

[LINKS TO PREVIOUS SISTER CLAIRE LIVE-WRITES](#)

--

Sometimes there are dreams.

In the dreams she's happy for a while, usually, because the people she knew and loved live there. They talk to her. Sit with her. It's just like old times: she's apt to close her eyes at night and when she opens them again she's in another place, the fuzzy-around-the-edges almost-place all dreams happen, and she'll be standing over a table looking down at the sketch of an aqueduct Clementine's done, doodles in the margins of seals and scuppered ships, Clementine's scarred finger moving from line to line.

"Suh-suh-so if we t-tap into the old source, it w-won't be as stuh-strong a flow b-b-but we know it will be st-steady. At least as much as we c-can know something like that. The records g-go back years b-before the fuh... fuh... first flags, and the m-moss says it's n-never been d-dry beneath th-this puh-particular altit... t-tude, so..."

Or sometimes it's Oscar racing toward her down the beach, sand spraying up under her feet. She's wearing that silly striped bathing suit and there's seaweed in her hair and she's still little, little like how they both started, no boobs yet and no belt with a sword on it, just the white flash of her teeth and her high reedy voice rolling down to where Nib's waiting in the surf.

"I can beat you to the sandbar, Nibby, I know I can! I am assured of it! I am entirely positive—"

Or sometimes it's Maman in her kitchen, or Sister Genny hovering in the hall before curfew trying and failing to act like she doesn't want hugsies, or sometimes it's Magpie also trying and failing to show her how to juggle on account of he never knew how to do it either. Mostly, as it turned out, he knew how to break stuff and put it together again, and she dreams of holding the bell of a lamp as he carefully glued the base back on, the bulb shivering beneath the dome, his fingertips brushing hers and her face so red it was ready to peel off.

Good dreams. Really good. So good she'd not like to wake up—*"So quite awful, actually,"* Oscar would say—because waking up means a world with none of them in it, the people she loved. The people she lost.

And then there's the dream about Catharine.

See, the thing about Catharine was that Nib reckoned to be jealous of her, because it was obvious enough from the moment Oscar found her on the beach that Catharine had Oscar's heart and Nib was there *first*, wasn't she? So what if Oscar found Catharine? Nib herself found Oscar under a frigging bridge and huddled up with her and thought she was the most wonderful

thing in the world before anyone else ever got their mind around it, and—she told herself this before she met Catharine the first time—that counted for something. That was *special*.

She reckoned to be jealous of Catharine, sure. It didn't happen. It's not like Nib doesn't know how to be jealous. Every time a new kid came into the abbey and had Sister Genny all worried over them, well, that hot coal trying to burn up her belly on the inside sure wasn't festive joy and charity.

But Catharine: yeah, no. Catharine looked at her that first time, bold as brass and with eyes so bright it hurt to hold them long, and told Nib she wouldn't break her nose unless she deserved it, which: she broke Sister Genny's nose because Sister Genny was mean to Oscar. And as far as Nib's always been concerned (and always will be, even if Oscar's dead), anyone who's mean to Oscar deserves a broken nose at the *very* least.

Catharine was all right. Catharine wasn't worth being jealous over, because she looked at Oscar the way Nib probably always looked at her too. They played in the fountains, that first day, and after that they went about the business of growing up together, and maybe sometimes it ached a little to see how well the pair of them fit together, but—

But they never left her behind, or cut her out of things, or told her to sod off. Nib remembers the letters she got from Catharine, the first time Catharine followed her little sister out of the city. She remembers too how Oscar cried and clutched at her when *she* left.

The dream about Catharine—

In the dream, she's at an inn. The same inn she took the last room of only hours before it happened, hours before the girl from the docks rushed up and slammed her fist against the door and told everyone

"They say it fell! The city! The Bright One's city, Eden, oh gods, they say it fell and she's dead and—"

what had happened.

In the dream, she sits up before the knock happens. She swings her feet out of bed and she goes downstairs, carrying a candle, and it's not an embarrassing dream because she's not naked: small mercies. She lets herself out into the inn's courtyard. Catharine's there, and it's very atmospheric and spooky because the wind chooses that moment—*always* that moment—to pick itself up, *awooooo*, and it blows out Nib's candle in a little straggling stream of smoke and throws dead leaves across the grass. Despite the wind, Catharine's hair never moves.

But Catharine does always turn around, in the dream. She beckons Nib close and Nib goes to her, half because it'd be rude to not and half because she *needs* to, she needs to get to Catharine, she has to help her she has to she *has* to Catharine's hurt Catharine's *chest* why is there a hole in Catharine's *chest*—

"Find the star," Catharine tells her. Always. Every time. And always, every time, she looks up, heedless of the

(*oh stars* is what Lia would say, speaking of)

hideous wound that's pouring blood and darkening the front of her nightdress to a shade shared with ripe plums. She looks up and stares at the sky which is, unhelpfully, full of trillions of stars. Also unhelpfully, she doesn't specify *which* star. She just goes on looking and looking for a while, maybe a long time, Nib's never sure. Time gets funny in dreams. Time stretches out like that awful taffy so many stalls used to sell in Red, the kind Oscar loved so much and would chew loudly next to Nib's ear just to be obnoxious, her breath sweet-salty and her teeth all blue.

One more also: Nib can never touch Catharine. She can never talk to her. Once she gets close to her all she can do is stand there, frozen, her hands hanging at her sides, as Catharine bleeds and gets paler and paler and finally just falls, a sad little heap in the leaves.

She always looks up at Nib from down there. Nib's not tall, not like Oscar was. But she looms over Catharine anyway, her shadow a stark belt over her, and Catharine always says, *"Nibby, find the star,"* before she shudders and dies.

Nib always knows it's a dream, during. She knows because Catharine didn't die in any courtyard. Catharine died in Eden and Mother Abraham's to blame, and Mother Abraham's the one who said so herself.

Sometimes there are dreams. Good dreams. Bad dreams. Sometimes she wakes moaning into her pillow; sometimes she simply jerks back to where things are real and it's dark and she has a moment to miss Oscar's laugh, Maman's warmth, the way it felt when Clementine would pound on her arm with a fist and hiss, *"Th-th-that's fuh-fucking genius!"* Sometimes she sits up and she can still see Catharine's eyes, beseeching.

Find the star.

—

They last years, the dreams. The more time passes, the more infrequent they are, but one day she'll spend hours figuring out how to fix some kind of malady that's killing the crops of a remote mountain village and it's fine, really, it is. It's good work. It's *worthwhile* work, making people happy, making sure they'll be all right when the season turns. Everything's dandy right up until

the time she drops down into her pallet to sleep, exhausted, and then suddenly she's on the beach and there's Oscar and they're both little again, little and happy, why didn't she appreciate then just how *happy* she was?

Or she'll be telling a story to a whole host of refugee children, their parents near enough to listen too: she'll be making the shadows get up to go dancing across the bare swept earth like they're alive, a spell she learned ages upon ages upon *ages* ago and wow, talk about a return investment, because the kids will giggle and clap and forget how long they've been running, how far they still have to go, and the parents will smile around the edges of the fire and it's great, it's perfect, it's roses until later in the evening when

find the star

the past won't leave her alone.



She misses them all the way she reckons she'd miss an arm if something happened to it, or an eye, or if part of her soul went off and found someone else to live in. Anyway, ain't that what's happened? Years and years and *years* and she's starting to find silver in her hair, now, looking in the mirror when there's a mirror at all, starting to see lines on her face, and where's Oscar to grow old with, huh? Where's Catharine to make them new sweaters and scarves every year come midwinter, and where's Clementine to be the coolest aunt in the world, geez, making rocking horses out of vines with bright pink flowers for eyes?

Where are they while she's still here, still everywhere, without them?

Snowing: thick flakes like bits of wax that don't melt half as easy. They cling to her cloak. She reasons that she's gone leagues and leagues past the line of known territory on any map drawn in the last century, and once upon a time the idea would have excited her, maybe. Being adventurous. Seeing new things. Seeing *old* things no one else alive remembered anymore, but could be shown again.

"Oi!" she calls. Her dog's gone off into the berry bushes, out of sight but not earshot. Nib can hear her trampling around in the undergrowth, probably hoping to scare out a squirrel to chase. "Iffin a bear comes after you, you're on your own!" In all honesty she'd fight a bear in a heartbeat if it came to blows. Sure. No question.

On one of the maps she looked at before venturing out this way, there was a small smudged t-shape stuck between two lumps. An abbey in the mountains? Maybe. A long, long time ago, yeah, lost to memory, but she figured she'd come try to find the ruins of it. Lots of abbeys keep their libraries underground. Maybe that one did too. Maybe there's a book or three waiting to be read down under the snow and the frost, and maybe she can use what's in it to do some good, or maybe maybe maybe—

Her dog's barking. Not the *hurray-a-small-mammal-to-chase-and-devour* bark. Not the *oh-no-I-gravely-underestimated-the-small-mammal-help-mama* bark either. Frowning at the series of sharp, urgent yaps issuing from beyond the thicket, Nib turns and wades into the bushes. The brambles tug at her sleeves. The berries leave bright red stains in the snow when she steps on them.

Her dog's barking at a snowbank. Marvelous. "Hey," Nib sighs, "that's real nice, like, super nifty. Haven't seen a billion of those today or anything. Could we maybe—"

The snowbank has ears. The snowbank's a person spilled over on their side and dressed all in white and Nib says, "Shit! Shit shit *shit* shit shit!" and rushes over, expecting a corpse, only it's a woman which, okay, wouldn't exclude her from being a corpse but she's *alive* and she is, as Nib

discovers, really stupidly tall—“Why do I attract tall people?! Is it pheromones? Suck my *buttock*, lady, oh my *gods!*”—and just as stupidly heavy.

—

One more thing:

“HOW DARE YOU ENTER MY HOME!”

“Hey hey hey *hey* whoa *hey!*”

She is stupidly fast with a knife.

A butter knife, thank gods. It glances off Nib’s shoulder and goes skittering harmlessly away, and Nib glares at it and then at the woman who just tried to skewer her with it. “Wow, hospitality rating is absolutely an A there,” she says, “thanks muchly. Maybe calm both of those heaving tits just a tad, okay? I came into your house because you actually fit in here. Your feet stuck out of my tent.”

The woman’s eyes are almost pink, aren’t they? Neat. Not neat: she’s rummaging around through her silverware drawer looking for another weapon. Or at least she was. She pauses now, gazing at Nib, and she looks of an age with Nib and just as much not, like... like she grew and stopped after a while and couldn’t figure out how to start again. Nib’s met a few people like that, here and there. One of them killed one of her best friends.

“Tent?” the woman says.

“Yep. Broke your ankle going down that little hill,” Nib says. “Passed out trying to walk on it, huh? Bet that sucked major ass. I dragged you in here after I figured out my own personal accommodations weren’t up to snuff, beggin’ your pardon. Uhm. Emphasis on the *dragged*. Sorry about your flowers.”

“Did you wound my amaryllis?”

“...listen, flowers grow back.” The woman bristles. Nib can feel the power and capability steaming off her, but hey, once upon a time she survived being tackled by a selkie puppy that was all teeth and weighed about as much as three houses. This is fine. “You wanna sit back down? Weight off the ankle? Yeah”—the woman’s sitting—“there ya go. Nice and easy.”

“How did you get in here?”

Nib figures it’s probably not a good idea to admit to having broken both the woman’s door and wards, but figures that it’s probably an even *worse* idea to act like it didn’t happen. “I know my

way around magick.” *I’m a Mage, actually. City Mage. Certified by the monarchs in Thronum Mare and by the Bright One herself, ain’t that something?* “Only singed my fingers a bit. Don’t worry, I put some of the wards back up. No Shards will come to trample the amaryllis I didn’t already massacre.”

“Why did you help me?”

Before the woman woke up, Nib took her time turning her head one way and another, looking around her little house. Lots of little shelves. Lots of little carvings on the little shelves. Some books, some jars, a few sets of folded clothes. A cold pantry cut into the rock. Wards aplenty, taken from an abbey somewhere. A wall with tiny, tiny notches worked into the wood. Thousands. Thousands upon thousands. Marks of a life lived away, alone, and Nib’s been around long enough to know why someone who looks like the woman does—why someone who has magick like the woman surely must—would be as far from other people as possible. The suspicion makes sense.

Nib smiles. Shrugs. “You needed it,” she says, and also, “please don’t kill me, that’d be swell.”

—

The woman doesn’t kill her. Hurray! The woman spends most of the rest of the evening being unsettled by and vaguely afraid of her, and by the following morning she’s progressed to imperiously telling Nib what to do and when, and the day after that they’re friends.

“The White Witch, huh?” Nib nods. She’s eating an apple methodically, staring at the chessboard between them. “Sure, I’ve heard of you. Didn’t figure much of what I heard was true, though.”

None of the fireside stories about the White Witch ever mentioned she was brilliant at chess. Shit. Nib’s already out half of her coin purse, not that there’s any civilization nearby in which the contents of the coin purse could be spent.

Sybal says, “Some of it’s true.”

The way she says it... “Killed a bunch of people, huh? Didn’t mean to?” Nib glances up and Sybal’s fiddling with her rook, her odd eyes distant, her ice-pale hair glittering in the firelight. “Or... let’s see, you kinda committed them to death and there wasn’t shit-all you could do about it after, even though you maybe really wanted to?”

The silence afterward is answer enough.

“Yeah,” says Nib. She closes her eyes and sees the silver wall of the bubble ward rising, rising, sealing a city shut. “Me too.”

—

She doesn't have anywhere to be, so she stays a while. It kind of gets in her head that she ought to stay at least until Sybal's ankle is better. After that it gets in her head that she ought to stay until she can beat Sybal at chess, and Sybal doesn't seem to mind. In fact, Sybal seems delighted—in the scowling, elegant way she has of conveying delight—to have company.

They talk a lot, some days. Others they don't, sitting side by side on the bench beneath the window watching the snowfall, Sybal running her fingers through the dog's fur and smiling when her leg kicks. At midwinter, without warning, Sybal presents Nib with the ugliest scarf in the known universe and Nib has to excuse herself and goes outside and dissolves into big braying sobs she thought she was done with over ten years ago, but. Well.

"I didn't get you anything," she says to Sybal later. She's come back inside. Her face is puffy, her nose raw. Outside the wind howls and smashes its fists against the side of the house, and she says, "I didn't get you anything at all."

Sybal says, "You are an imbecile."

"Yeah, I like you a lot too, thanks. Really, um. Thank you. Thank you so—"

"You're welcome, Nibby. Come play another game."

—

But of course—

"*Find the star*," Catharine says. Her lips are blue. Her lashes flutter down and there are tears in her eyes and the light's going out of them, those eyes, and Nib stares down at her, immobile, helpless. "*Nibby, find the—*"

"—star?"

She opens her eyes. In the dark Sybal's hovering over her. A cool tress of hair touches her face.

"Bad dream," Nib mumbles. Her heart's beating hard and her breath's hitching: as many times as she's had this dream, she always wants to cry afterward. Always. "Really bad dream, sorry, did I—"

"That's not a dream, you idiot. That's a *message*."

Nib blinks. Sybal goes on staring down at her, a giant unhelpful know-it-all, except—

She *would* know, wouldn't she? Sybal's a Dreamwitch. A *Dreamwitch*.

"Okay," says Nib, and oh her heart. Someone's squeezing it. Someone's squeezing it so hard and so tight. "Okay, that— *fine*, what kind of message?"

"The woman in your head said *find the star*, Nibby."

Nib sits up. Sybal leans back to give her room and Nib tells her to, "Quit looking in my head. That's private stuff. Manners." Her eyes are wet. Is she crying? She thinks she might be crying. "What star am I supposed to find? Do you even know how many godsdamned stars there *are* out there? Qu-quadruple *infinity* and th-th-then put a *cherry on top*, I can't—"

"Stop crying." Sybal says, very calmly, "The star is a person. Obviously. And someone you know, also obviously. You wouldn't be given a message outside your own knowable parameters."

"*What?*"

Nib sobs this. Taking her hand—her fingers are chilly; she's bitten her nails—Sybal says, just as calmly again as she did the first time, "The star is a *person*. Who do you know who resembles a star?"

Oh gods her heart. Her heart hurts, it hurts it hurts it *hurts*—

"She's dead," Nib says. "She's dead, she died, I killed her if she wasn't already— it *can't* be, it— Sybal, Oscar's dead."

The wind rolls over the roof and somehow it sounds like the voice of a girl on a beach long left behind.

I can beat you to the sandbar, Nibby, I know I can!

Nib says, "Oscar's dead."

"Well," says Sybal, "obviously not."

—