

Bitter Fate of a Child

A lone girl leaned against the wall in the far side of a dark room. She clutched at her heart, and fell to her knees. Tears ran down her face, but she did not sob. Her stare was not a sorrowful one, but of terror.

'Why? Gods, why?' she asked, wide-eyed. 'Why have you made me this way?'

Her name was Caila. She was cursed, or so everyone else said. She was told she brought misfortune to her people, because strange things happened to those whom she disliked. In some cases, more serious than others. They could never prove it, of course, but the coincidence was there too often. Her Pa and Ma always said it wasn't true, but she always noticed the awkward looks between her parents, the anxious frowns, the fake smiles. She knew they knew, and of the whole village, they were the most terrified of her.

Yet that only depressed her more. Everyone around tried to appease her, and inside they were running away from them. Occasionally, the frustration led to outbursts of anger and bitterness, and that's when "it" always happened. People would trip, fall off a ladder, or injure themselves accidentally with a kitchen knife. When the young Brennal made fun of her and rejected her advances, he got his hand bitten off by one of his father's pigs, as soon as he left her to tend to them.

Everyone she knew hated her, and slowly, she was starting to hate them.

Yet today, things would change. Two nights ago, a calf's thighbone with hair tied in a knot at one of its ends, the other half singed and burnt, was left in the city square. The cats and dogs swarmed towards it, barking and hissing at the foreign presence. The Spirits had left them the omen, something which happened for the last time 8 years ago.

The time for Choosing had come again, and her "curses" had become too noticeable. This time, she would be the one chosen to be given away to the Spirits, she knew it.

And here we are now: Caila is hiding in the cellar, and an angry mob crying out for her is outside her house.

A bang on the door above, and a crash. There were coming to take her by force.

'Please, we have no choice! Someone must go, and this time it's her!'

'No! You won't take my daughter! I won't let you go through!' said a voice belonging to an angry man.

~sigh~ 'Listen, Maérek, you know why we are doing this... Do you think we would if we had any other choice?' said one of the other voices in the room above.

'You *have* other choices!' said her father in a rage 'Choose... *someone else!*'

A moment of silence passed.

'How about your son Kéiren? We all know that little prick torched Geora's barn because she caught him hiding

the black root there! He's turned every lad of his generation into a junkie! Why don't we pick *him*?'

~Smack~ a sound of a fist hitting a face, and a *thud* on the floor. A woman screamed.

The cellar door bursted open, and several men came down, wooden clubs in their hands. Her father was still struggling with other men upstairs.

Caila muttered under her breath. 'Why, why, do I have to be like this? I hate you all!'

'Come girl, we don't want to hurt you. It's not our fault.'

She raised her head and stared at the man disdainfully 'But *you do*... you wanted this to happen. You wanted an excuse to get rid of me.'

The man swallowed hard and sighed. 'The witches make us do it, you know that. Someone has to go.'

'Admit it, bastards, you want me dead!'

'Now, calm down! Come with us!' The man was holding a rope, and took a step forward.

The ground caved in under him, and his foot fell into a hole. 'Aaaargh!' The splintered wood cut into his groin. Everyone else in the room hushed, afraid of being the next victim of the girl's curses.

One of the men stepped forward and grabbed the other one's rope. 'This is enough. You hurt people and you're a danger to everyone! I say, *I do* want you gone! Now stay still!'

For Caila, that was the last straw. She was tired of being feared, disdained, and hated. She never liked them, and now she had enough. Her hateful stare burrowed into the man's eyes.

~crack~ 'Yearrghh!' The man fell, one of his legs bent in an unnatural way, with one of his shinbones piercing the flesh.

'I'll rip the heart of the next one who dares even say a word to me.' she threatened.

Everything in that cellar stood still.

One man, in his fifties, stepped forward. His face was not of anger, though, but of sorrow. He held his arms pleadingly.

Caila's expression changed. She recognized the man.

The man shooked his head. 'No more. Please.'

Caila now had mixed feelings. This man had lost his only daughter, his only remaining relative, to the Choosing 8 years ago. She was a troublemaker, Caila remembered when she was younger, but otherwise had no curse on her or anything. Not that she heard of.

'Stop this, please.' The man begged, in a whisper. 'You know we have no choice. You can't change what's going to happen, no matter how many of us you harm. It's not that we hate you, but what you can do is... *dangerous*. And... how are we supposed to choose a person and tell his parents their child must go?' The man

sobbed slightly, and couldn't help shedding a tear. '... But if you *do* go, other children might live past this summer, and their parents might get to see them grow up.'

Her anger was gone. The bitterness was gone. The only person who could understand was begging her to go. Only sadness filled her now. Pain was everywhere, in everyone. Pain of losing their children, pain of being betrayed, pain of being abandoned, pain of being cursed, pain of every day being a burden. Pain of not being able to change their fates.

She stood there for a while, before the first one ventured forward to bind her hands and feet. 'You don't need to do that, I'll go.'

As she walked past the older man, she grabbed his shirt and looked him in the eyes. 'If I find her... I'll tell her that you still love her very much. But I don't know if I'll even live.'

The depressed girl strode on, accompanied by her fellow men. She strode on with them to the Forbiddance, two weeks travel from there. The old man stayed there, sobbing, reliving his nightmare in his head. All over again.

She strode on to uncertain doom.

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