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Anna Scanlan

A Tangle of Encores

SHE HAD WALKED THESE STREETS A THOUSAND TIMES BEFORE, century after century. She had been around long before they were built, when the now crowded city streets were beyond the realm of possibility. It was to be expected that she might still walk this path long after it crumbled to dust.

As was the cycle of life. Of all people, she would know. She'd witnessed thousands upon thousands of life cycles start and then come to their closes. The pained cries of the Battle of Aughrim, a mother's soft sobs, it made no difference. The end was the end. And it was natural for life to reach such a stop.

But her? She lived on.

The fate of the young man across the bar told a vastly different story, one of premature extermination.

He reeked of death, so strongly that it almost knocked her over when she entered the bar. The pungent scent of rot and its telltale sweet, winery undertone danced through the air, taunting her. Pulling her in. Despite her better judgment, a sense She'd spent centuries cultivating, her curiosity got the better of her.

She looked at him and his entire life flooded her senses like lightning shooting through the air, revealing glimpses of memory. Faces, names, places She would never know. They swirled through her.

As quickly as they came, the memories faded away. But one lingered in the air, not quite willing to let go. It was much darker than its counterparts, wispy and blending into the shadows. A glint of a knife's hilt shone its way through the shadowy curtain of the sight. As did a woman in a pink dress and golden shoes standing in a pool of blood pouring from the man's gasping throat. The image danced in the shadowy cage, clinging to the man.

He would not live past today. Fate had spoken.

She tuned the shadows out, trying to refocus her attention on the pieces of him still tied to this world. His hair was a bright, beautiful blonde, reminiscent of golden fields of wheat. It was almost enough to fight the shadows off. But his fate still lingered in front of him.

She could push the shadows away, but it was only a matter of time before they made a swift return, knife brighter, blood thicker.

The man shifted back and forth on his barstool, fidgeting with a now-empty glass. The barkeep was nowhere to be seen. If She had to guess, they were probably in the back on their phone to make the time fly by faster. So the man was alone, forced to sit in the emptiness of the room. Waiting.

Every so often, he glanced around the room. He had to be well aware of her presence. The two of them had been sitting there for almost an hour, the only souls in the bar. However, he still saw right through her as if she were a lonely nobody. And She preferred it that way.

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She needed a break from her constant existence. It was nice to blend in for a while, not having to worry about when she would need to turn and fly away for fear of being seen and recognized and exploited.

The man at the bar looked across the room once again. He swirled the glass around and ice clanged lightly against its barren walls. Bouncing against the stool's footrest, his foot refused to rest. With each passing minute, his tapping increased and his eyes drooped downward.

A light bell rang, and the cool breeze from the opening door brushed against her dress. She pulled her coat tighter around her.

The clicking of shoes against the tile grew louder and louder. She looked at the floor out of the corner of her eye.

Golden shoes.

A flash of pink fabric and blonde hair swept past her as the newcomer made her way over to the man.

And his shadows of fate thickened, refusing to fall back.

The woman walked towards the man at the bar, lightly tapping his shoulder.

The man jumped to his feet. "Linda?" he asked.

The woman, Linda, smiled, but her smile did not reach her eyes.

"And you must be Tom."

The pair shook hands as the man, Tom, pulled out the stool next to him. He gestured towards Linda, inviting her to sit.

Linda obliged, but the deadened smile remained plastered on her face.

The woman's makeup was impeccable, and there wasn't a seam out of place on her dress. She wondered why Linda felt the need to piece together such an obviously fake appearance. Well, to everyone but Tom, who was obliviously chatting away.

But She saw. A fire sat behind Linda's blank eyes, and it was a fire She recognized within herself. No – a fire she had once had that she had spent centuries trying to get back.

It was an unmistakable look of pure, unbridled rage. Emotion of such intensity always left a mark, carving itself into your very being and tainting you from the rest of the world. People feared her. They have for centuries.

Though Linda didn't have nearly as much experience to build such a high level of anger, its glimmer was unmistakably there.

And yet, Tom continued to chatter away, noticing none of what She noticed. He gabbed away about the football scores, ugly bar interior, quality of his drink. All the meanwhile, he was staring at Linda, infatuated by her. When his eyes left her gaze, they would fall to her perfectly placed locks, her pouty, upturned lips, her breasts spilling out of her low-cut top. Her presence enamored him. She got the sense that any woman's presence would.

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And the steely lock of Linda's jaw said that he disgusted her.

Tom's gaze never made it below Linda's chest, as if her breasts were a distracting blockage in the road, causing all traffic to grind to a halt.

If he tore his eyes away, even for a second, he might have seen the lump in her otherwise skin-tight dress. The peculiar knife-shaped disturbance at her hip.

The more Tom droned on, the wider Linda's smile grew, the darker the shadows of Tom's fate became. With each passing moment, their wisps clung to him more and more. But Tom couldn't see this. His mortal brain was too weak to truly see. It was sad, really.

She turned her head away from the pair and the fate cloaking them. Now would probably be a good time to leave. Shift into a new form as she had done time and time again, slide away into the night, not give these two another thought. Until another situation inevitably crossed her path.

She couldn't afford to sit with these thoughts for too long. These lives were fleeting, mere specks of dust in the much larger picture of her world. If She took the time to dwell on every life, every fate She came across, she would easily succumb to insanity. It threatened to burst her skull into a million pieces.

Once, she had cared for each and every one of them. Once, she would do anything to give all of the souls some comfort in the end. Once, she had stepped in when she could, even though the physical outcome would remain the same, even when they refused to be helped. A piece of her died with each one.

She should just take flight, leave this mortal strife behind her. Maybe then she could build her own soul back up. Find herself again.

But something stopped her from slipping away and leaving Tom and Linda for good.

Surely it wasn't morbid curiosity. There was nothing to be curious about: she knew Tom's fate. Men like Tom came and went throughout her existence, and there was nothing special about this one nor his imminent demise. He was one of billions.

She looked back towards the pair at the bar, shadowy images flooding her senses once again. Her mind pushed through them to see the physical world around her, and it was taking more effort than ever before. Now, only the bare outlines of Tom and Linda were visible through the fog. Bare outlines and a smear of pink dress.

Linda's ice-cold tone mesmerized her and it was audible over the hum of the fog. Her godforsaken grin fit perfectly with the sharp angles of her jaw, as if they were made for each other. It was as if Linda was built to carry rage.

The two of them were one and the same. Linda and Her. Her and Linda.

It was her destiny to see fate, live amidst the fury and frenzy of war, thrive off of the chaos it created, bringing death to the world. She lived

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and breathed and embodied fury, the core part of her being. She was made to be this way, an immortal like no other.

Linda embraced her fury and rage, no matter how short-lived it might be, as if she was born to do so. As if it was her destiny to. But Linda was a mere mortal, not born to embrace much at all. She wasn't built for this kind of energy, and it would eventually break her.

But by the looks of what she was about to do to Tom, it was clear that Linda could not hold herself together for much longer. One of these days, she would shatter into a million pieces as the things inside of her grew out of control, taking over. Today was the beginning of the end end of her facade.

And she feared, despite her own power, she would succumb to the same fate. Millenia of grief and sorrow and rage building into a cosmic explosion. It was all she had ever known, all she was meant to be. Even so, at some point, it would have to be too much. Linda was lucky enough to only be simmering for a decade or two.

She hadn't realized the shadows thicken once again, their gentle hum getting more and more agitated. The gentle light of the bar illuminated the silhouettes of the only two people in the room.

She heard the sharp swish of the knife leaving its sheath.

She heard the garbled gasp that slid off Tom's lips.

The gasp grew louder, turning into a stifled shriek.

And a red wave seeped out of the shadows, swallowing them whole. The world spun around, a mixture of wisps and blood until nothing but the bar remained. The bar, Tom slumped over and bleeding onto a chair, and Linda, frozen. Just standing there. Linda hadn't seen her sitting in the corner.

Linda held the knife, turning it over back and forth, back and forth. Her eyes shifted in a similar pattern. They remained wide and confused for a second, but then She watched as all the emotion faded. Linda was broken: this was the beginning of her end.

She knew She didn't have an end coming her way anytime soon. She prayed she wouldn't end up like Linda, shattered by fury. Maybe she would find out one of these eons.

She felt a tear trickle down her cheek, falling into her lap.

She was fated to either live for the rest of time, live blinded by fury or numb to the world. Who she used to be was gone.

Pushing the thoughts away, She turned her head towards the window, watching the rain trickle across the pane. People scurried past, ducking into other establishments to shelter from the storm. It was only a matter of time before some of them came into the bar. Found the body. Had questions.

And She would have to walk away, back on the streets. Staying in any place for too long was dangerous. She didn't want to accidentally reveal

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her true form to anyone. Thinking ahead, she wrapped her coat around herself and stepped out into the night.

Those streets, she had walked them a thousand times before, century after century. She had witnessed their construction and would be there to observe their decay into dust. Just another cycle, running its morbid course. Another cycle, like Tom and Linda, like billions before them and even more after. It was natural for life to break down, to end, to reach its close.

But her grand finale would never come, so she had no choice but to brace herself for the next encore. And the next one. And the next one.