

The Girl After Gone Girls

“How can that be...” The rainbow before Hope’s eyes was the greatest she had ever seen. It covered the whole sky towards the West, where the sun was setting. Hope could swear she could see each and every color on it.

She couldn’t recall having seen such colors in the sky. Gold and green and orange and purple on the rainbow were becoming a colorful mist of sparkling dust spreading all over the sky.

The rainbow started getting bigger and bigger. It expanded more and more, second by second, like a balloon inflating. It would cover the entire sky any moment...

- Hey, you!

Hope opened her eyes. Her sister was giving her the eye.

Hope had lately observed that, every time she had to listen to boring, cruel or things she perceived to be silly, her mind was flying away from present time and place. She tried to block the sounds from around entering her ears. She tried to mentally visit the beautiful Great Valley, with her beloved flock giving her peace. But alas; her sister had ruined her journey for good!

- My beloved citizens, do not forget: the Gods are far more insightful and wise than we will ever become. Even we, the members of our Holy Council, all educated and noble men, cannot fully comprehend the wisdom and rationale in the Gods’ acts. Apparently, the choice of these girls is a sign of their pureness and their virtues since only such creatures could have been chosen by the Gods to join them in their glory. You shall not lament their absence, but rejoice their luck!

The Chief of the Holy Council was the one to usually talk on behalf of the whole of all in occasions like this. “Why don’t they just send us a letter home?” It was

the very same words they heard every time. So, did they just send those words on paper, the people would have a choice to read it or not.

It was the disappearance of the eighth girl within one year and only. All of them were young girls from the village.

Nothing like this had happened before; or, at least, Hope couldn't recall anything like this in the past. It was, said the Council, an act of the Gods. It couldn't be but the Gods doing this, according to their words.

So, it was the eighth time the Council had asked them all to gather in the village square and the Chief talked to them, explained them the whole situation.

- I understand it might all seem too frightening and difficult to comprehend in your simple-minded thought. But you needn't worry about anything, my dear co-villagers! We, the members of our Holy Council, are here to do all the thinking, all the hard job and decisions for you. We want to assure you that, do you follow a virtuous way of life, you have nothing to fear. So, we...

- But why did a God appear in a dark shadow? Why didn't he shine bright?

The Chief froze for a moment. And so did the rest of the Council members. You could tell they hadn't seen that coming.

The people all around, the whole village actually that had gathered in the square, burst into whispering and roaming. Something like "blasphemy" echoed from here and there. Finally, the Council members turned to the girl who had spoken loud.

It was Destiny, the sister of the girl who had disappeared the night before. The Chief walked one step forward.

- What do you mean by saying "dark shadow", daughter? Why did you say that?

Destiny walked a few steps forward too. She was shivering a little and her whole face was red.

- I mean, my Lord, that I happened to be waking up that moment when my sister was taken. I saw well a tall dark figure carrying my sister and taking her out of the window. I don't understand why this happened! Why do the Gods do such things, my Lord?

The Chief turned around after one more frozen moment. He was apparently saying something with the rest of the Council. And then he turned to the people again.

- My dear child... Are you certain you saw a dark shadow?

- Yes my Lord!

Hope saw granny Sophia, one of the oldest people in the village, pressing Destiny's hand. But she either didn't realize it or considered it wasn't quite important.

The Chief stroked his well shaved chin.

- In this case, we have a problem... Do you see dark shadows often, girl?

- No, my Lord! Only last night!

- In this case... as long as you perceive divine creatures to be dark shadows... I'm afraid you're occupied by demons, girl!

Something like "wow" made Hope cringe. As Destiny was standing before the crowd, they all pulled two steps back. She seemed like she hadn't really realized what she had heard. The Chief though seemed quite certain about what he was about to say.

- We have no other choice but to organize your purification ritual.

Most of the villagers in the crowd hailed for the Council's decision. Some of them though cast scared looks at each other; including granny Sophia.

Hope was hearing several voices echoing in her head. She was just thirteen years old and, since it had been a very long time the last purification ritual had been

held, she had never witnessed it. She knew a few things about it though. And it was all scary and painful.

The next thing Hope understood was the crowd's jeering behind Destiny's back, as she was running away from the square, towards the Great Valley...

... "How can she be feeling?" Hope couldn't get the poor girl out of her mind. She knew Destiny for as long as she could remember. And she would swear anytime Destiny was nothing like a witch, demonized person and that sort of things.

Hope was heading towards the square. It was just one day after the previous gathering in the village square and now the villagers were about to meet once again. Destiny hadn't returned to her house or the village after the previous meeting. Everyone was whispering here and there she was hiding to avoid the purification ritual. "She doesn't want to get rid of the demons! That's how serious it is!"

"Bullshit!" Hope couldn't believe her ears. She had once overheard her grandpa talk about the last purification ritual that had taken place in the village. And she had stayed awake for a few nights. Iron rings pressing the head more than a human can handle, wild, almost poisonous herbs excoriating the skin until it altogether becomes a badly bleeding wound and so much more. The purification ritual had been stopped for a couple of years because it had resulted in death a couple of times. How could a human stay to go under this torment?

While Hope was thinking of all these things, she had already reached the square and the huddle had started. This huddle wouldn't be boring for Hope. The life of a person she cared about was at stake. And although she was trying hard to concentrate in what would be discussed in a while, she kept thinking over and over about something vague in her brain.

Somebody was waiving granny Sophia to shush. Hope, very close to her, heard her call the Chief “hypocrite”. “He comes before us like he cares, while he only has money in mind! All this mess is happening and he’s sending his son to the City for business!” The others poked her - a little hard. And she stopped.

The Chief of the Council was once again talking on behalf of the Council and he was once again saying one of the same. Destiny was supposed to be a dangerous person, the good girl turned witch because of the malicious demons. Her parents were standing aside, cut off from the rest of the crowd with their heads down. No one would approach them, although their other daughter was taken by the divine spirits, which was a great honor for their people. “Except...”

- May I ask something, my Lord?

- Yes, child!

The Chief smiled at her like encouraging her to speak, although Hope knew he wasn’t satisfied when interrupted. And the rest of the village took it for quite a rudeness to interrupt the Chief of the Council. No matter, she went on.

- Please allow me to ask you... I mean... I was thinking this whole thing over and over... Destiny has always been a good and pious girl!

- Yes, child! Unluckily, demons usually target the good and pious people!

- But what if we’re getting it all wrong, my Lord? What if Destiny was right? We’ve never had an eye witness all these months these disappearances have been happening! But we do now and Destiny is the only one! What if the disappearances of the girls are not a work of gods, but the work of humans? And that’s the reason Destiny saw a dark shadow, like the shadow of a human would be in the dark?

Not a single person from the crowd said a word. Hope perused them all around. They were staring at the Chief and the rest of the Council, like their reaction

would enlighten them as to what they should feel. They were almost trying to avoid her eyes. Only Destiny's parents cast a glance at her from afar, like they meant to say something and hesitated. And granny Sophia smiled at her, in a rather enigmatic way though.

The Chief had turned around to the rest of the Council. They whispered something and nodded their heads. The Chief turned to Hope and the crowd again. He was smiling now; somehow scornfully however.

- Remind me, girl, what is your occupation? And what is your education level?

- Um... I'm a shepherd, my Lord. I know how to read and write, but nothing more than that.

- Wow, I see... So, this is where you draw the intelligence from to "think"... It makes sense, my dear co-villagers! Her "thought" is worth more than the thought of men studying for years! I'm sure she has found a solution I and the rest of the noble members of our Holy Council couldn't find!

Word after word, more and more people were bursting into a wild, cruel laughter. Hope could clearly see the entire Council mocking her. Her family was giving her the eye in contempt. "Like they would miss the chance!" Only granny Sophia nodded something with her head. "Go away!"

That was what Hope did. She ran as far away as she could with all her might. The crowd was pointing fingers at her, laughing louder and louder; more and more cruelly.

Hope didn't look back. She only ran until she could hear or see nothing of it. She wanted to cry in sobs but she would never surrender in her tears before these carnivores.

She reached the Great Valley, not far away from the village. She ran until the bushes by the big old oak tree, where her sheep were settled; or actually her family's sheep. And there she fell down and burst into crying.

It was moments like this she was feeling all alone, with only her sheep caring for her. It was nothing but an unappreciated worker her family made her feel, ever since she could remember. She was the good and hard-working girl for the village, although very few people actually paid attention to her. But she would be their clown from now on. So, it was only her sheep Hope wished to stay among.

- Hope...

She raised her head abruptly, given a scare for a while. And she saw before her eyes... "Destiny"!

- Hope, are you ok? Please... don't scream!

- No... I won't! I'll be fine... How are you? Where did you sleep last night?

- Well... right here! You found my refuge! I slept among your sheep, under the tree last night. They are so lovely creatures! They kept me warm for the night!

- Yes, they are...

- I'm not a witch, Hope! I need you to believe me! I just saw what I saw!

- Well... I do believe you! I think what you said makes sense. I tried to convince the others, but...

Hope told Destiny all what had happened a while ago; what made her run to the Great Valley in sobs.

Destiny's eyes were soon filled with tears. And she kept Hope in her arms as she was bursting in tears again. The two of them cried together for a while, for both their miseries. And after they calmed down, Destiny looked deep into Hope's eyes.

- What am I to do? Do I show up in the village, does anyone see me, I'm lost!

I won't escape the purification ritual!

- There's only one way to escape it, Destiny!

- And what is it?

- Figure this whole thing out! You say you saw a dark shadow that night. I say it can't be but a human behind this and you're the only eye witness. So, we've got to understand what is going on!

- But... how? We're only shepherd girls, Hope!

Hope twitched upon hearing that. This phrase had started this entire thing that had cracked her a while ago. But it now made her blood circulate faster, more rapidly in her veins.

- Then we know of toughening up and wild beasts! You must stay hidden. No one from the village approaches this place. You'll be safe here and I'll be bringing you food and fresh water.

- But how will I help then? If I stay...

- I'll take care of the rest. You just stay safe!

And so they did. Destiny stayed hidden in Hope's shelter and Hope hesitatingly took the way home before dusk.

She knew what she was about to hear in there. But it was the first time she didn't care. She kept her head bowed until she went to bed. And that was when she managed to find the peace she needed.

Destiny couldn't provide any more clues, no matter how badly she wanted to. Was there anyone in the village, who could possibly know something, he definitely was in the Council. They were the head of the village, so... And maybe it was just her,

but the eyes of granny Sophia were stuck in her mind. Was there anyone who could help and wanted to, it was her!

Hope started her day like any other day in the following morning. She tried to look as normal as possible. She went to her flock. She relieved Destiny off her distress, as she practically was a fugitive. But she returned to the village before noon.

She was probably the last person the janitor of the Council Hall expected to see at the door. But Hope had prepared for this moment. She had carefully chosen what to say. And so she was accepted by the Secretary of the Council.

It finally went more than well. Hope's plan was developing just fine. The Secretary approved of the poor simple-minded girl's will to humbly ask the nobility for enlightenment. He promised her the Council would accept to explain a few things to her about the divine acts of the latest time and generally.

After that, Hope visited granny Sophia. She was a very old woman, so Hope asked her whether she needed help with anything. They were not alone. The neighbors were around too. But just very few glances between them were enough to verify they were understood: they were in tune. Hope would be back soon enough.

A couple more days passed like this. Hope was the nice and simple-hearted girl who was trying to make things up to her co-villagers in their eyes; and in the eyes of the Council as well. Although the higher-rank members and the Chief were just saluting her and praising her for her efforts to broaden her mind, the lower-rank ones were accepting her every day. They were talking to her about the nature of the miracles taking place in the village with the girls' disappearances. And during these long hours Hope was feeling so bored but was concealing it carefully, she managed to prize some evidence out of them.

After thirty days exactly of meetings with the Council members, which Hope was taking careful account of, she had come to some conclusions: the Council members she was talking with, which were the lower-rank members, truly believed what they were telling her. But as Hope was listening to them, day after day, she was realizing that sometimes... The Council members were using the exact same words to describe specific parts of the disappearances. And they usually were about the description of the creatures that were taking the girls. Hope preferred not to comment anything on it. But it felt like...

“Someone has told them these exact words. And they keep repeating them the way they were taught to.” Granny Sophia agreed with her. They had spoken a few times alone and she was the only one who knew about the whereabouts of Destiny.

- Who could it be though? I’m trying to pretend I don’t notice, sometimes I think that it’s just a stupid idea of mine, but... They speak like schoolchildren who repeat their teacher’s words. Is it true? I’m an almost illiterate girl, so maybe I just don’t understand!

Granny Sophia sighed.

- Tell me something, Hope... Do you remember the day they called Destiny a witch?

- How could I forget?

- Good... Like you said the day after that, Destiny was the first person in the village to ever see these... creatures taking the girls; one creature actually. No one else has ever seen them. So, why didn’t the Council call her at least for a few words? Is it truly some divine creatures behind this whole thing, why doesn’t the Council, in charge of the worshipping issues, want to learn more about these creatures?

Hope could tell there was something right before her eyes granny Sophia was trying to tell her about.

- What do you mean to say?

- It is very suspicious the Council didn't look deeper into Destiny's experience. As for your understanding contrary to the Council's... You've been fooling them for a month and they still don't realize!

- Well...

"Wow!" It was the first time someone was telling Hope she was smart. Smarter than the smart people actually! "Focus!" She had undertaken an important mission and Destiny was counting on her.

- So, why do the Council members talk like this?

- Hope, child... There is only one man whose words the Council members would accept without any reproach...

- You mean... The Chief? Why would he do that?

- That I don't know. But I know he was the first to speak about the purification ritual about Destiny. He was the first to start mocking you in the square. So he wants the Council and the whole village not to consider your and Destiny's words.

Hope discussed it all with Destiny, who was sleeping in the small cabin the two girls had built together by the bushes during this month. They couldn't understand why the Chief would act like this. But they agreed granny Sophia's words made sense.

A few more days passed like this. Hope changed nothing in her routine and her behavior. She kept some of granny Sophia's words into mind though: "you shouldn't draw any suspicions on you. Remember you're a thirteen-year-old girl; pretty much like the rest of the girls who were taken!"

Hope was certain she had changed nothing in her behavior. However, she started noticing some strange glances of the Chief towards her. And granny Sophia's words were verified when the Chief, out of the blue, yelled at Hope at the entrance of the Council Hall - in front of many people - it was sacrilegious to investigate the matters of divinity. Hope only bowed her head and apologized. It was clear now: she shouldn't openly confront this man.

She couldn't sleep that night. She was tossing and turning in her bed thinking of this day, when she heard a strange creaking coming from the window. "Could it be..." She cast a look around in the room. She was all alone in there, as she wasn't sleeping in the bedroom with her sisters. Her bed was a small couch in the living room.

The next sound assured her the window had just opened. She quietly grabbed the candlestick from the small table next to her. she stood still with her eyes wide open. A tall dark figure, like the one Destiny had described, walked silently into the room. It seemed like a man. And he walked towards her. "Stay calm!"

The man approached her on the couch. He took something off his pocket, but Hope couldn't see clearly in the dark. He held out his hand towards her face, holding this thing.

"Now!"

She raised her hand from under the blanket and hit his forehead with the candlestick. The intruder muffled his groan. He twitched back. That was all Hope needed.

She ran to the door, grabbing her dress on her way. She opened the door and disappeared in the dark.

She kept running in her nightgown. It was late, so no one would see her like this. She ran until the cabin in the Great Valley. The scarce moonlight was enough to her. She would find the way there even if blindfolded.

Her beloved flock approached her somehow agitated, as she had never been there at night.

Hope spent the night in the cabin. And she concluded, along with Destiny, they had both seen the same man.

She decided to act like nothing had happened in the following morning.

She clearly remembered she had hit the intruder in his forehead with the candlestick. So, she had to keep her eyes open for a tall man with a wound or a bruise on his forehead.

She managed to enter the village without being noticed by anyone. Did anyone understand she had slept in the Valley, she could lead the kidnapper there and take him directly to Destiny.

She could tell something had happened. The villagers were talking in quarters here and there. It seemed like there would be a... "huddle". So, another girl was taken!

"What the hell with this man? Is he obsessed or something? He couldn't stand his failure with me?" Hope said that to granny Sophia, who approached her pretending she needed some help in her garden after the huddle. They talked in whispers.

- I don't know. But you need to be careful. With Destiny gone, you're the only girl who has seen this guy! You will be sleeping at my place for some days. You will come at night and leave early in the morning.

As they said, they kept their eyes open for a man with a bruise or wound on his forehead. They didn't see anyone. Except... the Chief's four stewards, whose foreheads stayed hidden under big hats. Hope froze. "Now what?"

The huddle was almost over with no sign of another man with a mark on his forehead. The people were slowly leaving the square when Hope heard someone saying "the Chief's son is going to the City for business". And she remembered granny Sophia saying the same thing in the huddle after Destiny's sister's disappearance.

The four men with the hats were all the Chief's employees; the same man's who had tried to disgrace both her and Destiny for what they had claimed. "What the..."

She told her father she would go to the Valley and she made sure she was heard around. And after she had left the village, she followed the way back from a different path; the one that was taking her to the Chief's house.

She hid in the bushes and waited. It was about noon when she saw the older son leave the house in a carriage, wearing a big hat; like the four stewards. She followed the carriage from afar, running behind the bushes. The carriage reached the street to the City. But after a while, it pulled over. It moved until it couldn't be noticed from the street.

Hope saw the Chief's son leave the carriage. He walked to the forest, among the trees, away from any path. Hope followed from afar. A child of the countryside as she was, she faced no difficulty camouflaging herself.

He reached a wooden house in the forest; a very strange one, apparently abandoned, with shuttered windows. There seemed to be a peasant resting in the yard, but... "No!" The peasant approached the Chief's son and they chatted for a while.

“Garrison!” It was a farmer working for the Chief, who was supposed to be hospitalized in the City for a long time!

The two men walked in the house. And they stayed for quite a long time. Hope stayed hidden during this time.

When they finally opened the door, they both walked to the backyard. “Now’s the moment!” Hope slipped out of her hideaway. She ran to the house. Could there be anyone else she hadn’t seen around? It was too late for that.

She reached one of the windows and looked between the plunks pegged on them. And there was... “Destiny’s sister”! And the other girls “taken by the gods”!

“Garrison might be back!” She cast a look aside. She saw Garrison’s back. “I’ve got to leave before it’s too late!”

They were right on everything, both her and Destiny; all this time! They were right about everything! Her feet took her where she needed to go. She stood at the beginning of the Great Valley and whistled with all her might. It was that peaceful time just after noon, so she knew Destiny would hear her.

Right after that, Hope ran to the village. She knew it was the time the Council was returning to the Council Hall after lunch and until dusk. “What am I to tell them?” Spontaneously as she had done everything so far, she hadn’t thought of what she would tell the Council. “Just do your best!”

They were just entering the Hall; all but the Chief. And Hope could see they raised their eyebrows for seeing her in front of them. She took a breath first.

- My Lords... I need you to follow me!

- Follow you... Why, child?

- I am going to take you to the place where the kidnapped girls are held!

- The... Hope, I thought we had worked this matter out!

One of the Council members tried to take her aside, as if wishing to silence her. He reached her ear and whispered to her. "Why are you horrifying the village like this?" Hope though didn't keep her voice down. The villagers from around were already watching their conversation.

- My Lord, I saw them before my eyes, just a while ago! I saw them all! Someone abducts and keeps girls hostages!

- Shut your...

- Just follow me! Please! That's all I'm asking! If I'm lying or fooling you, I offer to take Destiny's place in the purification ritual!

- Are you...

- If I'm lying, put me in prison! But please, follow me! It will only take a while for a big, nasty conspiracy to come to light!

They didn't expect to hear that. Hope's proposition obviously shook them. So it worked. Surrounded as they were by the villagers and with the Chief absent, the Council members accepted her proposition so she wouldn't make a mess in the village square. The villagers, a herd of curious people murmuring, followed them.

They couldn't understand where Hope was taking them. And they wondered, until they reached the abandoned house.

For some inexplicable reason, the yard was left unwatched. The Chief hadn't shown up so far.

As they all marched to the house, they probably made noise. They saw Garrison burst out of the door, but there was nothing he could anymore. He stepped aside and made way for all the Council and Hope to walk into the house.

The Chief's son was looking at them, all frozen. He had made himself comfortable on an armchair. Nine girls, tied in chains like dogs in a yard, were

serving him. The Council members couldn't help but look now at them, now at Hope and then at each other.

Five days later, the village was a totally different place. You could feel it all around.

The Chief was arrested along with his son as an accomplice to the girls' kidnappings and captivity. The Council unanimously agreed to expel him and held elections for the new Chief. The son never explained why he made this crime.

The captive girls returned to their families; along with Destiny, who no longer needed to hide.

Every time Hope was walking in the street, everyone stood in awe. They all saluted her like she was a noble lady.

The Council suggested that she joined them; either astonished the "little villager" had stupefied them or annoyed this had happened before the entire village. She denied, saying she was "a simple-minded girl"; with no hard feelings. This was all those poor people could do.

Her family was now treating her like a queen. Regardless, Hope preferred Destiny's and granny Sophia's company; and her dear flock's.

This mystery had offered her all she had once wished: people's admiration and respect. But it didn't matter to her now.

They all looked like little humans in her eyes. They had treated like they were better than her. She had proved she was better than them. And that was all that mattered.