

Steadfast

“Suddenly, the little boy picked up the soldier and hurled him into the stove,” Melia picked up the soldier figure and flew him across the toy theatre stage as she recited the words of the Andersen tale. “No one knew quite why; maybe the gnome had something to do with it,” she continued.

Melia set the soldier down and reached for the ballerina figure, sailing her across the stage as she had done with the soldier. “The dancer stood before the castle, arms outstretched. And then a puff of wind picked up the dancer, light as a feather, and blew her across the room into the fire.”

“The next morning, when the housemaid cleared out the ashes, she found that the tin soldier had melted down into a tin heart. And of the dancer, nothing was left but her spangle,” Brian finished, quietly.

A silence followed the last words of the story. It was broken only by the sound of the October rainstorm drumming against the windows of Gladstone’s Curios and Antiques, and the classical music playing on the scratchy old radio behind the front desk.

“It’s a really depressing story, when you think about it,” Brian said quietly, cupping his takeout coffee – black with two sugars – in his hands.

“A lot of Andersen’s stories are,” Melia agreed. She took a sip of her own coffee and slowly curled her legs up under herself on the chair.

The toy theatre occupied most of the table next to Brian and Melia’s chairs. With its real velvet curtains, the gold filigree adorning the proscenium, and even a little crystal chandelier hanging over the stage, it was no cheap cardboard affair, but a marvel from another era.

It was this object that had been responsible for Brian Phillips and Melia Stafford meeting.

The theatre had first appeared in the window of the shop a month ago. Melia had seen it on her daily walk to the Walsingham Opera House, and she'd stopped to gaze at the toy theatre in the shop window almost every day.

Eventually, she'd come into the shop to get a closer look: both at the theatre, and at the tired-eyed young man she'd seen behind the front desk doing the accounts.

In another life, Brian would have been bored and restless at a desk job. But when he'd come home from Afghanistan, with wounds both physical and mental, he'd been relieved when Aunt Elaine asked him to come work with her at the shop.

The quiet monotony of accounting helped get his mind off of things he was trying very hard to forget. And the front desk had the advantage of hiding the titanium and plastic prosthesis he was still adjusting to.

"I was starting to wonder when you'd come in," Brian had said, as casually as he could, when Melia first came in. He'd seen her come by the shop every day, like clockwork, and he recognized her as the amazingly athletic lead dancer in a show he'd once seen at the opera house. And that she went to the same physical therapy center that he did.

"Really. Do you keep track of every single bored, disinterested passer-by who walks past?" Melia asked dryly.

Brian had laughed a little bit for the first time in months.

Gradually, they'd begun finding excuses to visit each other, either during quiet moments at Gladstone's or in between rehearsals at the opera house. On this rainy fall day, they'd come back to the shop after going for coffee.

Both Brian and Melia's gazes returned to the theatre.

Melia had asked Brian what he and his aunt knew about it. All they knew, Brian had said, was that it had come to the shop following an estate sale just outside of town, but not even the family selling the theatre knew much about it.

The backdrop – one of several that you could slide in and out of the theatre’s back – showed a child’s playroom, with a cardboard castle and lake, a box of tin soldiers, a jack-in-the-box, and a fire burning ominously in the stove in the background.

The ballerina and the soldier were one of several cardboard figures grouped on the stage. There was also the taunting gnome from the jack-in-the-box, the toll-collecting rat from the sewer, and the giant fish.

The soldier wore a full red-and-blue uniform, and there was a rifle balanced on his shoulder. The ballerina wore a Degas-like tutu, and around her neck was a thin blue sash with a little silver sequin attached to it.

“He thought she had one leg, like he did,” Brian said.

“It makes you wonder what would have happened, if they’d gotten to know each other. If the fairy tale really would have continued,” Melia mused.

Looking at the ballerina, en pointe on one leg, caused Melia to rub at her calf muscles.

“When’s your next appointment with Dr. Jameson?” Brian asked.

“Next week.” Melia said. “Yours?”

“Friday,” Brian said glumly. “What’s he saying for you?”

“He says...” Melia swallowed as she remembered her last visit. “He says that there is a hope. That my condition may be reversible.” She took a deep shuddering breath. “With surgery.”

It had started six months ago with a strange prickling and numbness in her legs, but she'd chalked it up to not warming up properly. It slowly worsened, until the day she collapsed, clutching her legs in agony, during a dress rehearsal.

The opera house staff and performers tried to cheer her up as she went through therapy. "You'd be perfect as an assistant director," one of the trustees had trilled. "You've always been good at managing things, and..."

But she might not dance again, even if she took Jameson's advice and went for the surgery. She'd be stuck with filling out paperwork and writing letters and overseeing finance reports, while the show went on without her.

"Stuck in the castle," Melia said out loud without realizing it.

"You don't want the director job?" Brian asked. It wasn't the first time she'd mentioned it to him.

"It's not that I wouldn't like it," Melia sighed. "It just...it feels too much like a consolation prize. Something to make me feel better about having to give up dancing." She gave the dancer another look. "Sometimes I wonder what she was thinking. Up there in the castle, never able to leave, while the other toys play." Her gaze turned to the soldier. "And for him..."

Brian reached for the soldier figure and picked it up. He slowly turned it over in his hands as they started to shake. "He goes through hell and high water. Literally. Falls out of the window, gets eaten by the fish. Makes it back, only for some kid to toss him into the fire." His hands began shaking more and more. "And do you think the other soldiers saw it..."

"Phillips, watch your back, there's another round coming in...take cover!"

Brian quickly dropped the soldier back on the stage and took several deep breaths, as a score of images – the battlefield scenes and the phantom pains that woke him up in a sweat at three in the morning – flooded his head.

Being presented with the medals while he was still in the hospital – and wanting to fling them across the room.

“Are you all right?” Melia asked.

“I’m all right.” Brian took a long, steadying sip of his coffee. “What was it all for?” he whispered.

“The story, you mean?” Melia asked.

“Everything,” Brian said.

He didn’t have to explain.

So many outside forces, an invisible hand pulling the strings, pushing them about like toys on the playroom table. Deciding whether their stories would have happy endings or sad ones.

The classical station on the radio started playing a new piece: a slow, sad waltz, one of Melia’s favorites.

Brian and Melia looked at each other. Then Melia pushed herself out of her chair, wincing a little bit as her legs twinged and prickled slightly, and offered Brian her hand.

The dancer in the cardboard castle, stretching out her arms to the soldier.

“I’ve got two left feet,” Brian said. “At least I would if I actually had two feet.”

“And I’ve got two legs that aren’t quite working,” Melia said. “So let’s call it even.”

“Fair enough.” Brian reached out his hand to hers.

Melia took Brian’s hands and slowly pulled him up out of the chair, and she steadied him

until he found his balance on his prosthesis. They began to dance, slowly, gingerly, around the shop floor as the music played.

His feet, one flesh and one metal, followed hers through the dance steps.

Melia rested her head on Brian's shoulder, as he pressed his cheek against hers.

The rainstorm continued pounding away outside, but neither of them noticed.

She would dance again. She was sure of it.

And he with her.