

## Simplicity's Nocturne

By: Riley Clawson

The creek was placid at this bend, and seeing its gentle curve again tugged at some lost corner of Clepsa's mind. She stood once more at the entrance to her sanctuary, crushed vines and briars winding about her heels. How many ages had she been deprived of this place? She smiled in spite of her current troubles. The sanctuary was left untouched. It was her best kept secret; her haven. She gave up the fruitless attempts to separate the amber pitch from her like-colored fur as she passed under the archway. This was the place she had dreamt of since her move across the country fifteen years before, and now that she had arrived, she wanted the problems of the world to be left outside, just like in the days of her virgin youth and innocence.

Clepsa walked lightly on the front pads of her feet, not wishing to disturb even a blade of grass. Little moonlight slipped to the ground between the tree-limbs, and though it was cold, she was already encompassed within a warm blanket of memories. A luminous, foreign moss clung to most of the trees in the area. It emanated a soft cyan, which rippled in the surface of the empty waters. They were black and opaque, not as Clepsa had remembered them. Then again, being nocturnal, she only visited this secret spot under light of the sun, when her family was asleep in the house.

The atmosphere was undoubtedly different, and she knew it wouldn't be the same even in the light. The colors were gone, or at the very least, drab and gray. She could feel that the trees recognized her. They were still kind to her, wearing weary smiles and an expression that seemed to be apologetic for disappointing her. They were old, after all, even when she first visited. Now, their branches were knotted and crooked, balding of their needles. The boughs sagged even deeper over the water, lowering the curtains of entrance that were once so high and inviting like the halls of a palace.

The haven, at its prime, *was* a palace. Clepsa was a special guest, the only one invited from outside. In the fall, the halls were lined with gold and crimson tapestries of leaves. The floors were polished granite, covered with a decadent carpet of fallen needles. But beautiful and majestic as it was in this season, its court was absent until the spring. That was when the monarchs reigned over their palace, eclipsing the light from the forest canopy above, coruscating with a penumbral light upon their wings as they shifted before the sun. Clepsa smiled to think back upon it. The memories came to her piece by piece; twigs of visions that her mind wove back into reality.

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Under the new sun of spring, Clepsa slipped through the wheat fields to the bordering forest. She stayed low, even though she knew that everyone in town would be asleep in their stale, humid dens. The forest was dotted neon green where the sunlight peeked through to the ferns. It was cool in the tree-shade, almost cold compared to the direct sunlight.

The path to the entrance was worn and almost bare. Clepsa had been having an unusually bad day, but as soon as she passed under the archway of needles, her troubles washed away and she was free to follow her whims. Planting her feet near the stream, she knelt, testing the steadfastness of the ground that it might not crumble beneath her. It was only after she had assured herself that the ground was safe that she leaned over the sunny waters to glimpse her reflection.

A pinecone dropped from heaven above and shattered the glass surface. Water sparks, burning with the sunlight, careened past Clepsa as she winced. She kept her face contorted in a flinch, even as she opened her eyes and looked into her reflection. The visage of a young kit stared at her from the water, vulpine ears drawn back and small teeth bared in instinctual surprise. The expression melted into a smile, and she cocked her head slightly, getting a better view of the flank of her muzzle.

Wetting the pad of her hand, Clepsa smoothed over a few patches of fur that stuck out against the flow. She dipped a sharp claw in the water and drew it out quickly. The stream winked at her and rippled. She blushed, pulling back in mock embarrassment; the way she had seen adults do. She winked back slyly.

Clepsa continued to groom herself until a flutter of foreign color passed over the mirror of water. She looked up in time to see a monarch perch on a low hanging branch, just above the stream's surface. Slowly, it folded its wings. Slowly again, they separated. Clepsa knew it was waving to her lethargically, beckoning her onward, but the far bank was many long feet away.

Without the slightest disturbance of the branch, the butterfly lifted itself into the air and disappeared into the forest beyond the stream. With rational thought cast aside, Clepsa stood and backed away from the stream. She judged the distance. She judged the power she would need. She judged it all, and in spite of the results, she decided that she could fly. Her sprint broke into lofty flight as her right foot punched the ground. Seconds later, the enveloping, wet cold took the last of her in. She emerged and coughed as she took the exposed roots of the opposite bank in hand. The water behind her waved violently in anger. Clepsa shook off all of the moisture she could, but her fur still hung in shining, wet plates that shifted over each other as she walked. Everything was matted and cold. The butterfly was gone, but there was the promise of sunlight close ahead in a clearing.

A rotting, moss-covered log lay upon its side near the clearing's center. It was propped up only by its broken stump. All of the trees around were alive and moist. The earth was spongy, verdant and bronze. Clepsa could feel the life in the area. Even in the absence of wind, it appeared that the bark upon the trees shifted. It took a minute for her to realize that it *was* shifting, and was not bark at all. This was the throne room of the palace. The home of the monarchs.

Clepsa stepped forward cautiously, aware now that she was in the presence of some higher power. With the utmost care and patience, she inched forward and sat down upon the dying log, not wishing to startle the monarchs. The sunlight shone warmly upon her now, and her fur began to dry. A single monarch broke from the group and took to the lofty air. It flew apathetically, never caring quite where it was headed. After a long moment, it decided to perch on the strange new object in the clearing.

Clepsa felt the creature upon her ear, and it took everything within her to restrain the impulse to flick it off. Two more monarchs broke away from their nearby trees and settled upon her arm and shoulder. More and more began to break away to study their new guest, and before long, the clouds were circling her, ducking in and out of the sunlight.

Molten copper and gold flickered everywhere around Clepsa and the beat of wings shuffled her fur. She was within the presence of the court. She was the guest to the palace that everyone adored. They waltzed about her, and then she with them. Unable to

contain her smile now, even if she wanted to, she closed her eyes and danced among them until her feet lost all feeling. She kept her eyes tightly shut and floated with them, high into the forest canopy where the sun smiled down upon her warmly. She was free, and for that immeasurable time, they all lived at the zenith of the world in an unearthly nirvana. With an unhindered spirit, she threw her head back and flung her arms out wide, as if to catch the sky itself, but she could not even capture the moment.

Clepsa opened her aging eyes to find the moon staring back at her. Her arms, spread-eagle, fell back despairingly to her sides. The moonlight fell softly upon her in a small patch of the clearing, the remnants of a decomposing log lay underfoot. A sickly stump jutted up from the ground, wearing a gray that could only imply death. Briars and thorns surrounded the small clearing, blooming with white flowers that were cast blue like steel in the moonlight. Clepsa shivered.

She walked back to the stream, letting her feet crush the briars beneath her. A few thorns drove their way into her heels. She leapt cleanly over the river of ink that the water had become in the night. A branch caught her shoulder in farewell, and she turned around to bid it the same, but she couldn't disguise her pained expression. Tears glossed her eyes, and she couldn't help but feel a little lost. Fifteen years before, she had left her home apprehensively. With it, it would seem, she left a simpler life of bliss in ignorance. She was trying to get home, but home was never a place. Home was a time; a passing age to which she could never return.

With a forced smile, Clepsa waved to the trees. She allowed her tail to droop as she turned her back upon the haven. She slipped through the hanging doorway of needles and thorns, knowing fully well that she might never come back; knowing that in a matter of months alone, the briars could very well close around the area and ingest it whole. But then, perhaps, she would return on some warm spring day and cross the stream, only to watch cloud after cloud of magnificent, fiery orange and black eclipse the sun as the monarchs returned to their palace. She would stand among them, in the womb of wings. Once again, they would dance together. One last time, they would fly.