her to. Grandmere was nothing if not kind, but the people didn't recognize that. They saw her as a mad woman, forcing her to live on the outskirts of town where they did not have to listen to her ramblings. Out of sight, out of mind.

Reyna had once asked her if she was angry with the village for outcasting her. Grandmere had merely scoffed, "To be angry with them is to be angry at a parrot. They have no words of their own, they only repeat what they've heard."

Reyna approached the cottage and rapped on the arched wooden door three times, with a sinking feeling growing in the pit of her stomach. She shoved it away, unsure where the anxiety sprouted from, and swung the door open.

The sight that greeted her on the other side was a heart-stopping shock. The twisting gut feeling of unease spiked as Reyna surveyed the scene before her. Grandmere's flower-patterned antique dinnerware was smashed to pieces. Her dainty white chairs had been overturned and every drawer was empty, their contents scattered across the floorboards. It looked like the debris of a tremendous hurricane.

"Grandmere?" Reyna called, heart pounding against her ribcage like a wardrum.

"Over here, darling."

She looked towards the sound of her strained voice and fell to her knees at the sight of her grandmother crumpled on the floor, covered in bruises and blood.

"Grandmere, what- what happened?" Her voice shook; tears threatened to spill down her cheeks.

“They came for me. They had whips and clubs and they tore apart my beautiful cottage.” Her gray eyes became glassy.

“It’s okay, grandma, you don’t have to tell me—”

“They were searching for you, Reyna.”

Fear wrapped its cold hands around her throat, strangling her with shock and guilt. The disaster overtaking the cabin was her fault. *Her fault*. Her stomach turned with waves of nausea, threatening to expel her breakfast. A gust of wind burst through the open door, elevating the scattered papers into a spiral that swirled throughout the cottage, faster and faster, matching the distress building up in Reyna’s chest.

Grandmere caught her hands, grounding her back to reality before she spun out of control. Her eyes shimmered with fierce determination, “You must go, Reyna. Before they find you. It started with burning the books but it will only worsen. The monarchy will not stop until they’ve hunted down every person who dares to defy them and burns them to the ground. You were born with stories in your veins. Do not let them bleed yours dry.”

Reyna’s vision blurred with tears as fury began to fester inside her. Why Grandmere? She was nothing but kind and patient, taking on the criticism of the village with a gentle smile. She was completely harmless.

Except that she wasn’t. A small part of Reyna knew that. It was the same part of her that writhed at the sight of precious novels on a burning pile. The part of her that urged her to speak up, to pick up the pen. Grandmere was stubborn in her beliefs, unswayed by the hateful world around her. She was a threat to the careful control the monarchy had over the villages. A threat that they’d chosen to eliminate.

As she looked upon Grandmere’s weakening figure, gashes covering the arms that had embraced Reyna when her parents couldn’t bother to, a surge of unfamiliar feeling passed over her. It was violent and powerful and begging to be free. It was a spark of defiance that could grow into an inferno.

With her last dying breath, Grandmere pulled something golden out of her pocket, “Take this. I saved it for you.”

Reyna stared at the glinting gilded pen held in her grandmother’s trembling hand. Before, she would have hesitated. She would have refused the offer and left the pen to collect dust. But something new had come alive inside her. Something daring and unafraid that showed no restraint when accepting the pen.

“Run, Reyna. Do not falter. Do not let them catch you. And when you’re ready, show them your voice. Show them who you are.”

Soot and tears blended together on her sleeve as she wiped her face. With a ready nod and one last squeeze of Grandmere’s hand, she ran.

Her clunky boots pounded against the forest floor. The trees swayed and blurred, the world spinning beneath her aching feet, but she kept running, clutching the pen until her knuckles turned white. She ran until she found a quiet space far away from the village.

The spark within her thrummed with power, thrashing against the bars of the cage Reyna had locked it in. She exhaled at last, releasing the fear and the hurt that weighed heavily on her heart. When she opened her eyes, she saw the world in a new light. With one last look at the tranquil forest, she picked up the pen and wrote.