



PORTAL

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATARINA DULUDE

FICTION

All Wizardry Left Her Since the Day of Her Wedding

By Katarina Dulude

Fantasy - Modern Fairytale - Feminist

The Queen gazed out her tower gloomily. Her golden husband was gone for a fortnight—some battle to attend to. He was constantly waging war, there was always some battle to attend to. The children were with the nursemaid. It was a Stark-wall custom, after all. And so, the Queen found herself with little to do but sit on her velvet cushioned chaise lounge and let the time go past her. It was not appropriate for her to go out of the castle on her own. She was queen, after all. Nor did she have many bosom companions; though the people of Stark-wall had welcomed their new king with open arms, they were skeptical of her and the rumors of her sorcery.

Indeed, there was little to do, and somehow that exhausted the Queen more than when she'd been fighting for her freedom years ago. Then, there had been something to energize her, to motivate her. The magic within her kept her strong. And though the Lady had been cruel, they had been tied together in a way. The Queen, then the Lady's thrall, had detested her fiercely. Yet, she could not deny that it had given her a thrill every time they thwarted one another. The Lady's sorcery against her own, the Queen had felt she was something to be reckoned with then.

When he arrived, he brought with him a shift in the balance, though the Queen did not realize it at first. He was far from the first man lost and wandering idly through the Wood; the Lady collected men like playthings until she invariably tired of them. When the Queen met him in the forest, he had been ignorant of where he was and the situation he found himself in. Gawping, but terribly handsome, there had been little reason for the Queen to believe he would be any different. He wasn't bright, even then, the Queen knew, but he was earnest in a way that endeared him to her.

He was the one. With his help, she had thwarted the Lady and won freedom for them both. With all that happened, she couldn't help but love him, need him, adore him after that. She would have followed him anywhere.

That was long ago. How different he was now from the wide-eyed, clueless man she'd met in the Wood. And yet, he hadn't gained any wisdom for all that.

The Queen held power for a moment. For a fleeting, ephemeral glimpse of a moment she was a goddess. Her servitude over, her enemy defeated, she seized the Lady's place. For one moment, she had everything she wished for. Freedom, control, love. All of it had been hers.

It was hardly any time at all, however, before he began to doubt her. She had been nothing but true and just and still he doubted. She was young, then, and her fear of losing him was stronger than her grip on all that she had worked for. And so she went with him and let it all slip from her fingers. And for what—love?

Once, she worked in every way she could to break free from her cage. In some ways, it had been an attractive cage—the Lady could be as kind as she was cruel. Indeed, though the Queen had loathed her so, there were the times they passed together, heavy breaths under silk sheets, where the Queen could admit only to herself that perhaps as much as she had wished to break free then, there was a reason, a detestable tie, hatred and yearning tangled in one, that had kept her there. Would she have broken free at all without her husband's influence? Would she have truly wanted to?

This, too, was a cage. Equally gilded and splendid, but a cage all the same. She lived each day corseted and cosseted, yet no magic kept her ensnared, save that of men and the rules they invent. She could not simply walk away, could she? Without her gift, she would need to rely solely on her mind.

The hardest part was simply acquiring the garments. Everything she owned was ostentatious, garishly brocaded and fine as the stuff of fairy stories. And yet, the clothes and all the other fine things that made up her enclosure were not without their uses. When a maid entered to draw her

bath, she made a simple offer. If the maid would exchange her spare dress, she would be entitled to three strands of pearls and an emerald ring from the Queen, with the promise of the maid's silence. The maid nodded eagerly.

And so, in a brown dress of homespun, the Queen became the Maid once more. In the night, she walked out of the castle through the servants' exit. She walked calmly, with purpose.

The Wood was much changed. Her husband's war with the Bears had decimated their population considerably. If there was ever a time that they required a bit of faith, it was now.

The Maid was older now, and for a moment, she doubted herself. Much time had passed. Would they recognize her or was that role relegated to only that brief moment of triumph? What's more, would the magic return? Was she a fool to hope it might?

All wizardry left her since the day of her wedding.



About Katarina Dulude

Katarina Dulude (she/they) is an American writer and photographer based in Glasgow. They graduated with an MLitt in Fantasy Literature from the University of Glasgow in 2023. She has three academic publications and her play, "The Wolf Sickness," was recently workshopped by Tired Horses Theatre. Her research interests include neo-Victorian fantasy, the Gothic, queer and feminist studies, and children's literature.