

Stained Glass Hair

The girl with stained glass hair waited behind her rifle. Her window was open, her curtains drawn to the side; a small bipod supported the weapon's barrel in the darkness of her apartment. One dazzling, kaleidoscopic eye hovered just behind the scope of the bolt-action rifle, patiently observing the empty street. She blinked freely, not wanting dry eyes to throw off her aim.

After a few minutes, she briefly diverted her attention away from the rifle to write in a small pocket notebook next to her – '3:45 AM: No incursion' – and take a sip of water from a cheap plastic bottle. These things taken care of, her eye once again found its place behind her scope.

A winter breeze blew up the dimly-lit street and into the girl's apartment, only to be ignored. Concerns such as the weather were beneath the girl within her own home.

A glint on the side of the street drew the girl's attention, like sunlight reflecting off of a windshield. One of the windows down the street – the Juniper Building, the girl thought to herself – was shining, not brightly, but enough to be seen in the darkness of the early morning. The light within brightened gradually over the course of several minutes, like sunrise, while the girl waited patiently. Her vigilance was rewarded; a man stepped out of the tall window, a man who still had to stoop to leave it.

He was impossibly beautiful. Long, raven hair that flowed freely in the wind, fair skin kissed with just a few freckles on his face. Fine elfin features defined him, an angularity that spoke of elegance and predation. He wore clothes that shifted and swirled with color, and gazed upon the street with a smooth confidence, an assurance that here was a place where he belonged.

The girl's rifle cracked once, though another sound, like a bell or chime, hid in the echo of her gun's report. A red hole appeared in the beautiful man's forehead, sending a subtle jolt through his body. The man crashed to the concrete in a limp heap.

'3:58 AM: Incursion prevented. One (1) intruder slain.'

The girl with stained glass hair worked the bolt on her rifle and caught the thing it ejected – the worn-down stub of a tooth, with only the tiniest fragment remaining. This she placed on her tongue and, with difficulty, swallowed.

Then her eye resumed its place behind her scope, where it remained until dawn, when she closed her window, drew her curtains shut, racked her gun, and went to sleep in her clothes.

* * *

That was December. It was now February.

At precisely 1 PM, the girl with stained glass hair sat up in response to her alarm clock. She slapped the off button irritably and noticed something new – a clicking, chiming sound when she moved her head. Running slender fingers through her hair, she discovered long strands of delicate glass, each full of multicolored beads that clicked and chimed against one another.

The girl sighed. Her hair never stayed the same way for long, and she wished it would make up its mind.

She got out of bed and walked into the bathroom. Spare clothes were fished out from under the sink, along with a small bottle of polish. The girl spent precisely ten minutes in the shower, and another five polishing her hair until the rainbow glass glittered and gleamed in even the tiniest light. Her old clothes were thrown into a basket. The new ones she put on included blue jeans and a plain white T-shirt, slightly smaller than her size to hug her slender features. Both had tie-dye patterns by the time she padded out of the bathroom in her socks, which were similarly marked by a blaze of color.

At 1:30 PM, the girl ate a plate of cut fruit and vegetables for breakfast, and then set another, identical plate, on the floor of her kitchen.

The girl opened her closet and retrieved a small, brightly colored red wagon, as well as a jar containing a small amount of rolled-up paper money. The money she removed; the jar she placed back in her closet. She unhooked a long black coat from its peg near her door and put it on; the leather of the coat was disrupted by many pockets, which shifted and squirmed for a moment as it settled on the girl's body. Confident that her coat was not going to move further, the girl placed her money in a pocket, then zipped the coat up to her neck.

The coat chattered happily, and then was still.

The glass-haired girl put on her boots last, tying the laces into careful double knots before standing up straight and whistling. She waited for a moment, until three rats came scuttling out of a small hole in her wall.

"I'm going out," she said quietly, smiling shyly at the rodents. "I should be back in a few hours. Will the usual arrangement work?"

The three rats conferred briefly. One, the largest, looked up at the girl and nodded.

"Excellent! Fruit's in the kitchen. Don't forget to wash the plate." The girl waved to the rats before opening her door, grabbing the handle to her wagon, and walking out into the hall with it. The rats handled the door, shutting and locking it neatly while the girl entered the elevator that would take her from the seventh floor to the ground.

Others in the city did not notice the girl as she moved through the crowds. Part of this, at least, was how she saw herself. Mostly it was a small twist of memory. Their eyes saw the girl; their minds, their unconscious polite behaviors, recognized her. But their conscious thoughts dismissed her, forgot her in the instant of seeing her, and glossed over the crowds that parted for her and the cars that waited politely for her to cross the street. They ignored her as she shopped for groceries, noting her presence only long enough to accept her money, and failed to notice her picking pockets up and down the streets, taking a few dollars here, a few coins there, from almost everyone she passed. Every cent she stole vanished into the coat, which cooed contentedly at the attention.

She hesitated outside a specialty store, facing her own reflection in the window to adjust her hair. She unzipped her coat and petted it until it stopped moving, then checked her breath. The girl winced. She should have brushed her teeth, she'd known she was coming here. She kicked herself mentally and sighed before closing her eyes and concentrating. When she opened them, the girl walked to the front door and pushed it open, hurrying inside with her little red wagon trundling behind her with its load of groceries and goods.

The store sold bones. Bones of all kinds – animal, human, or replicated, they were stacked high on shelves, hanging in displays, or arranged in elaborate works of art. The pretty, coffee-colored young woman behind the counter saw the girl with stained glass hair walk in, in a way; she saw someone in rainbow colored clothes, with kaleidoscopic hair and shockingly blue eyes, enter her store with a loaded-down red wagon. She smiled at the girl, who blushed delicately and look down at her boots.

"Crystal!" the pretty young woman greeted, waving from behind the counter. "How are you?"

"Fine, Emily," the girl answered shyly, looking up but not quite making eye contact. She removed a small group of bills from her pocket and carefully counted some out, setting them on the counter. "Do you have my...um..."

"Your order? We always do, Crys." Emily patted the girl on the shoulder before heading to the back of the store. The girl's blush deepened, and she touched the spot where Emily's hand had been, as though to reassure herself that she had actually felt it. "Got it right here!" Emily sang out from in back; quickly, the girl's small hands went back onto the counter.

"Hey," Emily asked as she emerged with a small leather bag, which she set on the counter. "Can I ask you a personal question, and then maybe another question depending on your answer?"

The girl swallowed, hard, and forced herself to look Emily in the eyes. Emily's eyes were brown, like her hair, but they had a depth that made the girl feel dizzy if she stared into them too long. "S-sure," she answered, hesitantly.

"How old are you?"

The girl paused for a moment, not expecting the question and unsure of how to answer. She did some math in her head and scowled when she realized that she had no frame of reference for a long period of time in her life. Finally she shrugged and looked out the window for a moment, then back to Emily. "Twenty two? I know I look younger, but..."

Emily grinned like a fiend. "Can I take you out to Reba's on Friday? Say...for lunch? You're always saying you're busy, but you come in here once a week like clockwork, in the afternoons. Lunch has to be free time for you, right?"

The girl swallowed. "You want – on Friday? Isn't that Valentine's?"

"That's sorta the idea," Emily said with an easy smile. "So you don't mistake the offer for anything but what it is."

The girl was sweating with nervousness.

"I'll pay for your next order too if you say yes," Emily pressed mischievously. "One date, Crystal. Please? If you don't like me we go back to you mysteriously buying a bag of teeth once a week and that's that."

The girl with stained glass hair looked left and right, as though afraid of getting caught, and then back to Emily. She bit her lip and then nodded, just once. "Twelve thirty sharp. I'll meet you there."

"Great! It's a date." Emily reached across the counter and squeezed the girl's hand reassuringly before letting it go. The girl smiled shyly at her and placed the bag of teeth on her wagon before turning on her heels and leaving the store with, perhaps, more haste than was strictly necessary.

After all, she had a date to prepare for. With Emily!

* * *

The rats were shocked when the girl with stained glass hair entered the apartment in an excited rush at 2:47 PM instead of her customary 3:00 PM, all the more so when they heard her singing in wordless joy. One tried, in vain, to get the girl's attention, but she hardly noticed the tugging at her ankles while she pulled a large bowl from her cupboard and began to pile fruit into it.

"I appreciate you watching the place," the girl began in happy distraction, only to be interrupted by the sort of small cough that is only ever made on purpose, to get someone's attention. She turned her head slowly.

Sitting on the back of her small couch was a young woman with hair of sculpted marble and eyes made all of snowflake obsidian, her pupils standing out as white against the black around them.

"Someone's excited," the young woman said playfully, grinning from one ear to another. The girl with stained glass hair relaxed and set down the ceramic knife she hadn't quite consciously pulled from the kitchen drawer.

"Lily," the girl greeted, her tone a mix of warmth and caution. "I wasn't expecting you. Though...I suppose few do," she granted.

Lily nodded and hopped down from the couch. "It's good to see you again." She reached over the back of the couch and hefted a long, opaque bag, almost, but not quite, the style of bag one might transport one's dry cleaning in. "But it's not great news."

"It's usually not," the girl with stained glass hair admitted, with a sigh. She set down the bowl of fruit and smiled gratefully to the rats; they carried the food away amidst a trickle of happy, chittering sounds.

Lily, for her part, set the bag down on the floor and went to one knee near it, drawing the zipper down. Thick plastic was tugged aside, revealing utterly mutilated, brilliantly multicolored clothing. The tie-dye patterns of the jeans, socks, and T-shirt were spoiled by splatters of blood and, here and there, flecks of gore.

The girl breathed in sharply. "...Mine?"

Lily nodded. "Checked it three times to be sure. Your clothes, your fate. Death beats her wings for you, old friend."

The glass-haired girl pulled out one of the little chairs from her kitchen table and sat heavily. She stared at the floor, kaleidoscopic irises swirling slowly around her pupils.

"When?" she finally asked.

Lily got up and walked over to set a hand on her friend's shoulder. "In the next year and a day. Could be sooner, won't be later."

"...I have a date on Friday," the girl with stained glass hair said in a daze. "How? Why?"

Lily shook her head. "You know I don't know that. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you. It'd ruin your chances, and you know it. There's still a way out of this."

The girl nodded, slowly. "You can't run from fate..."

Lily grinned broadly. "But you can rise to meet it. I'll help any way I can, but you know the rules. I can't interfere in your death."

The girl stood and hugged Lily tightly. "Thank you for coming to tell me. I...I have preparations to make. At the very least I need to tell Marcus, so he can...you know. Hold the door, if I don't make it through this."

"For what it's worth," Lily began, with a crooked smile, "I think that, of the people I've done laundry for since coming back to the Iron Lands, you're the one most likely to defy death."

The girl with stained glass hair chuckled, but her cheeks burned with a grateful blush.

"Good luck on your date," Lily said cheerfully. She zipped up the bag and slung it over one shoulder before stepping through the wall of the apartment like it was mist. In less than a second, she was gone.

For a long moment, silence reigned in the girl's apartment.

"Well," she murmured, mostly to herself. "...That's some fuckin' shit."

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"Thurston Automotive."

"Is Marcus available?"

"One sec."

A moment of silence. Mechanical noises - grinding, mostly, though drills and air pumps joined the symphony - played out in the background of the phone call.

"Marcus Thurston speaking."

"Lily came to do my laundry."

"...I'm sorry."

"So was she. I've kept notes on my door. The rats will ensure no one else moves into the apartment, if I pass."

"You say that like you might not."

"Heroes can challenge fate and win, sometimes."

"You're not a hero."

"I could be."

This silence lasted longer.

"I can't promise I'll be *fine*, Marcus, but I'm going to do everything in my power to come out the other side of whatever this is alive."

"All you can do, really. I'll tell the others to keep an eye on their doors. There's no certainty that it's Them that's going to kill you, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Thanks, Marcus."

The girl with stained glass hair hung the phone up and let out a deep, shuddering breath. Then she picked it back up and dialed a new number.

"Rowan? I'm calling in that favor. I need you to watch my door on Thursday night."

A mumbled reply.

"Thanks Rowan. I'll bring you something to eat after."

More mumbling.

"Yes, I'm sure I can find someone who cooks cat."

Click.

* * *

The girl with stained glass hair sat up at 5:57 AM on Friday, three minutes before her alarm was due to go off, and switched off the alarm before it could disturb Rowan. Rowan, for his part, remained on watch, waiting out the dawn, and looked almost like he'd rooted himself in place. The girl patted his shoulder gently, careful to avoid the bare branches that grew from it in skeletal profusion, and gave him a wan, sleepy smile.

Coffee and fruit plates were made, shared, and consumed in silence. Rowan didn't talk much, but the girl was glad of his company anyway. The last of the slow-roasted cat - the girl with stained glass hair had needed to talk fast to get it cooked last night - was taken out of the fridge and warmed in the oven for Rowan. The girl turned the oven off and arranged the leftovers on a plate before setting it next to her guest's post at her window.

"You'll have left before I get back," the glass-haired girl murmured softly; her voice barely disturbed the quiet of the apartment. "Thanks for...you know, helping. You know how to find me if you need me."

Rowan nodded silently, without turning his attention away from the window. The girl put on her leather jacket, which muttered sleepily at her, and zipped it up to her neck. Her jar of money was opened and counted out carefully; most, but not all, of the money was put into one of her jacket's many pockets and zipped in tightly. The pocket made a contented noise and cooed pleasantly while the girl rolled out her little red wagon. She patted her jacket to make sure she had everything, stepped into her boots, and then took a pair of sheathed knives out of her closet, from just behind the jar of money. She tested the edges of the ceramic blades and inspected their condition before sliding her belt through the sheaths and dropping the bottom of her jacket over them. A pair of thin, but warm, gloves were slipped over her hands and flexed, just once.

"Good luck," the girl murmured to Rowan, before leaving her apartment with her red wagon in tow.

The streets were quiet in these early hours, disturbed only by the cars of those unfortunate enough to be going to work in the winter chill, and the trains that shuttled the people without cars to and fro. The girl with stained glass hair wished she'd thought to get a hat or a face warmer or, failing anything else, at least a scarf; her face was red with cold, and her breath fogged in the dim predawn light.

The girl and her wagon crossed a series of empty parking lots and entered a supermarket, unnoticed and unheeded. She picked up a plain white dress, a small bag of new socks, and a winter cap with a face warmer. She paused thoughtfully on the way to the door, then turned around and went back into the main part of the store to pick up fruit, vegetables, and single pink rose, carefully protected against

the winter cold by clever paper wrapping. The girl paid the one unlucky cashier still on duty for her purchases, and then put on her winter hat. She slipped the face warmer over her face and began the long walk home.

The sun rose, shortly before she arrived back at her apartment. Rowan was no longer present when she entered her home, though he had cleaned up after himself and washed his own dishes before he left.

The girl with stained glass hair put her groceries away before doing anything else. She unzipped her jacket and took it off; she folded it neatly and placed it on the table, then put her gloves and new hat on top of it. She frowned when she realized she hadn't taken the tag off of her hat and, carefully, removed it. The girl removed the tag from her new dress as well, then got a hanger from her closet and hung the dress on it. The hanger was placed on the top of her mostly-bare bookshelf, so that the dress could drape. She opened up the package of new socks and placed a pair on the shelf, next to the dress, before placing the rest with her other socks beneath the bathroom sink.

Her preparations done, the girl with stained glass hair slipped into the bathroom, closed the door, and took a shower.

The girl emerged in a fresh set of multicolored underwear and padded around her apartment, keeping herself busy with tidying and taking inventory. She wrote a small list of supplies she should stock up on, looked at the clock, and swore quietly to herself. The girl with stained glass hair paced for awhile, and then finally flopped onto her bed and grabbed a book from her bedside table to read. Her eyes couldn't focus on the words, but it gave her something to do.

At 11:20 AM, the girl put the book down and hopped off the bed to get dressed. She pulled on her socks first and then, after some internal debate, put on her belt with her sheathed ceramic knives still attached to it. She had to adjust the buckle twice before she decided that she was never going to be entirely comfortable with having a belt over her bare skin. With a shrug, she took the white dress down from its hanger and slipped into it, then stepped into her boots. She tied the laces into careful double knots and took a deep breath before looking into a mirror. The rainbow colors were already seeping into the dress, as she knew they would, though the glass-haired girl frowned at them anyway.

The girl with stained glass hair collected her hat and gloves and put them on, then unfolded her jacket and put that on as well. She zipped it up to her neck and patted its pockets affectionately; the leather jacket purred quietly, then lay still against her. She debated asking the rats to watch her apartment, then decided against it. If things went well, Emily might want to visit, and explaining the rats in those circumstances would be less than ideal. She collected her rose from the table and, with a deep breath, walked to the front door, opened it, and left her apartment. The girl locked the door behind her and set off into the winter morning, just as the last of her white dress transformed into rainbow glory.

* * *

Like many small restaurants of its kind, Reba's was busy on Valentine's Day and required reservations to dine. The girl with stained glass hair arrived at 12:20 PM and gave her name as Crystal, hoping to herself that Emily had thought ahead. The hostess smiled broadly at the girl and escorted her to a table, explaining that "Ms. Freeman" had called ahead to confirm the reservation and to note that her date might arrive early. The girl blushed and wondered how Emily had guessed so correctly. She ordered a glass of house red from her server and then unzipped her jacket so that she could shrug it onto the back of her chair.

Emily appeared at 12:30 PM sharp, in a canary yellow dress that caught the girl with stained glass hair's gaze and kept it there. Emily did not walk, she *waltzed*, with a confidence that caught more eyes than just her date's. She smiled at the girl, and the girl blushed and smiled back despite the spike of shyness in her chest.

“You’ve got a serious dedication to a theme,” Emily complimented when she arrived at the table. She gave the girl with stained glass hair a kiss on the cheek before sitting down at the table. “Where’d you get that dress?”

“Store,” the girl managed. “Colored it myself though.” It wasn’t technically a lie. “I. Um. You look great!”

Emily smiled warmly. “Thanks. I was trying, y’know. If it makes you feel better, I’m a bit nervous too.”

The girl blinked in surprise. “But you’re so...”

“With it?” Emily shrugged. “Fake it ‘till you make it, Crys. I’m just glad you actually showed.”

“I, um. Not really a lot of experience with this whole thing,” the girl with stained glass hair admitted. “I had this on-again-off-again girlfriend in high school but then some stuff happened and...I haven’t really dated in awhile, basically. Never got into the habit.”

“I can get that,” Emily said, with an understanding nod. “Usually the first date is when you get to know people, or at least start to. You know, ask questions, find common interests, that sort of thing. Like, f’rinstance, we both seem to like bones.”

The glass-haired. “I, um. Yeah. Teeth mostly though. I know it’s weird...”

Emily reached her hand across the table and squeezed the girl’s hand. “All the best people are weird, Crystal.”

The girl with stained glass hair let out a deep breath. “Can I tell you something kind of important? It’s...also a bit worrying, maybe, but I want my cards on the table. ‘Cause I do like you and I don’t want you to get blindsided.”

“Sure,” Emily agreed. She met the girl with stained glass hair’s eyes. She saw them as blue - except when, for a moment, they flashed green, like sunlight through summer leaves. She only had a moment to be startled before her date was talking again.

“I’m probably going to die soon.”

Emily stared in silence at the girl with stained glass hair. “Do...do you know why?” she finally asked.

The girl took a deep breath and looked away. “Chances are that someone’s going to try to kill me. And if that’s the case, they might get you too.”

“You’re serious.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah. I am.”

“That’s...pretty heavy for a first date,” Emily admitted, trying to shake the shock out of her voice. “Can you tell me what happened? Can I help?”

It was the girl’s turn to stare in surprise. “I...am pretty sure that ‘can I help’ is not the usual reaction to that.”

Emily shrugged, and offered the girl a sideways smile. “You’re my friend. And I don’t think you’re a bad person, Crystal. So whoever’s after you is an asshole, and I want to help.”

The girl’s cheeks burned red in gratitude, and she squeezed Emily’s hand, too overcome for words.

The waitress returned with Emily’s drink and salad, then asked if Emily was ready to order. Emily looked inquiringly at the girl with stained glass hair, and the waitress followed her gaze. She frowned, and squinted, until finally noticing the girl sitting in the chair.

“I’ll have what you’re having,” the girl murmured quickly. Emily gave her a brief are-you-sure look, then shrugged and ordered salmon fillets, with slaw. The waitress wrote it down and, with an embarrassed smile, left.

“I wonder what’s wrong,” Emily mused. “She keeps forgetting you’re here.”

"People do that a lot," the girl with stained glass hair admitted, with a shrug. "I, um. I brought this for you." The girl held up the paper-wrapped rose and, shyly, offered it across the table. Emily took the flower and gently unwrapped it, and she smiled slowly when she saw the pink petals.

"Thank you," Emily said gratefully. The girl with stained glass hair returned her smile with a shy warmth.

The front door opened up, and the person walking inside said, "Come on in, guys." The girl with stained glass hair's gaze snapped up, and she saw a group of four short, gangly *things*, with pale skin and wide, toothy grins, amble into the restaurant. Matted red caps, made all of wool, pressed down on their heads and made their pointed ears splay sideways. The diners did not notice them.

"Emily," the girl with stained glass hair said softly, "it's about to get bad in here. Look over your shoulder. *Really* look, and don't listen to the nagging voice that tells you nothing is there."

Emily turned; the girl with stained glass hair drew one of her ceramic knives from under her dress and kept it beneath the table. Emily peered, leaning slightly to try and get a better view, and then gasped.

"Stay quiet," the girl with stained glass hair advised. "Those are red caps. They have my scent already, and they know you're here. If you run, they'll hound you down and kill you. I need you to do exactly what I say, okay?"

Emily turned, her eyes wide with fear, to meet the girl's gaze. She nodded, just once.

"Unwrap your silverware, and keep the knife on you. Red caps aren't weak against iron and steel but it'll still cut them when a lot of other things won't."

"Please tell me you're fucking with me," Emily murmured calmly, doing as the girl with stained glass hair instructed. The girl shook her head.

"I'm really not. They're coming this way. Stay safe, okay? Red caps are faster than mortals. You can't fight them."

"I'm not a damsel in distress," Emily hissed, but the blue eyes of her date glared into hers and flashed a deep, bloody red.

"You're human. You can't fight them," the girl repeated. "Stay safe."

"...Implying you're not?"

"I'll explain if we live through this."

The girl with stained glass hair reached behind her back and began unzipping the pockets of her coat. Her other hand remained beneath the table, with the handle of her ceramic knife resting comfortably in her palm. Emily gave her a curious look but didn't move from her place.

"They'll rush us," the girl said softly. "Get down when I get up. Then just try not to die."

The lead red cap lunged in a fluid motion - all speed, all control, its hatchet coming free from its belt in an easy, casual motion while it crossed the room. At the same time, the girl stood from her chair, hooked her black leather jacket in her fingers, and flung it.

There was a timeless moment, and then the leather jacket hit the red cap full in the face. The gangly creature went down flailing and screaming; it hit the floor with blue blood flying everywhere, flailing desperately to remove the leather from its body. The jacket made snarling, tearing sounds, and closed in around its victim; dozens more zippers opened wide.

"Duck!" the girl yelled, breaking Emily's reverie. Emily ducked under the table and felt, rather than saw, one of the red caps go over where she just was and land on its booted feet on the far side of the table. Emily rolled under the table just in time to see the wood catch a hatchet blade; the gleaming metal poked through the wood with sinister promise. Emily slashed with the steak knife in her hand, hoping to hit the red cap's ankles, but it danced back almost teasingly, straying *just* out of the reach of her attack.

Then those ankles went *flying* back; Emily saw the red cap's feet lift the ground as though it were thrown, and it collided with a mirror behind the table, sunk into the surface like the glass was water. Emily gasped as she saw the red cap pounding against the inside of the mirror, yelling soundlessly to be let out. She moved out from under the table and stood just in time to see the girl with stained glass hair

whirl the third of the gangly creatures by the arm, straight into the mirror. The glass shattered onto the floor, and the pieces, still reflecting parts of the red cap, gently oozed blue blood.

The thrown red cap never had time to get up; the girl with stained glass hair drove her ceramic knife into the base of his skull in one neat motion and then stomped savagely on the handle. The knife burst through the other side with a spatter of blood and hollow choking noises from the throat it impeded.

Emily looked away so she wouldn't be sick, and she saw the fourth red cap sneaking up on her date. Without thinking about what she was doing, Emily picked up the chair next to her and smashed it into the gangly creature, sending it sprawling to the floor. The girl turned at the sound and pulled another knife from her belt. The red cap rolled onto its back with a pained groan, just in time for the ceramic blade to be buried in its heart. Blue blood splashed from the wound, splattering the girl's prismatic dress.

"We've gotta go," the girl with stained glass hair said quickly. She picked up another chair and hurled it through the front window, sending glass scattering onto the sidewalk. The people outside yelled in surprise and panic as the girl scooped up her jacket - its many pockets now bulging beneath firmly sealed zippers - and took Emily's hand.

"What *happened*?" Emily demanded as she was tugged along at a breakneck pace, but the girl shook her head.

"I'll tell you when we're clear. We've gotta get out before the tempus egreditur happens and we get in real trouble. If we're lucky, people will think you got whacked by mobsters."

"*Lucky*?" Emily sputtered. "And before the what happens?"

"It's a - a time compression, almost. All that stuff that just happened is about to rewind, then happen all at the same time instead of in order. As far as the diners are concerned, our part of the room is about to explode with blood, and their minds will fill in the gaps. Hopefully with something sane."

"What would be *insane*?"

"I dunno, something like you going crazy and then killing yourself before exploding. Odder things have made the six o'clock news." The girl with stained glass hair pulled Emily down an alley and held her breath. There was a loud sound of shattering glass, and then screaming. After a moment, sirens sounded in the distance. The girl with stained glass hair sighed in relief and slumped against the wall, sinking down to sit on the concrete with her bulging jacket across her knees.

"Crystal," Emily said slowly, squatting down to rest on her heels so that she was eye level with the girl. "What just happened? Why did those things try to kill us and - and - and I don't even know where to go from there because the rest is too weird for me to frame a damn question!"

"Can we have this conversation elsewhere?" the girl with stained glass hair asked in a pained tone.

"No! Because that's the shit people say when they want to avoid something and change the subject, and I not only *almost died*, I helped you kill four people and left their bodies in a public place and *Crystal I need an explanation*." Emily took a deep breath and calmed her voice down from her near-yell. "Please, Crystal."

The girl with stained glass hair sighed. "That's not my name. It's just the name you assumed was mine."

Emily blinked in confusion.

"Think back to all the times you've ever talked to me," the girl with stained glass hair said gently. "Did I ever tell you my name? Did you ever even ask?"

Emily dipped her chin and thought back. Had she? Crystal had been coming to the shop for longer than Emily had worked there. Did she ask the owner her name? One of her co-workers? She looked back up at the girl with stained glass hair with a puzzled expression, which turned into shock when she saw a waifish young woman with delicate, angular features, kaleidoscopic eyes, and long strings of stained glass beads for hair.

“Now can we discuss the rest of this elsewhere?” the girl with stained glass hair asked, her tone small and fragile.

“I. Yeah. Your place?”

“You trust me that much?” the girl said. She sounded surprised.

Emily looked thoughtful, and then she nodded. “You know, I still think I do. And I still think those guys were probably assholes.”

“Alright,” the girl said, as Emily watched her visage faded back into a more human form. It was like watching an artist paint a new person over the old one. The girl with stained glass hair shrugged her bulging jacket on and shyly offered her hand, which Emily took. “It’s this way.”

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The walk back to the girl’s apartment was mostly silent, marked by the occasional shiver in the winter air and the unconscious politeness of the crowds that made way for the girl with stained glass hair and her companion. Emily marveled at it, wondering how no one noticed the two of them or bumped into her or the girl with stained glass hair. The two slipped inside the girl’s apartment building, past the half-warmth of the foyer, and went upstairs.

The first thing Emily noticed in the girl’s apartment was the glass.

The apartment itself was a modest affair - a living room with kitchen, a separate bedroom, a bathroom, and a closet near the front door. But on the bookshelves that lined the walls and in every spare inch of space in the kitchen, the coffee table, and even hanging from the ceiling was glass artwork. Suncatchers, sculptures, and figurines competed for the eye’s attention with scenes etched in stained glass, abstract mosaics, and chalices, all done in a delicate, ethereal style that made them seem spun from sugar. Not a single speck of dust marred any of the work, and the gleam of the glass threw color and light all across the apartment, splashing it from the windows and onto the white walls.

“Did you make these?” Emily asked, brushing a sculpture (a glass cat, mid-stretch, its mouth open wide in a yawn) with her fingertip. “They’re beautiful.”

“Sometimes,” the girl admitted. She locked the door behind the two of them before walking stiffly past Emily, more nervous now than she was outside. Emily looked up in time to see the girl take her rifle down from its rack and begin inspecting it with a worried eye.

“Crystal, what’s going on?” Emily asked again. “You said there would be answers.”

The girl with stained glass hair sighed. “There will be. I need to work while we talk. What do you want to know?”

“Why are people trying to kill you?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Do you have a *guess*?”

“Two reasons. Could be both or either.” The girl with stained glass hair opened a small box at the bottom of the rifle rack and withdrew a pouch from it, into which she placed her bullets - canine teeth, jacketed in glass. Emily could make out the fine-grained gunpowder at their base through the translucent rounds. “We need to get you some iron. And I need to make more rounds before they figure out where I do that at.” The girl spared a glance out the window before tying off her small bag and securing it to the belt beneath her dress. “I guard a door. I also abandoned a post I was expected to watch.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want to watch it.” The girl pushed rounds into her rifle, which chimed gently as each slid home. “...Remember when I said that humans can’t fight red caps? I’m. Formerly human.”

Emily hesitated at the girl’s tone. “Should I ask?”

“...I think I have to tell you,” the girl said after a long while. “That’s how it works, right? You have to share your life with someone if you’re going to be with them. If that’s still an option.”

“I - you’re still thinking about that? With your life in danger?”

“It’s not much of a life,” the girl admitted, working the bolt of her rifle back into place. “And it’s always in danger.”

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