

Revenge - The Girl in the Chair

By: Danika R.

Prologue - Eight Years Ago

The street was full of caverns, its concrete runnels cracked and tilted at oblique angles. The streetlamps in this part of the City were broken, allowing the blue night to swoop down on frigid wings.

Her steps were too loud. Her legs begged to run. But somehow, a faint tugging in Cassandra's stomach kept her placing one foot in front of the other.

One in front of the other.

Her eyes roved from side to side, taking in each cold, smog-blurred detail. None of the windows around her shone with an interior light. She could hear distant scurrying, a hacking cough from one street over. This place, with its too-tall buildings and smoggy air, was where she was supposed to live. Why? Who would want to walk past facades with so much black glass they looked like rotting maws? And, no less, on a road devoid of greenery?

Cassandra pulled her cape around her and stopped moving. Go back. There's nothing to see here.

But there was something to see here. There was a whole world, with people like her.

They're not like me.

She kept moving.

A faint hee-hee-hee sound came from somewhere distant, unlike anything she'd heard on the Eastern Edge. It pricked her every nerve with icy tendrils, causing her to shudder. The only animals she ever saw in the City were people like her, plus the occasional mask-faced racoon or hungry stray. Run, her conscience told her. Go home.

The tugging in her gut intensified, promising her answers, excitement. With barely a sound, her feet kept moving, one in front of the other. She could feel herself getting closer now, the spectral hee-hee-hee whirling through the thick fog. A few paces farther, and something tinkled under her dark boot soles.

As Cassandra studied it, a word popped into her mind: glass.

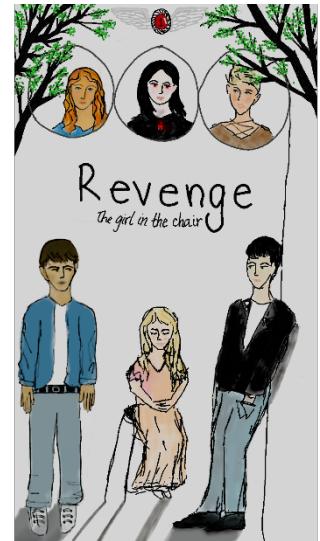
A trail of it led around the corner of the next building. It glowed like crystal in the snippets of moonlight.

A child's whisper sounded in her ear: "Run."

Cassandra blinked, then shook her head. She had spoken to herself. Her blood rushed to her face, though there was no one to witness her mistake. There was nothing, nothing... .

Around the corner, a scraggly, stick-thin shape slumped against the side of the building. Breathless laughter puffed from his purple lips. The scrabbling was louder now, tiny claws on stone magnified by several bodies.

The fog cleared. Cassandra now stared down at a man dressed in brown rags. His face was drained of its color, yet still darker than hers, his eyes nothing but sunken blue pinpricks. Around him scurried bizarre creatures – furry and filthy, about the size of bear skulls. They circled the man as if waiting for something. Long, naked tails slithered behind



them as they moved. Round, bulging black eyes and wide, pink snouts glistened.

Slowly, the creatures detected Cassandra's presence. They stopped individually: one, two, three, four, five sets of beady black eyes, watching and waiting.

Cassandra let out a low growl; it was a failsafe defense in the Forest, but for some reason these creatures did not heed her warning. In fact, they advanced, their breaths coming in rough, bloodthirsty bursts.

She whipped her gaze back to the man on the ground, doubting he could help her. He met her eyes, and immediately, his hee-hee-hees halted. He studied her for a moment, tears forming and falling. Then, he started screaming.

His throat was already ragged, so each cry came out hoarse and quiet, but it was enough to bring the world down on her. Why did it take her face to stop the man from laughing when moments before, the bloodthirsty creatures encircled him? A low gurgling sounded from one of the rodents' throats. Slowly, the others followed suit.

The raw stench of sewage wafted over, unstirred by the cold breeze.

Cassandra stepped back.

Something clacked against her boot heel. A quick glance told her it was a plastic tube, printed with vibrant colors and a logo that said, Jestanjer's Last Laugh.

The noise was all it took for the creatures to attack.

Tell a Little Tale

By Arielle R.

Prologue

Neverland was a nightmare. Even if you forgot the pirates, crocodiles, fairies, mermaids, and lost boys, it was still a miserable place to be. Quagmires of ooze hid beneath the unassuming undergrowth and wild beasts roamed the woods at night. The perpetual summer season meant hot, sticky weather in the mornings and afternoons, and mugginess and swarms of poisonous insects in the evenings. Everything was unfamiliar, so it was all Magnus could do to keep the team fed with mysterious berries and roots he tested himself.

It was a jungle.

A deep *boom* rumbled off in the distance, shaking the ground. Magnus sprinted through the trees, vines and big, wet leaves slapping into his skin. He whipped about, scanning the jungle around him to make sure his teammates were still there. Daniel, his second, grinned back at him on his right, while Daphne and Phoenix stopped at a split in the path a few meters in front of him.

A splash sounded in the lagoon off to their left. The water sparkled a clear blue, while distant splashes and faint singing sounded from further in. It was shaded by a woven canopy of leaves and green vines, but sunlight still made it through holes in the greenery, bathing pockets of the lagoon in a soft, bright glow. To the right was a bog with rotting, greyish trees jutting out of the swampy land, the waters placid and dead-looking. Deep from within, Magnus saw tiny lights of every color of the rainbow, flitting in and out of the trees. Fairy lights. And two glowing golden orbs nestled in the muddy pools in the middle of the bog, where the water was deepest. Crocodile eyes.

Magnus slowed to a stop, unease creeping over his skin in a clammy mask. He saw his teammates looking left and right, then back again, then up to him. He could feel their relief, and he knew what they were thinking, in their unwavering loyalty. Their faith in his leadership, and their conviction that he was going to get them out of here alive. He ran a hand through his thick brown hair, sending it sticking up in every direction and then some, and turned to the rest of the group. His heart was pounding, blood rushing through his head, and he tried to imagine each individual blood cell. Breathe in, breathe out. Searching for the right path.

He couldn't find it.

Magnus shook his head. "We have to go back."

Daphne lowered her spear a bit and looked back at him. She had been scanning the jungle behind the group for threats. "Are you crazy?" The other team members had stopped too, except for Daniel, vigilant as always. Magnus felt a rush of pride for his best friend. He turned his gaze back to Daphne.

"It's not worth taking a risk. I don't like the chances, and I don't feel like it's the right way to go."

"Does going *back* feel like the right way to go? Because that actually seems like the worst option to me."

"Hey, guys, settle down," Daniel said. "But seriously, Daphne, would you rather go through the swamp with the deadly crocodiles *and* fairies, or the pretty sparkling lagoon with mermaids who will kill you at first glance and keep Magnus and me for Peter?"

"I'll tell you where I'd rather *not* go," Daphne countered. "And that's *back*, to freaking Peter Pan, who would kill *all* of us at first glance!"

Magnus pressed his hands to the sides of his face. "Okay! Okay. I'm searching for another route." He took a deep breath and released it. There was a collective gasp from around him, and he opened his eyes. Both of the paths were gone, replaced with dark caves. In front of him was a rock wall.

"Aaand, it's morphing."

Magnus tried to reign in his frustration and keep as much sting out of his tone when he replied, "No kidding, Daniel, it's morphing. *Again*. Sooner or later, we'll have to--"

A quiet, echoing laugh in the dark. A flash of green eyes. A blood red feather.

Magnus's eyes snapped open. He was completely alone.

Then he heard the screams from the caves.