

The Red Horseman

They are fighting again, the two of them.

If I twisted her words a little further, he might bite them open. The words would bleed and I would have my victory.

I met them both a long time ago, before they fell in love, Nell and Parker. They were best friends, not lovers then, and they sparred with the truculence that only two people destined to fall in love could. I had my eye on them from the beginning, a casual observer, two of millions on my list.

I fell a little bit in love with them when they first met. They were exquisite, two souls who trusted each other with their lives but wouldn't say the words. But I don't deal with exquisiteness. She was angry, and her words were full of sarcasm and distance. She built a shell around her heart that only I could see with ease. He loved her aggressive wit, not understanding what it truly hid.

When they were still only friends, he tried to break in to her, and she let him go to those places, the places that frightened her. She trusted him with her life, you see, so she thought she'd be safe.

And then she opened up to him in other ways, physical ways that left her wounded with desire and with real bruises on the inside. The night they first made love, she cried and he didn't understand. I'd seen her being violated as a young woman, but she never told Parker about the ache in her belly, the tyranny of being touched, even by him. She never told him and that was my invitation into both of their lives.

It took time for her; a callous had formed over her heart. It wasn't his fault. He loved her. He loved all the demons he couldn't see, because that's what love does. It makes fools of humans.

So now they're fighting again and I am watching them with glee. It is the same fight they have every week—she keeps her soul defiant and concealed and he tries to open her up with words. I make myself a cup of tea while they trip over accusations and hurt. He'll never hit her, but it doesn't much matter. Human hearts make the best weapons.

Nell is wild. She did something to herself today that Parker doesn't yet know about, she has kept another secret, a secret I have told her not to tell. There is much I don't understand about humans, and this is one of those things. How they can conceal things from the ones they are destined to love. It is my favourite manipulation, and the easiest.

She is racked with a battle inside her head and she is pushing him away. I know what the secret is, I always do, but Parker is shaking his head at her, he is crushing her with words and making her grieve her own trusting heart. Nell doesn't want to hear what he has to say, she wants to crawl into a corner and take her pain with her, but he won't let her. He has always been like this. He is not afraid of confrontation and this is his strength. I am quietly barracking for him in my corner.

Nell is saying,

"I can't breathe around you," when what she means is,

“I can’t breathe without you.”

And Parker aims an arrow at her chest, at that spot to the right of her lungs, the perfect place to take breath away.

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” when he means,

“Why won’t you let me in, Nell?”

It’s unusual for him to veil his real meaning, but he’s starting to fight like her.

And Nell says,

“What? Us?”

And he says,

“Yes, us. Maybe we are a bad idea.”

And she wasn’t expecting him to say it, his words are the sucker punch she feared and invited. He is scared and she is scared and this is my idea of glory, the breaking of two human hearts.

But this is not a game. This is war.

When Nell and Parker get like this, I remember how they used to be, holding each other up in mock combat. The greatest of friends. She hadn’t been scared then; she had rested her head on his shoulder when life got too big for her. They had been beautiful when friendship cradled their souls without expectation.

But intimate love is different for Nell. She is telling him with her silence that she didn’t expect to feel so frightened being with him, about exposing her soul. The wound is getting bigger, a glorious hole that he is trying to fill, but she rips it further apart so he will stop.

I have tried to take down humanity many times before. Spain bowed like a green twig in the caterwaul I spread beneath me in the 1930s. I have ripped blood from bone and made rotting corpses out of the Burmese as they violated their own countrymen and forged misery from their women and children. That conflict has fed me well for over sixty years. But humanity has always found a way to emerge from my considerable victories. States have tribunals and embargoes against me now. But there is no such protection for private love so I have turned to these smaller civil wars. My crimes of humanity are the bloodsheds between lovers, and my victories peel layers from their vulnerable souls.

Parker is leaving the house, mumbling something about getting some space. Nell is doubled over in the foetal position in one corner of the room. She turns to the bottle of whiskey that she keeps underneath the sink, the one Parker doesn’t know about, and she loses herself in it, milking oblivion from her darkness.

I sit across from her cross-legged and I urge her to drink.

Drink up, bitch, I say, and she drinks. She doesn't see me, but she senses me. They always sense me.

When Parker returns home, she is collapsed in the corner. He brushes the hair away from her face, and carries her to their bed, the one he waited ten years to be allowed into. He sits with her while she vomits into a bucket. He cradles her head while spittle rolls down her chin.

"Fuck you", she says to Parker and I rejoice.

It is these little victories I cherish the most, the wrecked intimacies between lovers. I depend on them to tear this earthly world apart.

Her arms are raised to him; she is shoving his hand away from her face, away from his comfort. He says nothing to her, but he fights for his place around her waist anyway. His hands meet at the small of her back, even though she is still raging against him, a drunken rage that has nothing to do with him and everything to do with him.

"Fuck you", she says again, but she is trapped against this man who loves her even though his love is heavy. It is weighing her down and making demons out of the things she knows she needs the most.

There is still that issue of the secret, the one she won't tell him. The one I'm depending on to tear them limb from limb, like bayonets.

I whisper in Nell's ear to hold onto the secret for a little longer, to give the doubt more time to fester in Parker. And I am the voice that forces Parker to strip her apart with his brutal truth, while he breaks inside. It is a vile scene to watch, but it is all a means to an end.

I see the wars inside the human shell and I use them to my best advantage, to bring to bear the end of the world, one lover at a time. I seize the opportunity to open cracks with my bare hands. I live in the bitter breath between people and turn lovers into opponents. It can be difficult to start a war if the bond is strong, the faith, but there are always cracks, always dents in the space between two mouths. There is the fighting, the biting, the enforced silence, and the guns forced into mouths by unwitting accomplices. There are always cracks.

Parker is still holding Nell in the morning and she is hungover and ashamed. He won't let go of her, but he has become distant. This love has tested every part of his patience. He is greedy for her soul and she is feeling smothered.

"Please don't turn away from me, Nell. Don't close yourself off from me." He strokes the hair away from her eyes and kisses her on the forehead, staying away from her mouth. There is a mute reckoning between their mouths, just as I expected. It is my creation.

She releases herself from his hold, wriggles away from him in the bed.

"I can't be with you, Parker. It's too hard. This was a bad idea." And it's breaking her heart to say it, but his love for her is too invasive. She is not ready to be who she thinks he needs her to be.

As she leaves the room, I am triumphant. My sword slides easily through her heart and through his, eight chambers split in half, leaving raw and bleeding wounds on the outside of their bodies. The hearts are still beating, but only just. It is a breathtaking sight, the pulsing of humanity. I swing their hearts like stirrups onto my horse and ride away victorious. It is an arrogance in which I revel.

I have two more hearts for my trophy room, two more notches on the bedpost of the Apocalypse. The other Horsemen will be proud and relieved. My successes make their jobs so much easier in the destruction of mankind.

Then I notice an anomaly on my horse. She is roaring with frustration and hunger, her red pelt growing thicker with the aggressive beating of Nell and Parker's torn hearts. They are smacking and squealing against either side of the horse's smooth rump, not unlike doomed pigs forcibly separated from their young.

They are calling out to each other says Death. I thought you said you crushed them?

There are accusations and recriminations from the other horsemen.

Go back and try harder, they say.

Returning to Nell and Parker is my tribulation, but they're worth the journey. Their love is great, I can see that now, but I know I am greater, more profound. The final collapse of their hearts is close; it is well within my grasp, one more push, one final twist. Parker is sitting cross-legged without the warmth of Nell beside him. He is calling out to her without words. Calling for her to come back. I whisper in his ear,

She is not coming back. She is done with you.

Parker is not listening, so I bury my voice into his brain. I am screaming at him, my lungs paroxysms of rotten air. He is torturing himself with hope and I am unimpressed with this desperate man, because he is not hearing a word I say.

Nell appears at the door. She is crying. She never cries. She is always so damned stoic and combative and I prefer her that way.

Nell sits beside Parker on their bed but she doesn't touch him. I can hear her heart still beating on my horse, the rhythm of alternating tribal drums. Nell wants to reach out and touch the heartbeats, I can see that, but something holds her back.

"I'm frightened," she says to Parker and it has taken all her energy to say this. My voice is still hoarse, so I breathe into her brain,

Don't tell him. Not yet.

"I made myself miscarry your baby yesterday," she says. "I'm so sorry, Parker." She says his name and there is a release in her.

The gates are unlocked, those infernal gates of revelation. Nell opens up to Parker about the first rape forced upon her when she was a young teen, and the ones that came after. She confesses that the same person inflicted the atrocities that brutalised her armour, someone she trusted, and someone she thought she loved. Nell is letting the words flow freely now, revealing that having a baby grow inside her, the one Parker put there, felt like old wounds opening up her belly and groin. But she is also saying that the blood of her ruined baby was far worse, the blood that is falling from her body as displaced angels, even now. It was the self-immolation that damaged her the most, she says, and the betrayal of her best friend. The storytelling is crucifying her, but it cleanses her also. These humans confound me. Even with Nell's treachery, Parker's heart is calling out for her still.

Parker crumbles against her shell, their tears are audible even though there is no sound and I smell his salt in her hair. I smell it like rain falling all over them. He kisses her tears away as it is all he can think of to do. I am in their heads and I don't like what I'm seeing.

"Don't shut me out, Nell. I am your home. I have always been your home and you have always been mine," says Parker.

And he takes her mouth in his mouth and she is no longer afraid.

I am not used to losing and am confounded by my defeat. Nell is still bleeding from the wounds she made in herself, but her heart is healing, it is beating and it is strong. And Parker is holding her up because she is in pain. With every kiss, they are closing the dents I have made between their mouths. They will be at peace, at least for today.

My horse is displeased. She makes a meal out of these depleted hearts, you see, the ones I steal in the name of civil war. They are gone from her rump now and she is starving.

The other horsemen are furious. I have made their roles that bit harder. I had told them it would be an easy victory, these two lovers with their fragile hearts and argumentative souls. I seduced them into thinking that my plan would work, that the end of humanity would be the sum of parts crumbling, but I have lost Nell and Parker.

My colleagues do not react well to loss.

Their vengeance is a terrifying discord of demons made acid. I have not seen my colleagues this enraged before, and I have been privy to their historical body of work. They open their mouths, ejaculating their wrath into the space between my lips, forcing me to swallow their hostility, their rage. I have inflicted atrocities on humankind for thousands of years, but the loss of one intimate war is my subjugation. It peels layers off my immortal soul.

There are always dents in the spaces between mouths.

This is my creation.