

# The Patchwork Nest

*Spikey*

The roads here gleam golden in the sunlight, paved with honey instead of tar. Carriages barrel down the street, releasing blasts of princesses swathed in acarine red, verdigris blue, honourless yellow. The palaces are infested by the horrible things. See how the gardeners scurry at their feet, planting fresh fields of poppies for their satin slippers to crush, digging them up as soon as the gilded doors swing shut behind them. The carriages bow one final time beneath the richest of the mansions, skidding on pearls that line their path as potholes line a highway, turning before the end of the street. Complicity watches their retreat from her window.

There is one house the carriages will not deign to canter past, and it is her own.

Complicity conjures dresses from damask and cloaks from cashmere. She spins silk from her own restless shadow, weaves together emeralds and peacock spit, crafts a delicate hat from cicada skin. Her own overalls are sturdy denim, pockets crammed with cut grass from the gutter, mistaken for roadkill, mourned for fifteen seconds. She cracks her knuckles and rolls her wrists, takes a long look at the pile of unfinished dresses on her floor, and reaches for her needle once again. Bring out your mowers and your blowtorches, your sickles and your herbicide, but at the end of the world it is the weeds that will survive.

Catching her daydreaming, a blur of feathers hits her in the jaw. Before she even registers the attack, the bird has already alighted upon the back of her wrist, talons bright, feathers askew. Its eyes are wide as gorging leeches and twice as satisfied.

"Very funny," says Complicity. "I'll pluck your feathers to fill my pillow."



She won't.

They settle into the comfortable silence of an old routine, worn until the stuffing spills out, until the fur falls off in clumps. The bird perches on the sharp tip of her needle as she skewers seams into submission. It yammers on about its day and tries to eat her buttons while she hums and nods and says things like "the worm was *how* big?" and "the great dark choir of nightjars said *what*?" at what she hopes are appropriate intervals. In turn, the bird graces no window but that of Complicity's cold apartment, tucked shyly away in the gleaming shadows of Princess Street, sheltering no secret ambition to be a layer cake, or a spacecraft, or anything other than what it is, which is squat and grey and beautiful.

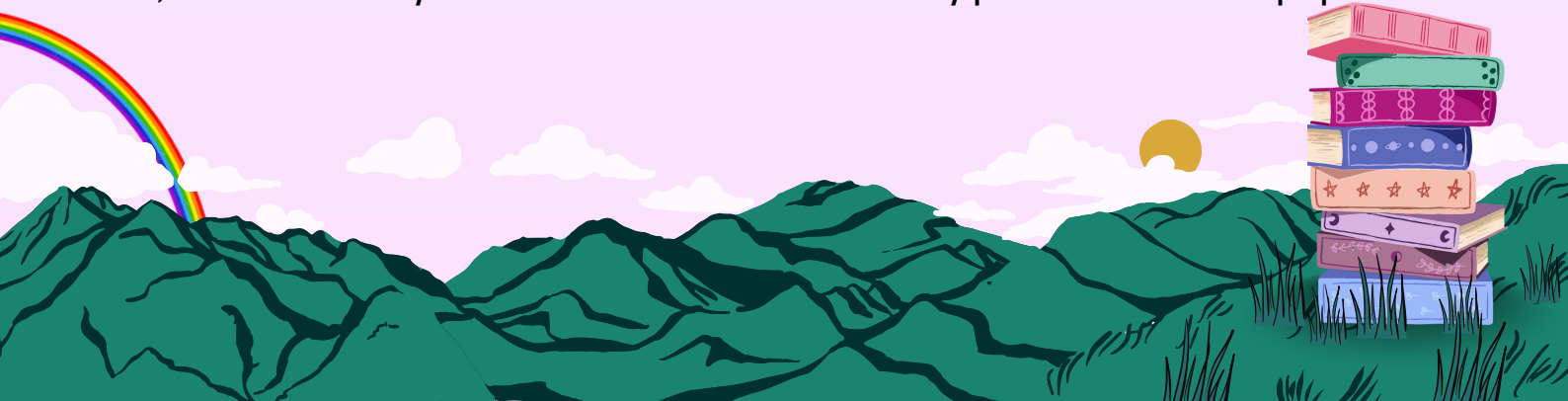
And at the end of the night, every night, when the roar of the sewing machine quiets to a murmur, then a snore, when Complicity's cheek rests on her desk in a puddle of saliva and dreams, the little bird takes a scrap of fabric in its beak and slips away.

And at the end of the night, every night, when the soft percussion of wings is swallowed up by footsteps on the grass, Complicity (something of an actress) runs to the window. There, if she is very lucky, she spies a flurry of curls, the back of a neck, a scrap of brocade sequestered away in a clever palm. Then she closes the window and returns to her work, head fluttering with dreams of sharp-beaked girls.

Not so tonight.

The bird, having done its very best to murder her, settles amicably upon her shoulder, watching her hands. It is quiet as a dead man's heartbeat, still as the rise and fall of his chest.

"What's wrong with you tonight?" asks Complicity. "Sing to me as you always do, unstitch the eyelids of the forest so that I may peer behind their pupils."



The bird fluffs its feathers and coughs up a seed. *Lalalala, I can't hear you*, it does not say, but the feeling is implied.

"If the tale has too much sinew for my clumsy human jaw, chew it up and spit it down my throat. I can stomach anything so long as it's from you."

The bird whistles half-heartedly, the note quavering in the air before falling to the desk with a sad thump. It offers nothing more.

Complicity is not a bird, only a girl. She does not speak the secret language of the forest, nor the mountain, nor even the next village over. Even so, she understands. These past few weeks have seen her breath borne up as steam, stirred beneath the wings of cuckoos flying northwest to where the world is kinder. A farewell is felt in the hollow of the throat centuries before it's said aloud.

She takes up her scissors and cuts below her collarbone, severing a square of denim from where it rests above her heart. The edges are ragged, but the bird accepts it like an admission of guilt. She brings the creature to her mouth, sings a kiss into the top of its head, and for a second, her lips brush soft curls. When her eyelids part, the bird is gone.

She folds the laundry, takes a shower, gets into bed. Counts the ceiling cracks for hours. At the back of her throat something is burning angrily, reverently. Almost as though she's swallowed a feather.

In the morning, of course, life continues. She walks the honeyed streets alone, and from their jewel-stained windows nobles pelt her with chiffon.

"A chemise the colour of longing!" cries one. Charmeuse plummets from her balcony.

"A tea-gown that shimmers like the tide!"



"A hat more splendid than my cousin's!"

Complicity gathers the fabric diligently, and much more besides. It takes all manner of things to craft a dress. The albumen of last night's moon; a field mouse's spine; the hidden organs of the universe, plum-dark and dripping and desperately sad. A poster's peeling edge. A poster's peeling edge?

"Excuse me," Complicity asks, reaching for the nearest sleeve, quite forgetting to curtsy, "excuse me, do you know this girl?"

There's a woman on the poster. Her jaw is tight, her eyes are wide as bullet wounds. A bouquet of curls brush her forehead like a kiss. Somewhere inside Simplicity, a window opens, and the light comes streaming in.

"That is a thief," answers one princess, spitting at Complicity with her gold-tipped tongue, "and that," (here she points to a number on the poster, a very large number) "is what happens to thieves. We found her sleeping in the mountains, waist-deep in stolen velvet. She was brought to the dungeon. Only, this morning..."

The princess leans in very close. Her breath is warm and sweet, like carrion.

"This morning, there was no girl, only an ugly, moulting bird."

A high, quavering note skips across the breeze, and Complicity runs.

She vaults marble walls and shatters porcelain gardens, leaves a hundred cultivars of rose bent and bloody in her wake. Nobody turns to look when her heavy boots break through the door to the opera house. There is a crowd gathered behind the curtain, clustered around a golden cage, a sea of finery whose waves break at the feet of a lowly sparrow.



"You ought to take it, dearest Rhathymia. It stole a piece of your heirloom lace," says one princess through tight lips.

"No, no, Hirudinea, I insist. You keep the darling thing, it stole a tuft of your fine vair," replies another, teeth clenched into a not-quite-smile.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly. Really, I couldn't."

"I'll take it," says Complicity, baring her torn overalls like a property deed. "I'll take it."

The crowd releases a collective breath, relieved from the responsibility of caring for any creature other than themselves (and even then, they have servants for that). Complicity's fingers brush the cage, and for a moment she imagines the gold burns her, has peered into her soul and judged her unworthy, somehow, but it is only a hand on her wrist.

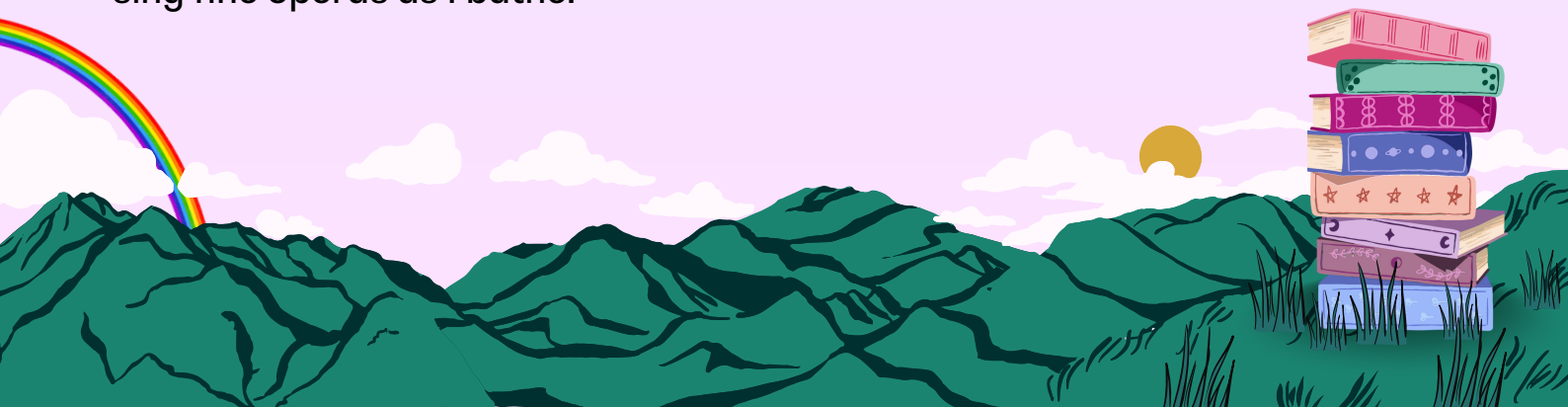
"The bird is mine," says the Lord High Princess Solitude, with a smile like molten toffee. "This child must know something we do not. For one to want the thing so terribly, imagine the beauty of its song."

The crowd chatters- how humble of their gracious monarch to see the beauty in such vermin. Complicity tightens her hold on the bars.

"Please, your highness. It stole the pocket of my overalls, and with it the pins and threads I held there, and with those my love and livelihood."

The princess' smile grows brighter at this, her grip stronger. Blood stains the tips of her manicured nails.

"Because I am a wise ruler, and a merciful one, I permit you your farewell to the beast. Then it shall be taken to my palace to feast on croquembouche and sing fine operas as I bathe."



She offers Complicity her ruby-scented handkerchief, and Complicity buries her face in its folds. She holds it there for a long time, soaking it through to the marrow with salt and rage, but when it drops her face is a mask. She falls to her knees beneath the sparkling chandeliers, the gazes of the powerful, the plain old unbanishable dust. All she can do is press her face to the cage's bars and wait for absolution. It comes. It comes. The bird takes her lip in its beak and draws the first bright dawning of blood. The crowd gags. A duke faints. In their distraction, something stronger than blood passes between the bird and the girl, something cold and hard and heavy as a secret.

And as she is led away by the guards, torn bodily from this wealth-stricken place, Complicity is holding back a laugh.

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The knock comes late at night. Complicity is at her workbench, fully dressed, features twisted by the flickering light of the sewing machine. She draws her tongue across the scab on her lip and goes to open the door.

For the second time this week, a bird hits her in the face. This is beginning to become a problem.

The Lord High Princess Solicitude stands at the door dressed only in her nightgown, hair tumbling down her shoulders like a rorschach test, more a collection of nerves and arteries than a woman.

"Take back your accomplice and leave this town," shrieks she. "It sings as though God's hand were stuck in its throat. What He must keep it from saying, I do not wish to find out."

She sheds her seaglass slippers and hurls them at Complicity, slips from her silvery gown and dives back into the night naked as the sun, our neighbour whose house is on fire. Complicity chuckles. She shakes her head. She sweeps up the glass, and she closes the door.





"Well," she says at last. "Well, well. Fancy seeing you again."

The bird, a shard of slipper in its beak, does something clever with the lock. It falls from the cage in an avalanche of feathers, fingers, freckles, curls. From the rubble the beast arises, stark naked and coughing like an old man. A single button rolls off her tongue, round and red as a bitter-berry.

"Do you want this back?"

"I'm alright, thanks. Gross."

The girl laughs as only a bird can laugh, gathers Complicity into her arms and sinks down with her into their patchwork nest. Complicity grips her tightly, thinks of the west wind outside. There is no reason to return to this sad little room when the whole world is out there, smelling of chokecherries and stinging like salt.

"You stole my overalls' pocket, and I say you have to stay."

"You gave it willingly. You stole a poor little songbird, and I say it has to fly, and I say you have to fly with it."

"You gave it willingly. Yes, I will. Of course, I will."

Tomorrow they will run from this place, hand in hand out of its glittering jaws, towards a kinder place to nest. For tonight, though, they must sleep, curled up in an ocean of silk. Let's turn the light out, shall we?

