

The Hooded Savior

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Celeste's eyes open wide as the shouts from below jolt her out of her sleep. She slips into her slippers and peaks out the top floor window. An angry mob is formed at the bottom of her uncle's castle. They throw fire and metal objects at the gate until she sees the chains begin to lower and the angry mob rushes into the castle. She covers her mouth frightened she races to her bed and hides under the covers. She hears her brother and mother shout for help. She can't cower she needs to do something she musters up her strength as she steps out of the large door into the hallway she quietly makes her way to the ledge of the stairs. Slowly looking over the edge she witnesses the mob

flood into the grand hall below. She fights every urge to shout for her family as she searches frantically for her father, hoping he's able to save them.

Instead she sees her father escape from the overrun castle abandoning her mother and brother in the courtroom. Her uncle races to their aide and waves his sword frantically batting away the attackers. Celeste thinks quickly she grabs the tray of burning ambers from her bedroom and launches it over the railing into the crowd. The mob disperses quickly trying to brush the hot coals from the skin allowing her mother and brother to escape. The angry mob charges up the stairs for her. Her uncle rushes the stairs killing all the men. He kneels down in front of her, "Thank you Celeste. You are such a brave little girl braver than I've seen grown men be. Go out the secret way to the garden," orders her uncle quietly.

"But Unc..."

"Celeste, I am very proud of you. You saved you mother and brother's lives, now I must save yours, please go," he hands her a dagger, "take this keep it close, only use it when you must," Celeste takes one last look at her uncle's stern rough face seeing the love and kindness behind the dirt and freshly dried blood, she wraps her tiny arms around his neck squeezes and grabs the knife and quickly

paces to the library. She takes one last glance back at her Uncle to see the mob clash into his sword he fights back with honor and power, giving her every second he could. Celeste runs into the library locking the door behind her, she quickly pulls a book down unlocking the hidden door.

She squeezes her way through the skinny passageway and slams it shut behind her. Celeste crawls through the tunnel until she sees a dim light; normally this would be the exciting part in her journey where she escapes the dungeon and breaks free, but this is no game now. She moves the broken gate and pulls herself out of the ground. She trips over her muddy slippers and falls, cutting her knee on a jagged rock it's only then she realizes that she's been crying. The screams and angry shouts die down a little, but Celeste pulls herself up and flees through the garden and farms, over the rolling hills far away from her home.

She stops to rest next to a large weeping tree she curls up at the bottom and closes her watery eyes. She awakens by a nightmarish noise, searching her dark surroundings her heart begins to panic. She sees two figures creep towards her with their glowing white fangs shining in the moonlight. Celeste slowly pulls out her dagger waiting for the beast to pounce, when a large strong white horse stampedes towards the beasts stomping at them,

standing on its hind legs defending Celeste. The beasts flee in fear and Celeste looks up at the horse with endless gratitude, and she puts the knife away and slowly walks up to him. She reaches her tiny hand out grazing the horse's silk coat with her soft fingers. The horse nudges her towards his back, Celeste climbs onto his back and the horse bolts off into the night.

"Celeste?" Celeste opens her eyes quickly to see her brother's confused familiar face and combed dirty blonde hair waving in the wind, looking down at her and her white horse sleeping in the field, "It is you!" he shouts joyfully and tackles her. She buries her face in his clean clothes and sobs, "Come mother and father will be ecstatic."

"Father?"

"Yes, when you saved mother and me we met up with father. He told us he was looking for help and he said that Uncle would protect you. He was right, where is Uncle?"

"He stayed back to save me, *unlike father.*" She says not letting the last part of her sentence escape her lips. Sadness fills his countenance.

"Well come," Celeste and her horse follow Vincent to their kingdom. They take rest about a half a day's trip from their new home.

"Brother?"

"Yes, Celli?"

"Where did you meet up with father?"

"Over the rolling hills, why?"

She bites her lip unable to hold back her headstrong opinion, "Do you think father is good?"

"What? Of course, why would you say such things?"

"I saw him leave, Vincent. He snuck away without even looking back at you an mother, let alone me. And the rolling hills is further out then the closest town, if he was going to get help way would he flee that far?"

"Celeste," her older brother kneels down so he's at eye level, "Celli, don't say those things, not out loud at least. Celeste, we have to watch each other's backs, and we both have to look after mother." Celeste smiles at her younger brother. Such courage and wisdom she just wishes that he'd be more vocal with his power. She wouldn't amount to anything except to be married off for her father's more stolen power and riches. But Vincent, She looks at him admiring his broad shoulders and kind eyes; he has what it takes to be a king a true king, like her uncle always spoke

of. She smiles in acceptance to their new alliance. They rest for a while more before getting enough energy to finish their journey.

Celeste is welcomed with shock and cheers by the common people. A young boy peaks through the crowd at Celeste. She looks over at him and he smiles shyly. The crowd closes in around the kids all talking at once, Celeste looks around for her mother, when she sees her she leaves the horse's side and leaps into her arms.

"My brave Celeste, I am so glad to see you. I can't even come close to thanking you for saving your brothers and my life..."

"Mother, what is going on, why didn't you come looking for us?"

She watches her mother's eyes flicker to her father, "Celeste, we thought you were—"

"It doesn't matter," she says cutting her off she didn't need to know the excuse, "we have to go back and rescue Uncle." She could tell by the silence of the crowd and how her mother's lips parted, but no words escaped that the answer was no, but she wanted to hear her say the words herself.

"Celeste, we cannot. The barbarians overrun the whole city, there is no way we can go in and rescue Uncle. We

don't even know if he's alive."

Celeste didn't even try to hide her tears, "Like me." She says to her mother and the ease droppers, she takes off running shoving past the young boy in the crowd looking at her with utter empathy. Her eyes blinded by her tears she sits alone in the stable crying, she didn't mean to be harsh to her, and it was for her father mostly. The horse walks up to Celeste and nudges her to look at the castle like he knew what she knew. Celeste pulls herself together as she makes her way in the servant quarter entrance to avoid the townspeople and to go apologize to her mother.

-Ten Long Years Later-

Celeste wakes another day; she climbs out of her queen size bed her soft toes touch down on the wooden floorboards as she pulls on a red robe. She opens her curtain overlooking the city. She peers down at the sad common people hustling their way through another gloomy day. Celeste makes her way to the wardrobe and picks out a lovely dress and headpiece to go over her wavy brown hair.

"Celeste?" her mother calls from the hall before she opens the large solid wood doors, "You are beautiful." She says smiling proudly at her young lady. "Where are you off today?"

"Mother, do you have to ask? I'm going riding on Austin."

She sighs, "I set up meetings for you today. You're becoming a lady now and you need to start thinking about a

husband."

"Mother..."

"I am serious Celli."

"Mother, I will find a husband. One that I choose."

"So be it, but I advise you to pick quickly or your father—" Her mother is interrupted by a shout from outside Celeste's bedroom window. Celeste and her mother curiously approach the balcony overlooking the courtyard. They peak through the window Celeste sees her father shouting at one of the servant children. The child cowers as low as she could to get away from her father's rampage, "Celeste please do not," Celeste ignores her mother as she stubbornly unlocks her windows and walks out to the edge of her balcony.

"How dear you!" Father shouts holding up a loaf of bread, "Do you know what the price is for stealing in my palace?"

"I-I'm sorry I just thought that—"

"Servant!" she scowls down at the young girl, "What is taking you so long bring me my breakfast and I better have the bread I asked for or you are going to... Father? What are you doing?" She interrupts his rage innocently.

"Celeste, you ordered servant to bring you bread?"

"Yes father, I enjoy freshly made bread with my

bacon." Celeste mocks slightly. Her mother hides her smirk in the flowing curtains. Celeste's father glares at the servant and tosses the bread at her then storms back into the parlor. Celeste winks at the servant before returning to her bedroom.

"Celeste, your father will catch on sooner or later."

"The sooner probably the better for him," Celeste finishes her breakfast at the nook before leaving for her daily ride.

"Celli! Can I join you today?"

"No, Vincent I want to take Austin out for a long ride today."

"Awe, come on; I'll be quiet as a mouse."

"Ha, mice scare horses." he pleases with his dark brown eyes, "tomorrow I promise."

He groans, "Ugh that's what you said yesterday."

Celeste looks over at the child servant from outside, she takes a small bite of the bread then hands it back to her, "Thanks for the delish bread, Seren." Celeste winks as she disappears out the French doors. She walks through the family courtyard she makes her way through the stunning garden to her families stable. Austin pops his head over the fence and trots up to her. He nuzzles her side and she slips him a carrot. She walks him over to the stable, "It's

not for fun today, Austin," mounting her horse she rides off into the meadow to satisfy her on-lookers she rides Austin back and forth like she warming him up for a long ride.

Then she sneaks behind the palace leaving the kingdom's walls. A few minutes they reach a large tree as old as the earth itself. Celeste reaches in a tiny hole and with her fingers she pulls open a hidden latch. She reveals a large black potato sacks and black clothes. Celeste quickly changes behind her horse she stuffs the dress in the hole and mounts her friend again and races out further from her kingdom. She loves riding it allows her to feel the freedom that she's robbed of back in the castle. Yeah she's royalty, but honestly she's as trapped as the prisoners in her father's dungeon. The wind tugs at her hood, but it doesn't betray her as she slows up to the small village. By the time the small village appears in front of her the sun is ducking below the horizon. She slows Austin down and covers her face with a part of her outfit she slides off Austin gracefully tying him to the usual apple cart.

Celeste moves smoothly through the crowd and spots her usual booths; she approaches a small older man. His face lightens up at the sight of her, "Savor! Welcome again.

Boy, do I love the sight of you. I'll gather the usual up. Your steed is getting faster with age," he states. "You sure you don't want to sell?" Celeste's beautiful dark eyes studies the older man she examines him, dressed in tan rags that wrap around his skinny waist she looks at his face wrinkling with a only few teeth peeking through his grin. She realizes he's teasing once again and with no response he continues, "Hey I thought I'd offer. What's the worst you can do? Talk?" he laughs at his own joke while filling up her sacks.

"Savor!" Celeste faces a young man across the walk way, "Can I interest you in some weapons? With your line of business I assure you you will need them. I have Knives, daggers, axes, hatchets, swords, in all sizes. I can even custom..." Celeste raises her hand silencing the blacksmith.

"All set Savor," Celeste picks up the sacks of food the merchant prepared for her and returned to Austin.

"He ate six apples today," the kind young woman informs Celeste. She drops six silver coins down on the bench. "Thank you. You know I wouldn't even think about charging you. Word is spreading that you're buying for all of Halesonder. Bless your heart, but I need the money," Celeste peers behind the woman to see an infant propped up in a wooden create. Celeste reaches her hand out pulling

the woman's hand into hers. She bows her head then quickly mounts Austin. The woman unfolds her dirty hand to see two shining gold coins glistening in the sunlight. Her mouth hangs low and a tear drips from her eye as she hides the coins in her dress.

Celeste charges passed the old tree and main entrance to the kingdom and rides to the back the gate is left unlocked for her. She scales the streets quiet as usual. Quick like a ghost, she unmounts her steed dumps the food in the back of a half empty hay barrel then re-mounts Austin and disappears out of the kingdom. She gallops back to the large tree changes into her proper attire, just as she's about to climb back on he lays down in the grass and puts his head down. She smiles acknowledging him and sits beside him underneath the large drooping tree and they stare up at the night sky. She dreads the return to the castle taking in a deep breath she welcomes the peaceful silence and falls asleep.

The dew makes her pale skin shine with the morning light. Celeste smiles for the first time waking up to the sound of nature's voice, but realizing where she is she jumps to her feet waking Austin racing quickly to the stable sneaking her way in through the servant's quarters Serenn greets her with her kind face. Celeste covers her

lips with a single finger and peeks out the door leading to the hall near the kitchen she gives her a thumb up to go. Celeste takes off her shoes and tiptoes through the quiet castle to her warm bedroom.

Just as her head hit the pillow a loud roar echoes throughout the castle,

"Celeste! Where are you?" Celeste walks out into the hall to meet her father standing with his fists on his hips with his fat chest heaving.

"Yes father?" Celeste replies coldly.

He whips around, "I've been calling your name for minutes. I expect you to answer me the first time like a proper woman." Celeste rolls her eyes out of his sight, "You are not to leave today I arranged a party in your favor."

"What! No father, I have to. I promised—"

"Your precious stead can wait a day. Now put on something more suitable than that and be ready in a few

hours to meet the man you are going to spend the rest of your life with."

"You can't—"

"Already done, you are dismissed." Celeste did not dear let her tears escape her eyes until the door is slammed shut behind her.

"My dear, I am so sorry." Her mother enters the room with attempts to comfort her.

She shakes her hand off her shoulders, "Well, what are you waiting for, Mother, make me presentable," she says coldly drying up her eyes. Her mother sighs in defeat and picks out an elegant dress; she waves getting the maids to prepare her hair and makeup. Hours later Celeste can hear the crowd growing in the grand hall, from her chamber. A rapid quiet knock catches her attention, she orders a maid to open the door, "My beautiful sister! Are you ready to meet the men of your dreams?"

"How bad is it out there?"

"Not that bad. If you're happy with the choices of stuck up high-maintenance, know-it-alls, or half way to dead pigs." Celeste somberly steps down from the stool and sits on the edge of her bed. The maids follow her with pins and needles frantically trying to finish hemming her dress.

"I can't do this."

"Celeste, you just have to get through this night and when the night ends you say '*you've met a lot of great men and you have to have a good night's sleep to choose.*' See no pressure," He laughs.

"Ha. Easy for you to say, you get to pick out of beautiful women."

"True," He mocks.

"Celeste, are you ready they are expecting you now," Her mother says timidly. Celeste puts on the biggest fake smile she can muster up and leaves her bedroom. The railing on the second level that hangs over the grand hall shimmers with white lace and light blue flowers. The crowd falls silent as she walks down the grand staircase. Her fingers lightly trace the banister praying she doesn't trip in the tight dress and high heels the maids glued to her.

Her father stands at the bottom welcoming her, she wraps her arm through his like trained and he escorts throughout the hall. She fakes her happy, amused, and interested faces and smiles as she meets with the men. Finally after two hours of dancing and talking she is able to sit at a table and eat. She glances over at the clock; the time has passed when the Savor was supposed to make her drop off. She begins diner when her mother from across the room motions her to slow down and eat properly. The courses

come and go before Celeste is able to finish them, leaving her with a half empty stomach.

A handsome waiter appears next to her, "Enjoying yourself, princess?"

Celeste jumps in her chair, "Oh. Oh, yes thank you."

"Was the food to your satisfaction?"

"Yeah, what I could finish."

He smirks, "Well, I assure you your entertainment will be better," he says disappearing behind her. She lets out a sigh and looks out into the crowd for anyone suitable, but she is let down once again. A young lady Celeste's age strolls out to the middle of the floor. Her dark skin and mystical eyes wins the attention of the crowd.

"Can I have all your attention? I'd like to introduce your entertainment tonight, The amazing Zantella family!" she claps along with the guests as she leaves the floor. Quickly two men are noticed standing on top of the railing on the third floor. They leap off the railing gasps echo from all around the room. Celeste covers her mouth as they spring back up to the second floor just missing the ground. Dancers and acrobats swarm out to the floor flipping off each other and expressing a very unique dancing style. They automatically catch the attention of the whole crowd, everyone, but Celeste. Her mind is still on the dead weight

hanging over her.

She glances to the darkened full tables when she sees men dressed in all black silently removing jewelry and expensive possessions from the clueless guests. She chuckles to herself, enjoying the sideshow. Celeste sees her waiter look up at her, noticing her he smiles cunningly. A young boy reaches up to steal a necklace from a lady whose nose is as high up as the high flyers, but the man sitting next to her grips his hand tightly. The man's shouts cut to show short. He lifts the kid up and shakes him. Celeste sees the other robbers sneak out the room abandoning the boy. The man cocks back his hand to strike the boy, but Celeste's hand blocks the strike.

"You will not hit this boy!" she shouts at the man.

"What! He's stealing from this whole crowd, this boy should be so lucky just to get a smack!" Celeste reaches down pulls his containments from his sash and pours it on the table. She puts on her best acting face.

"You are right. I will bring him to my guards; we will give him a punishment suitable for this crime," Celeste escorts the boy out the back of the grand hall.

"Please let me go, I'm sorry." He squirms and she grips him tighter pulling him into the kitchen.

The kitchen is deserted. She kneels down to his level,

"Calm down. You know that stealing is wrong don't you? You could get killed for doing what you just did. Why are you involved in this?"

"I know, I'm sorry. I just wanted to help. I jumped in at the last second cuz the- our friend never came to-" the little boy covers his mouth. A ting of guilt fills her throat.

Celeste smiles kindly, "it's okay. Your Savor is very sorry they never showed they will show up tomorrow with double amount," She glances around the vacant spotless kitchen, "In the meantime, this packed kitchen is shut down for the night. It won't be cleaned until tomorrow morning." She winks at the boy. Locking the door behind her, the boy looks down at his hand lifting the tiny diamond necklace he got caught taking.

"That was very kind of you," Celeste locks the door before turning around to face the voice.

"I don't know what you are talking about," she lies to a shadowy figure in the hall.

"That's a very odd thing to say. How do you know that the 'Savor' is sorry and will make it up tomorrow?"

She squints to see the man's face, but he is too far away "Again I don't know what you're talking about. You better get back to the party," She lifts her chin and turns

to walk away.

"Well then, I bet you won't care if I go into the kitchen to wash off this stain I have," the man emerges from the darkness reaching for the lock.

"No!" she throws her body in front of the door as fast as her dress allows her to pulling her dagger to the man's throat, "I... You..." she is lost for words as the waiter from early steps in closer to her.

His eyes glance down at the dagger, "Miss, I think there's something behind this door that you don't want me to see," his crooked smile charms his face.

"Will you hurt him?" she searches his eyes for an answer. Shouts ring down the hall breaking her trance, "You know, you play the clueless pretty princess quiet well, but I'd work on your faces a little more somebody might realize they are only for pretend."

"Celeste! Are you okay?" She quickly unlocks the door and re-locks it behind him. "Where's the boy?"

"Escaped, Father," Celeste answers quickly.

"Celeste," she turns from him before he was able to finish his sentence. "Celeste, don't you turn away from me!" he pulls her back towards him and backhands her across the face. She ignores the burning pain she shoots him a horrid glare and turns her back to him again.