

Phantasmagoria

by Emily Sparkles

How does one describe a land that one has never experienced? I could give you a handful of snapshots based upon what I see when I look out of our windows; I could tell you of the seasons and the temperatures. I could even go deeper and describe the behaviors of the beings who occupy our abode. But until quite recently, I could offer no more. Until quite recently, I would have thought there was no more to tell.

The room is dark, despite the open draperies. It is the sort of stone castle that its interior appears to be covered in soot, or perhaps the spread out corners contain an inky blackness that spreads over the walls, darting from the daylight and taking full reign after dark. The draperies, the canopied bed, the ottoman and stools are all identically adorned in red velvet, which is supposed to convey royalty, which used to convey warmth, but which now convey only blood.

I sit in my chemise like a forgotten rag doll on the stool before my vanity. My body is postured towards nothing in particular, my gaze keeps returning to vacant; it's far preferable to any fixed sight it could find. Turn to the right - the mirror. Head down, already large dark eyes exaggerated by tearfully smudged charcoal. Somehow my curls are in tact still; I haven't washed or dressed since the Day of Announcement...three days before? Four? Maybe only two...An attempt to hold my chin up, isn't that what one is supposed to do, particularly in the tough times? To no avail. Return to vacant.

"HOW CAN YOU LEAD A PEOPLE YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT?!" ripped from my throat as my hands gripped my chest, the violence of my emotion, my conviction, my wheeling mind, pulled me down to my knees as if I were being dragged away by a chain around my waist. His stony face, motionless. His living eyes, darkening. His arm slowly raising, the axe in his hand. The infinite moment as it hovered; the indescribable horror as it dropped. The

axe dropped is a dreaded saying for a reason; my fate had been irrevocably sealed. I was cut off.

Over and over the scene rewinds and replays. The mind is cruel in this regard. Nothing can be changed. No detail altered however minutely we go back and analyze it. Perhaps the Others do not suffer from this habit. Soon enough I will know. With this return from vacant staring/reminiscing, I let my eyes circle my room for what I only at this moment realize is the final time. My wardrobes are empty, my perfumes and trinkets gone, my very bed sheets have been stripped away. The servants have always been thorough at the palace.

"And you shall leave this place with no more than which you entered it," was spoken as the knights eagerly rent my dress and jewels off my body in the throne room that day. My mother, a creature I was learning to understand afresh, had the pity or, more likely, the sense of protectiveness to stop them before they removed my underclothing. Amazingly, and irritatingly, I was thankful for my father's newly revealed cowardice, although it was the source of this trouble. He left the room before The Announcement; he left before seeing what he knew his men would do to his daughter.

I hate myself for the generosity I offer my despicable parents by being grateful for the traits that kept me from complete ravishment. I hate the selfishness that it implies.

Time for action. Time to stand. I am allowed to stay in the palace as long as I want, provided I take no food, no water, no items of any sort. I am even allowed to remain in my room, though this is no courtesy, no cowardly kindness. This is the law, as much of The Announcement as the horrible parts. I have had no desire for food or clothing, but the time has come to embrace the path I have nobly chosen. The time has come to follow through on my intentions. I stand, I sigh, I walk to the window. It's November now, it is cold and cloudy. I shiver. My stomach is beyond growling, but my head is spinning slightly. The mountainous horizon, the rocky valley path, the fact that no town is in sight has never looked like this before - impossible. It simply looks impossible. Impossible that growing up it

was as much a comfort to me as my mother's arms around me. Impossible that I have never seen them up close nor have I seen what lays beyond save for picture books that may truly not be real. Impossible that my legs which have only seen exercise in the gymnasium must now become one with this impossible landscape.

Turning away, I walk towards the door. Impossible is my only option. Something stops me as my hand hovers near the large iron handle. A distant flash from a favorite story; a little girl leaving home brings a cloak and a basket of food for her journey. Another story - a family travels great distances in a covered wagon - shelter and food once again. I may not have food, but I do have shelter. Means for it. The velvet.

Night is falling now - good. Coverage. No curious eyes to spot the dingy red velvet clad princess as she travels away from the castle. I leave my room, a drape gathered about me as a long hooded cape. The other drape I've bunched up and carry, clinging it ever closer by degrees as I walk through the castle halls. There's no one about, unsurprisingly. I'd expected a guard to be near my door, but what would the point in that be? I was supposed to be starving to death, I suppose. Languishing away. (I didn't understand destiny at this point.) Holding my chin up is easy now, although the feelings behind it are more false bravado than true purpose. My shoeless feet make hardly a sound, my heart is too tired to pound. What's that? I hear something and dart into recess in the wall. Closely protected, a candle that's never lit my only companion, I listen desperately. "She'll be fine. She won't leave. The queen's young enough yet to produce another heir, a real one this time." "If not, there are always the cousins!" Laughter. Two guards. Apparently I was being watched - but my keepers were slovenly. They pass, chewing loudly, and my starved senses pick up the faint, fresh odor of apples. I wait overly long before leaving my hiding place. Creep out into the nearly dark hall, and sticking as closely to the wall as I can, flutter down the corridor and around the corner to the nearest staircase.

No fear of discovery remains; our castle has long been underpopulated, understaffed, and as it is the only world I've known,

I know it well. Most halls spend most of their time completely unlit, but my fingers could replicate every cracked brick. Now my hand traces the wall, down the spiraling staircase of the southwestern turret, down to the ground floor, stopping at the boarded up window. I can now firmly advise every child to find such a window in their castle and loosen the board so that by appearances it is solidly nailed shut, but in reality it is easily dismantled. For this is how I left my home for sniffs of fresh air as a child, glimpses of starry skies unhindered, pickings of daisies and apples...and this is how I left it now, as a banished princess in the dead of the night.

The stars above. The valley path before me. The orchard behind! A necessary diversion from my journey into the world. I knew the apples would be picked over, but I also knew that the younger trees always held onto their fruit more jealously, and so quickly I dashed to the newer portion of the orchard. Throwing my spare velvet on the ground, I jump and grab at the apples my adjusting eyes can decipher in the night-light. I throw all but one onto the fabric, grab it up around them, and run with wild eyes. I run as if being pursued. I run because I'm afraid. I run because I'm nearly delirious. And suddenly I run because never have I been free to like this before...

My face is cold - exceptionally so, and what's that awful noise? As if I were waking up after a long nights rest I come to my senses and realize that I'm still running - trudging really - somehow. I try to stop, but my legs refuse to listen. My right hand aches; I'm still clutching an uneaten apple. That sound! Stops suddenly as I laugh and realize it was my own weepy wheezing I heard. I slow, I stop, I wipe my frigid face with the back of my sore hand and see that tears are to blame for the coldness. Looking around, I recognize I should be concerned that I blacked out from running, but upon spying a low and level boulder, I stumble over to it and sit. I stumble on feet that I recognize now are burning, aching, and upon looking - bleeding. Too exhausted to panic, I sit cross-legged and stare at my mutilated feet and begin to eat my apple. I eat the core. I eat the seeds. I chew on the stem. By degrees I lay on my side atop of the rock and let sleep overtake me.

