

MEGAN O'RUSSELL



SONG OF  
NIGHTTIDE

# Song of Nighttide

Megan O’Russell



The snow settled onto my hands, freezing my fingers even as they still fought to play. I fumbled on the strings of my guitar, but the people passing by didn't seem to care. Hardly any of them gave a sign they'd heard my music at all. Some hustled by my spot on the corner quickly, as though I was no better than a thief or beggar seeking to lighten their purse. Others gave little smiles of encouragement. Them admitting I'm a person, and not a piece of cobblestone, lightened the weight on my shoulders, but did nothing to fill my stomach.

But most folks, they just walked on. Letting the clatter of hooves and wheels on the street drown out the sound of my music before they reached the next corner.

I took a deep breath, letting the cold air fill my lungs and began to sing.

*“In the farthest corners of the darkest black,  
Where no hero reigns,  
And the light won't come back.”*

More people looked my way once I started singing. I turned my lips up in a well-practiced, humble smile, trying not to shrink away from their sideways glances.

*“Never shall the wings fly on the wind,  
No help from above,  
When the good have broken to bend.”*

A woman in a fine green cape with gray fur around the collar dropped a coin into my box.

I gave a nod of thanks but didn't stop my song.

*“For the days when the gone shall return,  
None shall be spared,  
When the black comes back to burn.”*

The bells of the high tower began to peal, bouncing between the stone buildings. I cringed as the sound pounded deep into my ears but kept my fingers moving on the strings. First bells marked half-an-hour until dark. If I moved quickly, I could be back to the safety of home within fifteen minutes. I still had time left to earn another coin or two.

As the tolling of the bells faded away, I began to sing again, the verses punctuated by the slamming of shop windows as all the businesses around me closed for the night. The butcher, cobbler, and cheese seller were unwilling to risk being out of doors in the dark.

A seed of jealousy curdled in my chest at the luxury of those working in the shops. To be able to close their doors, go to their warm beds, and still have enough food to eat.

Plenty of people still moved along the street. Any of them could have a coin to toss my way. The pace of their steps had quickened, but that had no effect on their ability to hear.

I switched to a different song, one that wouldn't seem to beg the coming night to hurry its approach.

*“If there were one joy that I could save,  
I'd keep you by my side,  
Through pain and loss and life, my dear,  
I'd let your love be my guide.*

*I'd wander through the mountains,  
I'd soar across the sea,  
But if you don't want to travel, my dear,*

*Then by your side, at the hearth, I will be.”*

A man in dark coat stopped in front of me, watching my fingers on the strings as I played.

*“Lye, lye di-dye, lye di-dye, dye lye di-dye,  
I’ll lie by your side, my love, till the day that I die.  
Lye, lye di-dye, lye di-dye, dye lye di-dye,  
Through all the things that come, my dear,  
I’m yours till I die.*

*If there were one wish that I could dream,  
I’d wish you a life of ease,  
Of sun, and health, and wealth, my dear,  
To this joy you’d have the keys.”*

The man leaned forward, his fingers grazing the top of my box as the coin he dropped gave a heavy *thud*. He turned away before I could give him a nod of thanks and was around the corner before I finished the verse.

The streets had mostly cleared, leaving only those hurrying home from their work and those sorry fools paid to carry the packages of wealthy shoppers walking the sodden cobblestones.

None of them would have a coin to spare for the girl with the songs. I let the music fade and pulled the blanket out from behind me, where I had been carefully keeping the thick material dry even as I turned into a frozen, wet mess.

I wrapped my guitar in the blanket as carefully as some would a newborn child careful to tuck the edges in and keep the folds tight. Shoving the small box of coins into my pocket, I began the trek home.

The lamppost men had already started their rounds, but my gratitude for the bit of light did nothing to ease the tension in my shoulders as I hurried through the streets to the warehouses on the riverside of the city. I kept my guitar

close to my chest, glancing between the stones of the street and the shadows of the buildings, searching for danger. Ice on the road would send me sprawling out on the ground and risk my instrument being damaged. Things that lurked in the shadows... I didn't let my mind wander down that dark path, not with Nighttide only a few days away.

The scents around me changed as I neared my home. The fragrances of fresh bread and rich women's perfume were replaced by the thick stench of horse stables and fish mongers. I didn't mind the smell. The humbleness of living in the wooden part of town, where everything was coated in chipped paint, seemed like a ward to banish the worst of the darkness.

Sound spilled out of a tavern. The doors and windows were shut tight, but those staying for the night kept their voices cheerful and loud. Laughter pushed against the shadows, seeming to mock the coming dark.

Before the noise of the tavern faded away, the two-story blue warehouse I called home came into view.

The others had pulled the shutters closed. I let my pace quicken as the narrow side door came into view.

*They haven't locked you out. You're not late. They haven't locked you out.*

Despite the reassurances I fed myself, my heart faltered as I reached for the handle. I let out a sigh when the door squeaked open without trouble.

A room of crates greeted me. The few lanterns that had been lit created pillars of darkness and light from the towering wooden stacks.

"Lock the door behind you." Eb pushed away from the wall next to the door. "You're the last one in for the night."

I slid the heavy bar into place, shutting out the city beyond.

Eb scanned me from head to toe, and back up again. "You don't look hurt. You shouldn't have cut it so close."

"Why? You were waiting here to lock the door whether I was inside or not." I leaned against the door, doing my best impersonation of someone who wasn't half-frozen, hungry, and tired enough to sleep until after Nighttide. "I

wasn't cutting it—”

The rest of my words were eaten by the tolling of the second bells.

Eb folded his arms and glowered at me. He didn't speak until the ringing had gone silent.

“Do you think I like standing next to the door, wondering if I'm going to have to lock someone out?” Eb kept his voice low, too soft for the young ones to hear. “What do you think it would do me if I had to shut the door with you on the other side?”

I didn't reply. It wasn't out of defiance, but rather an unwillingness to speak of being out there once the second bells tolled.

“I need you to think, Prace.” Eb took my shoulders. “If not for me, for the others. We can't go through another night of not knowing where one of our own is.”

He didn't let go. He kept holding me there, like a statue that could only be cured of his stone affliction by the sound of my voice.

“I needed to earn more coin,” I said. “People are so busy buying every store clean before Nighttide comes, they can't spare a coin for music. I made it before second bells, and we've money to buy food in the morning, so you should be grateful.”

Eb's face softened. For a moment he looked like the seventeen-year-old he was instead of the raging patriarch the city had forced him to become.

“Just be careful.” He stepped out of the way, bowing me toward the ladder on the far side of the warehouse.

I wound my way through the crates. The faint *thump* and *scrape* of footsteps came from overhead.

“Emmal got a good dinner for us,” Eb said far too loudly to be meant only for my ears. “I should have moved him to food duty months ago. I swear the boy has a talent for ferreting out places that will sell cheap.”

“I don't know what we'd do without the lad.” I raised my voice to match Eb's.

He took my guitar from me as I reached the ladder, letting me climb the rungs before handing the instrument up to me.

Six faces greeted me at the top of the stairs. From Lia—the youngest at only seven—to Kade—at sixteen, only a few months younger than me. At least we thought so. Only Emmal, our newly appointed food forager and cook, knew his birthday for certain.

The rest of us picked a day and an age when we joined the warehouse family, and we all held those dates to be as true as what our parents, gone or dead as they were, would have told us.

“How did it go today?” Kade took my guitar and placed it on a high shelf out of reach of the younger children.

“As well as I could hope for this time of year,” I said. “When’s dinner?”

Emmal took two steps over to the tiny stove in the corner. “Not long now, and there’s plenty to go around.”

“Can Sharp Tooth have some?” Lia asked, looking lovingly at the orange cat sleeping in her lap.

“Sharp Tooth should be finding his dinner down in the warehouse and earning his keep like the rest of us,” Eb said. He made no move to take the cat from Lia as he closed trap door above the ladder and slid the wooden bar into place.

Fate hadn’t gifted our family with an easy life. I never envied Eb’s role as leader, especially not when it came to keeping everyone in line. He’d punish when necessary, force someone out if it came to it. But even the hardest among us wouldn’t have had the heart to take the cat from that child’s lap knowing night had fallen outside our wooden walls.

“Tally up, everyone.” Eb sat at the giant table.

I don’t know where that bit of furniture had come from. Large enough to seat at least a dozen adults with swirls carved along the legs and sides, the table looked like it belonged in the dining room of a wealthy family. None of us even knew how someone had gotten it into the loft.

The table had been here since before Eb had come to live in the warehouse when he was nine, and none of the family who were there then had known how our ornate table had appeared. Like the stove, the chairs, and even my guitar. Things had been passed down from one generation to the next. Children grew up, aged out of life with the warehouse family. New street rats took their place. Life went on.

“People weren’t the nicest today.” Lia raised a fist in the air, not standing or even making a move toward the table.

I took the coins from her hand and sat in the chair to Eb’s right, my given place as the second eldest.

The others placed their coins on the table. A merchant or soldier might have thought our earnings small, but we did as well as a pack of children could. The youngest earned by begging, the older ones by finding work where any sympathetic person might take them. Eb worked in the warehouse below, carrying boxes by day and watching out for thieves at night. I earned by playing on the street. Even with all our coins put together, there was never a promise of enough food for every mouth and fuel to keep the fire in the stove burning from one day to the next.

I placed Lia’s coins on the table, a handful of coppers and one half-silver. Not bad for an older kid, but the little ones usually made the most.

Eb kept his face calm as he gathered the coins, letting neither disappointment nor gratitude show.

I pulled my little coin box from my pocket. The others perked up at the heavy rattling. I never opened the box before I got back to the warehouse. Didn’t like to invite prying eyes to leer at my earnings.

I popped open the lid and carefully dumped the coins onto the table. Fair number of coppers, two full silver. The last coin out gave a heavy *thunk* against the table.

My heart leapt as visions of riches raced through my mind.

But it wasn’t a gold piece, only a hunk of pewter shaped like a coin.

“Well, that’s not a nice trick to play.” Kade crossed his arms.

“Not at all.” I lifted the coin, ready to chuck it across the room if for no other reason than to make the others laugh despite the darkness outside. But the design on the pewter coin stopped my hand.

An intricate spiral wove along the edges, leading to a tiny image of a man at the center. On the back, four columns rose surrounding a raging fire.

“What is it?” Eb asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but I can see if someone will buy it. Maybe there’s a collector or something.”

“Take it to Mercer,” young Jole said, nodding so her curls bounced around her face. “He buys all sorts of things people find.”

“I’ll go in the morning.” I tucked the coin back in my pocket.

I let the others chat as Eb counted the take for the day, their voices louder than they would have been on a normal night. The childhood notion that joy could spook the darkness away still held tight to their little hearts.

Or maybe it wasn’t a childish notion. Maybe it was the only thing any of us in the city could think to do besides hide in our beds and wait for the worst to come.

I listened past the sound of the voices around me to the night beyond. The thud of boots on stone echoed between warehouses as the bravest of the soldiers patrolled the streets.

I flung a prayer up for the protection of the men who dared stay out so near Nighttide. My fingers found the coin in my pocket. The feel of the design under my thumb wrapped my fear of the darkness around my heart so tight even Eb’s smile couldn’t break through.



An eternity dragged past between when I lay down on my pallet and when the sun finally rose. As soon as the first hint of light appeared, I crawled out from under my blanket and pulled on my boots.

Eb stood over the trap door before I had fetched my coat from its place by the stove. I didn't need him to shake his head to know he was to be the first one down the ladder. I didn't really want to go first anyway.

I watched him climb into the warehouse below. He looked around before waving for me to follow. I took my guitar from the shelf and passed it to him, then started down myself.

Even though Eb had told me to come down, my hands still sweat against the rungs of the ladder. I didn't let myself look around until my feet touched the floor. In the dim bits of light peeking through the shutters, nothing looked amiss. All the crates were still lined up and stacked, all the windows were unbroken.

"Another night down." Eb gave a small smile.

I let him take my hand as we walked to the narrow door that led out to the street. He passed me the guitar and lifted the heavy bar with one hand. I'm coward enough I let him step onto the street first.

"Damn."

My eyes found the trail of blood before the curse had fully left Eb's mouth. The smear of deep red reached up and down the street, twisting around corners so neither end was in sight.

"I thought I heard someone scream," Eb said.

"At least it was far enough away the younger ones might not have noticed."

We headed toward the town center, following the fainter end of the blood trail.

*Not one of ours. It's not one of ours.*

I didn't care if the gods themselves thought me selfish. I couldn't have made myself follow the sticky smear if I hadn't known the rest of our family was safe in the warehouse.

We made it three blocks before finding the body.

A man—judging from the bits of coat and size of the boots left behind. The face and body had been so torn up, there was no way to know much besides

someone was dead.

“The watch didn’t find him,” Eb said. “Why do the soldiers dare to stay out at night if people are going to die anyway?”

“Don’t blame the soldiers because someone didn’t make it inside,” I said. “Who knows? Maybe they saved someone else.”

“Maybe they killed one of the demons.”

“Perhaps.”

We both knew it wasn’t true. Even though we’d never seen one of the beasts, we had no false hope that a manmade weapon could kill them.

Teeth as long as my hand, slick skin blacker than the darkest night, claws that could tear a man’s chest clean open. The beasts roamed the frozen streets in the weeks before Nighttide, seeking blood and meat, preying on anyone foolish enough to stray outside.

Sensible folks locked their doors tight and kept lanterns burning to ward off the monsters. Brave men joined the ranks of the soldiers who patrolled, keeping the beasts from being brazen enough to break into our homes. The stupid got too drunk to remember to stay inside and ended up with their guts eaten out and their clothes left behind as a bloody husk for the living to find.

“Have Kade steer the others away from here,” I said.

Eb nodded. “See you before second bells.”

I watched him walk back toward the warehouse before tip-toeing around the gore and heading farther into town to find Mercer.

The scent of blood followed me only for a few moments, but I couldn’t stop the quivering of my hands. I held my guitar tight and kept my chin up, trying to look like I wasn’t terrified of finding another body every time I rounded a corner.

Everyone else seemed to be doing the same thing. Some swaggered so much they might as well have been drunk, other looked so pale I was afraid they’d be sick on my shoes.

But we were alive. We’d made it through the night. Only three more days

until Nighttide, and then the beasts would be banished for another year. And the demons who would return when Nighttide once again crept close, those would be the problem of whoever lived long enough to see the shadows overtake the sky once more.

By the time I reached the long row of stalls where Mercer set up his shop, the sun had risen properly and the streets had filled with people.

The death count had come down from the soldiers. Four gone in the city last night. Not too bad.

An air of relief set people wafting through the market like Nighttide was over and First Dawn had come early. Vendors with tables of flat cakes, sweets, and hot tea all barked to sell their wares. I had the ten coppers of my daily food allowance in my pocket, but I wasn't ready to spend it. Not when those coins would have to get me through until our evening meal after the bells.

I let myself linger in front of the booths selling bright fabrics, baubles, and spices. Music drifted from either end of the street. I swallowed my jealousy of the musicians who had enough coin to pay the soldiers to allow them to play in this most profitable territory.

The weight of the pewter coin hung heavy in my pocket. If I could sell it for enough, I might be able to bribe the soldiers myself. Then I'd be able to make enough coin to keep all of us fed. Maybe even buy Kade a pair of boots that actually fit his growing feet.

Mercer's booth sat between a stand selling winter gourds and a stand selling bottles of wine. His mismatched wares were strewn about in a pattern only the old man himself could make sense of. Silver hair combs sparkled in the sunlight next to a set of six books on home remedies and an empty perfume bottle. A line of belt buckles and shoe buckles took up one edge of the table, with fine lace lying on the other side.

I scanned his stall, looking for something close to the coin. The nearest things to it were foreign silver coins laced onto strings as jewelry.

"What are you looking for today?" Mercer's eyes lit up, the only portion of

his face visible above his bushy gray beard. "I have some lovely coats. Perhaps a comb for your hair?"

"I'm not looking to buy," I said.

The twinkle disappeared from Mercer's eyes.

"Jole said I should come and see you." I reached into my pocket, fishing for the coin.

"That one." Mercer shook his head. "Finds some interesting odds and ends. Never anything worth more than a few coppers. And I'm not sure if *finds* is the right word."

I pulled the coin from my pocket and held it up for him to see. "Someone gave this to me. Looks like something a collector might want."

Mercer squinted at the coin before holding his hand out for it.

I passed him the bit of pewter, feeling lighter for having it away from me.

"Will you buy it?" I asked.

Mercer glared at one side before flipping the coin and glaring some more.

"Not a fool in the city who would buy it." He held the coin up to the sun.

"Why not?" I tightened my grip on my guitar, carefully keeping the anger from my voice. "Someone with skill made that coin. There's got to be some rich person who would want it."

"Nope." Mercer tossed the coin back to me. "That piece isn't to be bought or sold. Coins like that are given as an invitation."

"An invitation?" I rolled the word in my mouth.

"I've only seen a coin like that once in my life," Mercer said. "Whoever gave you that is telling you to go up to the tower and see the Lord Magistrate."

"But I didn't do anything wrong." Sweat beaded on my brow despite the cold. "I was only playing music. And I wasn't in a place I shouldn't be."

"I said *invitation* not conviction," Mercer said. "I'll not buy the coin, nor will anyone else with sense. If you want some good out of it, I would head to the tower and see what you're being summoned for."

"Right." I looked over the stalls and the buildings beyond to the tower

looming over the city.

“If you want to show me what you got in the blanket, maybe we could discuss a different transaction.”

“My guitar isn’t for sale.”

“Suit yourself.” Mercer turned back to his goods, shifting the baubles into a different incomprehensible pattern. “If you change your mind, I’ll give you a good price. Been an age since I set my fingers to some strings.”

I wanted to go back to the warehouse. Ask Eb what he thought. Maybe see if Kade could come with me. But I let my feet carry me toward the tower instead. If I couldn’t sell the coin, I couldn’t ask anyone else to lose time for earning to come with me because I was afraid to face the tower alone.

Truth be told, I had never even entered the tower square. I’d stood at the edge, staring up at the gray stone tower that reached twice as high as every other building in the city, but I’d never wanted to get close to it. Wide enough to squash a whole block of other buildings, it always felt like the tower was someplace meant to swallow the world whole. I’d never thought myself strong enough to swim back out of that monster’s mouth.

I stopped at the last baker on the vendor street, passing over my ten coppers for a roll. If I was going to be eaten by a stone beast, I didn’t want to go into his belly with my own growling.

The warmth of the roll in my hand carried me the rest of the way to the tower square. I ate, staring at the stones, telling myself as soon I had finished I would cross the square and go into the wide double doors. I watched soldiers, rich folk, and commoners alike go in and out of the doors. A man with a bad leg passed by me, limping toward the tower.

If he could brave the stone giant, then I had to try.

I swallowed the rest of my breakfast and followed after him, careful to keep ten steps behind.

The man didn’t stop until he reached the double doors. My stomach clenched as he threw his weight at one of the doors, but it swung open without

trouble. I ducked in behind him.

Soldiers waited just inside, swords glittering at their hips, purple stains of fatigue marking the skin under their eyes.

“What’s your business?” A soldier with long blond hair tied low with a leather cord stepped in front of the rest.

“I’ve come to file a complaint,” the limping man said.

“With whom?” the blond soldier sighed.

“With the Lord Magistrate himself,” the limping man said. “The cold outside has gotten far too biting, and the darkness brings more freezing wind with it every night.”

“Out.” The soldier pointed to the door.

“I have a right to have my complaint heard!” The man stood his ground.

“Of course,” the soldier said, “and when you have a complaint that makes sense, we’ll pass you along to a clerk. In the meantime, you may walk out the door or be thrown out.”

“Corrupt.” The man spat on the stone floor. “The whole lot of you. Demons have crept into your skins. It’s the darkness that rules this city now.”

“Out!” The soldier took a step forward.

The man dove toward the doors and ducked out onto the street.

I fought the urge to run after him.

“What’s your business?” The blond soldier turned his burning gaze toward me.

I opened my mouth but couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t get me booted as the man had been.

*Someone tossed a coin in my box as an invitation to meet with the Lord Magistrate* sounded even worse than blaming the Lord Magistrate for the weather.

I reached into my pocket.

The soldiers’ hands went to their swords.

“I was given a coin,” was all I managed to say. Slowly, I pulled the piece

from my pocket, holding the pewter up to the blond.

His eyes turned from wary disinterest to intrigue in a moment. “And here I thought today might be boring.”

*I should have gone for Kade.*

“Take her through.” The blond soldier stepped aside, and a young soldier, barely older than me, took his place.

“This way, Miss.” The young soldier didn’t wait for me to respond before heading down a curving hallway.

I’d expected everything inside the tower to be made of the same gray stone as the outside of the building. I hadn’t ever really thought through the place needing walls. Though I suppose thinking it would just be a vast place of stone was probably foolish.

The walls inside the hall were painted bright white, and chandeliers hung every few feet, casting their light even to the bottom corners of the corridor.

The doors were made of shining wood with silver handles carved into fancy designs. After a moment, the corridor opened up to a wide staircase made of white stone. A giant crystal chandelier illuminated the hall. Paintings of men in fancy clothes hung all the way up to the very highest part of the walls. Rich folks and soldiers passed, but there wasn’t another common person in sight.

The soldier finally looked back, a hint of humor playing in his eyes as he took in my terrified face.

“The Lord Magistrate isn’t on the ground level.” The soldier started up the stairs.

I followed as close as I dared, keeping my chin tucked against the stares of the people we passed.

I tried not to think of the hole in the toe of my left boot, or of the strings hanging loose around the sleeves of my coat as we climbed two flights of stairs. There were more steps above us, reaching all the way up to the bells themselves.

I didn’t dare ask who worked on the floors above the Lord Magistrate as the soldier led me down another curving hall. The papered walls of this corridor

glinted with bits of gold peeking out of the wide swirls of the design.

We stopped at the first set of doors. The soldier knocked.

I held my breath as a voice called for us to enter.

The soldier opened the door and nodded for me to go in.

Biting my bottom lip almost to bleeding, I stepped into the room beyond.

I had never been so ashamed of my raggedness in all my life. A thick rug of deep blue and maroon lay across the floor. Chairs with high backs were covered in the same colored materials. Bookcases lined the walls, reaching all the way to the high ceiling. A man in a dark jacket sat behind a desk whose wood shined as brightly as sparkling metal. Vines had been carved up the legs in such tiny detail, it looked as though they might sprout flowers at any moment.

*The others will never believe me.*

I almost laughed thinking back to our poor table and how rich we thought it to be. But the man in the dark coat looked up and all funny thoughts snapped away.

“Yes.” The dark-coated man placed his pen onto the shining desk.

“Show him,” the soldier commanded.

I bobbed a curtsy and walked to the desk, holding the coin out. “This was given to me, Lord Magistrate.”

“I’m not the Magistrate, child,” the dark coat said. “I’m his clerk.”

My cheeks flushed hot. “I’m sorry, Lord Clerk.”

The Lord Clerk held his hand out for the coin. He examined the pewter for a long moment before looking back at me. “Where were you given this?”

“On Waldof Street,” I said, adding, “Lord Clerk,” with another curtsy.

“I’m not a lord, just the clerk to one.”

My cheeks scorched that time.

“And why were you given the coin?”

“I don’t know.” I wanted to melt into the fancy rug and disappear forever.

“I was playing and someone put it in my coin box.”

“Playing?” The clerk eyed my blanket-wrapped guitar. “Sit.” He pointed to

one of the high backed chairs. “Don’t touch anything, and don’t make any noise.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He stood and walked through a door cut into his bookshelves.

“He told you to sit,” the young soldier said.

I looked to the chair the clerk had pointed to. A pattern like leaves wove through the deep blue fabric.

“I don’t know if I should.” My voice sounded hoarse to my own ears. “My clothes aren’t clean enough to touch something that nice.”

The soldier tucked his tongue over his teeth, as though trying to keep himself from laughing at me. “The clerk said sit. So do it. You’ll find it best not to question orders around here.”

Knees wobbling, I went to the chair, perching on the edge.

*I should have tossed the devil pewter down the gutter. I could be out on the street earning real coins that can be used. I should never have come here.*

*I should never have come here.*

My fingers itched for the comfort of instrument strings, but I sat, still clutching my guitar to my chest, counting the books on the shelves as I tried not to count the seconds the clerk had been gone. At three-hundred-and-six books, the clerk returned.

He stopped in the doorway and looked at me. “This way.”

My whole body quaked as I stood, but I did as the clerk said and followed him, wondering at the thickness of the wall as we passed under the books above us and into the most beautiful room I had ever seen.

The wood of the floor sparkled more than the clerk’s desk had. Bits of colored crystal dotted the chandelier, mixed in with the clear kind. The colorful bits left sparkles of rainbow light scattered across the floor. A wide stone fireplace took up one side of the room, but the flames inside didn’t smell of normal smoke. The scent was more like spices being baked into something wonderful.

A man in a deep red coat sat behind a desk wide enough to be a bed for two people. The man studied me as the clerk led me to stand in front of the desk. The red coat tipped his head to the side, and his perfectly combed black hair didn't move at all with the slant.

“You're a musician?” he asked.

“Yes”—I glanced to the clerk who gave me a nod of approval—“Lord Magistrate.”

Before my stomach could untangle itself at not having embarrassed myself again, I realized I was standing in front of the Lord Magistrate. Then I wanted to be sick on his shiny floor.

“Play something for me.” The Lord Magistrate leaned back in his seat.

“I...”

The soldier cleared his throat.

“Yes, Lord Magistrate.” I knelt and lay my guitar on the floor, carefully unfolding the blanket that protected my livelihood.

The hairs on my neck prickled as they watched me tune, but I wouldn't let myself blush. My guitar might not be fancy enough for the likes of the tower, but I wouldn't be ashamed of the scratches on the neck, or of the faded gloss along the body. My shoes and coat were things to be embarrassed of, not the instrument that had kept my family from starving.

I looked to the Magistrate. “What would you like me to play, Lord Magistrate?”

The Lord Magistrate rubbed his perfectly shaven chin. “Something soothing. A lullaby.”

“Yes, Lord Magistrate.” My mouth went dry at the words. I didn't know a soothing song fit for a Lord. I didn't even know if I could remember how to sing at all.

My fingers found the first chord before my mind knew I had settled on a song.

*“In the depths of the winter I shall sing to you,  
Songs of lands far beyond our shore,  
Where the darkness shall never come with fear,  
And we’ll find the peace we once knew.*

*While you sleep sound and fast I’ll keep you from  
the cold,  
I’ll protect you from all harm,  
And the promised light shall burn true and strong,  
With the wonder that was foretold.”*

I let the last chord ring around the room before pressing my palm to the strings. I didn’t look up at the Lord Magistrate as silence pounded around me. I kept my gaze on the floor, trying to imagine little Lia sitting in front of me. Her eyes heavy with fatigue as they so often were when I’d sing her to sleep.

“Very well,” the Lord Magistrate said. “Make sure she’s at the temple on Nighttide.”

“Yes, Lord Magistrate.” The clerk bowed and snapped his fingers for me to follow him.

I tossed my blanket over my shoulder and scrambled after the clerk.

“And see that she has proper attire,” the Lord Magistrate said as we reached the door to the clerk’s office. “It is not respectful to have torn shoes in sacred places.”

Shame curled in my stomach, but I kept my chin up as I followed the clerk.

The soldier shut the door behind us.

“You did well.” The clerk returned to his seat behind the desk. “Better than some who have come to sing.”

“Sing for what?” I dared to step in front of his desk. “And why should I go to the temple on Nighttide?”

“You’ll be given instructions at the temple.” The clerk pulled fresh parchment from his drawer. “Be sure to arrive before second bells.”

“I’ll be safe in my home at second bells,” I said.

“You’ll be in the temple,” the clerk said. “They will be expecting you. Now, what is your address? I’ll have proper garments and shoes sent there.”

“I don’t want your clothes or shoes.” The lie stung my tongue. “And I don’t see why I should go to the temple on Nighttide when every sensible person in the city will be locked in their homes.”

The soldier cleared his throat.

I didn’t look away from the clerk.

“You will be at the temple because that is where the Lord Magistrate has told you to be,” the clerk said. “You will wear the clothes you are sent and be on time. You will bring your instrument and do as you are told.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You risk the ire of the Lord Magistrate. And lose the chance of earning fifty gold pieces.”



I spent two days not believing I had ever been to the tower at all. When I got home after seeing the Lord Magistrate, the others wanted to know what had happened with the coin. I told them all of it.

Emmal made me a cup of tea, which bit at my throat, and told me to go to sleep before whatever illness had me imagining such things killed me. Lia made Sharp Tooth lay next to me to keep me safe from more strange dreams. Eb just stared at me staring at the slats of the roof, wondering if I had gone mad, and when my mind might be sound again.

But the day before Nighttide, a sharp banging called us down the ladder right after dawn. A man stood outside with three boxes in his arms labeled with my name and a note from the clerk.

*Remember your instructions, and these are yours to keep.*

That's when it all became real again.

I played on the streets all that day, and climbed in bed as soon as I could that night. Not because I thought I would have any chance of sleep. I didn't want to see the faces of the others as they whispered about me. Me with the boxes of clothes next to my poor pallet on the floor. Me who would be the first of us to see the inside of the temple. Me who would be out of the safety of our home after second bells on Nighttide.

I heard three sets of screams during the night before Nighttide. One so close, all the children woke up at the terrible noise. The sounds of the little ones' stifled crying kept me awake until the first rays of dawn.

Eb tiptoed to my side as I threw back the covers. "Are you going to wear the clothes?"

"I don't think I have a choice." I lifted the lid of the first box. A green dress waited inside. A rich person may not have thought the garment fancy, but it was the nicest thing I'd ever owned. Brand new, with a tiny bit of lace around the neck, and a long line of matching buttons down the front.

"You could *not* go," Eb said.

"And risk the anger of the Lord Magistrate?" I slipped the dress over my head. The fabric smelled of summer flowers.

"So find another place to stay for a little while," Eb said. "After tonight, the streets will be safe again. Lay low, and you'll be fine."

"I'm not leaving the family." I opened the smallest of the three boxes, pulling out a pair of shining black boots. I don't know how the clerk knew my size, but the supple shoes fit perfectly as I pulled them onto my feet.

"You wouldn't be leaving us. You would be taking care of yourself so you can come back to us. Prace"—Eb took my hands—"we need you here, we need you safe, not running around after second bells."

"We need fifty gold pieces." I pressed Eb's knuckles to my cheek. "I'll be fine."

Eb watched me pull the thick gray coat from the last box. "We can't lose

you, Prace.”

“You’re not.” I stood and lifted my guitar from the shelf, letting my brave face collapse for that moment when my back was to Eb. My heart thundered in my chest as though it too were begging me to hide rather than face what lay ahead.

I squared my shoulders and turned back to Eb. “Shoes for everyone. Money saved for a healer next time someone is sick. Coin enough to buy my way into playing somewhere I can make real money. I’m going, Eb.”

He looked at me for a long moment before swinging the trap door open. I watched him climb down the ladder, waiting until he waved for me to follow. I passed the guitar down and climbed after him, willing my legs to stay steady. I couldn’t look afraid, not in front of him.

“I’ll go with you,” Eb said as I lifted the guitar from his hands. “Meet you outside the temple at first bells, and we’ll go in together.”

“You have to stay here.”

“Kade can lock the doors,” Eb said.

“No.”

“They’ll be fine for a night.”

“And if it’s more than a night?” My voice trembled a bit. I shook my head when Eb reached for me. “Either I’ll be fine and I don’t need you to come with me, or I won’t be, in which case we can’t risk you, too. Kade isn’t ready to care for the little ones.”

“Then don’t go,” Eb said.

“How many times have we wished for a way to make our lives better?” I asked. “The gods dropped a pewter coin into our hands, and I’m going to see where it leads. Just take care of the others and keep the door locked tight tonight.”

I went to the door without him, lifting the heavy bar aside and stepping out onto the street. The crisp morning air flowed into my lungs, cracking the thin shred of bravery I had clung to in the warehouse. I didn’t look back to see if Eb

was watching me. I just kept walking, fighting the tears that pooled in my eyes. I hummed as I passed a body, trying not to wonder if that would be all that was left of me when the sun rose tomorrow for First Dawn.

Part of me wished I could be coward enough to run home. Ask Eb to beg my way into a safe place to hide. But it had been decided the moment the clerk mentioned fifty gold pieces. The bastard probably knew it too. Knew someone as poor as me would be willing to face a horrible death for more money than I could hope to scrape together in a few years of honest labor.

I set up on my usual street corner, playing as I always did, letting myself lose time in the music. More people stopped to look at me than usual. Staying to watch for a whole song and leaving a coin in my box when they left. For a while, I wondered if I had somehow been marked as one whose music would be silenced by shadows soon. Then I remembered my new clothes. Easier to stand and watch someone that doesn't cause you to feel the unfortunate emotion of pity.

I played and played. Not stopping even as my fingers grew stiff. But songs can't stop time. Before I was ready, the first bells rang out through the city.

The first peal echoed through my bones, stopping my hand mid-strum. I didn't bother finishing the song before I wrapped my guitar in the blanket. My coin box was heavier than usual as I tucked it in my pocket.

*I should have had Kade meet me. If I don't make it home, how will they get the coins?*

I could try trusting the money to a priest. Maybe they could get the box back to Eb. If someone was good enough to work in a temple, surely they could get some coins to orphans.

Despite the lateness of the hour, I couldn't convince my feet to hurry as I walked into the very heart of the city.

The houses of the rich were shut up tight against the coming night, but I couldn't focus enough on the details of the high balconies and fancy stone work to notice how pretty the buildings were. All I could manage was to keep my feet

moving.

And then the temple came into view.

I'd seen it before. White marble, with a path of black onyx cutting up the stairs and through the pillars into the building proper. I'd thought it beautiful when I'd raced past on my way to some other place. Now, walking toward the dark, shining path, the temple became a place of nightmares.

The city seemed to agree. Lines of soldiers waited out front. Unlike the men I'd seen in the tower, these soldiers were wearing metal armor as though preparing for war. Swords hung at their sides, and black tipped spears were clutched in their hands.

My whole body shook as I walked up to where the cobblestone of the street met the marble and onyx of the temple steps.

The soldiers looked at me, but none made a move to block my path.

I studied the stairs in front of me for a long moment. The onyx path was the only way forward.

*It would be easier to step onto the white.*

"Should..." I didn't look at the soldiers. I couldn't tear my gaze from the black. "Should I just go in?"

"If you've been sent for." I don't know which of the soldiers spoke.

"Thank you," I said. "Good luck out here."

"Good luck to you, too."

"Thanks." I stepped up onto the black.

Seventeen stairs to climb. Then forty steps through the pillars to the high door waiting beyond. Images had been carved into the metal of the door. The one level with my face punched a laugh into my lungs. A tiny man standing at the middle of an intricate spiral.

We would have recognized the picture on the coin if anyone in our family had been brave enough to climb the temple steps.

Fate saved me from having to knock on the carving. As I raised my hand, the door swung open and into the temple.

Torches burned brightly along the white walls. The light of their flames reflected off the stone. The effect on the white marble was dazzling. On the onyx, terrifying. The black flickered, giving movement to the darkness like the shadows themselves had come to destroy the temple.

People waited at the far end of the massive room. None of them looked back to me as I stepped into the temple, so I walked down the black path to join them, grateful as the door shut firmly behind me.

“And in the darkness, we must always remember the light,” a voice echoed around the space. “For it is the hope of the light that carries us forward through the terrible nights. And in the darkness we must always remember the cost of our greed. For it is that price all of us must pay.”

A group of voices joined the first. “We remember price, and we willingly pay.”

“And in the darkness we will be the line that stands between eternal suffering and life,” the first voice continued. “For without our strength, there will be no life when First Dawn comes.”

I stopped ten feet behind the group at the front of the temple. They all stood facing a high stone platform. Flames danced across the surface as though the rock itself had caught fire.

Twenty of the people wore white robes with a strip of black running down the center like the temple floor. On either side of the robed priests stood lines of soldiers, armed like those outside. Behind the soldiers, two people dressed in normal clothes waited. Both of them had an instrument with them. Each of them looked as terrified as I felt. At the center of them all was a man with shining black hair and a deep red jacket.

The Lord Magistrate turned to face me. “She appears.”

“Yes, Lord Magistrate.” I curtsied.

A robed man with white hair turned to face me. “Is she the one?” He furrowed his brow as though whatever the Lord Magistrate had believed me to be, the robed man thought he was certainly mistaken.

“She was found on the street,” the Lord Magistrate said.

One of the other priests turned. “I nominated the child. I heard her playing by the shops on Waldof.”

The white-haired man gave a nod. “The gods may bless the young and old alike.”

All of them turned back toward the flaming platform.

I waited for someone to tell me where I should go, or better, why I had been called to the temple in the first place. But they only looked up at the flames.

I glanced over to the other musicians at the side of the room. I wanted to join them, but I couldn’t convince my feet to move.

Before I could decide if it was better to be a coward standing still and alone, or a coward hiding with others who looked as afraid as me, the second bells rang. The sound echoed off the walls of the temple as though the bells were inside the giant room rather than halfway across the city in the tower.

The noise of it shook my lungs, my bones, and the floor beneath me. But even as the ringing of the bells ended, the rumbling of the floor didn’t stop. I might’ve thought I was just trembling in fear, but the men in front of me were staggering, fighting to keep their balance.

The fire on the platform flickered, then soared five feet high as the ground in front of it cracked and dropped away, leaving a black pit in the center of the floor.

One of the musicians by the wall screamed and crumpled to the ground.

I wanted to run, or scream, or hide, but I couldn’t do anything. Couldn’t look away from the chasm. Wide enough for a cart to fall through, dark enough that my heart knew nothing good could wait below.

The rumbling of the floor stopped. The priests and the Lord Magistrate all stayed facing the pit. The soldiers didn’t move either. A giant gaping hole had appeared inside the damned temple and no one did anything.

My family was smart to have stayed away from this place for so long. I would have been smarter to stay away with them. I could have been safe in our

room above the warehouse.

“And so from the darkness we ask forgiveness.” The white-haired priest stepped up to the edge of the pit. “We beg you to have mercy upon our people, and let us live in peace for another year.”

*Run!*

The word shattered all other thoughts, but there was nowhere to run to. Second bells had rung. Going outside was as good an invitation to death as staying with the madmen in white robes.

“It’s time,” the Lord Magistrate said. “You.” He pointed to one of the musicians along the wall, an older man with a flute in his hand. “Come and play.”

The last hint of color that had clung to the man’s face disappeared. “Play, my Lord?”

“Come to the edge of the pit and play,” the Lord Magistrate said.

*He’s joking. That’s the only answer. Either that or they’ve all lost their minds.*

The man with the flute seemed to be thinking the same thing. He pressed his back to the wall, shaking his head so hard it looked like he might snap his own neck.

“Bring him,” the white haired priest said to the soldiers.

Two soldiers went to the man, grabbing him under the arms and dragging him to the path of onyx that led to the chasm.

The man shook with terrified sobs but stayed on his feet when the soldiers released him.

The flute player stared down into the pit. “What of all demons have you brought here?”

“We did not bring it here,” the priest said. “The beast rested below our feet long before the city was ever built. Our people coming here disturbed his slumber. Nighttide has come. It is time to lure him back to sleep.”

“Play,” the Lord Magistrate said. “If you want your gold, if you want to

banish the shadows that slaughter on our streets for another year, play the beast to sleep.”

“I...” The flute player gazed down into the pit. “I...”

“If you fail, the blood on the streets will be your own doing,” the white haired priest said.

The player shook so hard, I thought he’d drop his flute.

“Play,” the Lord Magistrate ordered.

The player raised his flute to his lips. A note squeaked out, bouncing off the marble, and jabbing at my ears.

A rumbling growl that vibrated the onyx under my feet was the answer from the pit.

“Careful now,” the priest said.

The player took a deep breath and tried again. The note warbled but was closer to a real pitch than he’d found before. He tipped his chin up to gaze at the ceiling as he played. I recognized the tune, a ballad I had heard at a summer festival. He found his path through the notes, his breath growing steadier as he worked his way toward the end.

A puff of air carried up from the pit, like the beast below had sighed. The warm air tangled around my ankles, bringing with it a stench of sulfur and rot that turned my stomach.

The flute player gagged, missing a note.

“Finish the song,” the Lord Magistrate said, his voice low and steady, as though he were trying to not wake a child. “You with the fiddle, come here.”

“I can’t,” the fiddler whimpered. “I can’t do it.”

“Three must play,” the priest said. “Three times we violated the dark one’s sanctuary. Three songs we offer him before he sleeps.”

The fiddler pushed himself to his feet. A dark spot stained the front of his pants. The poor man seemed too terrified to be ashamed of wetting himself as he wobbled toward the pit.

“Be ready,” the Lord Magistrate said. “As soon as the first song ends, you

begin.”

The flute player backed away from the pit, giving his place to the fiddler.

“Please,” the fiddler begged, “don’t make me do this.”

“You’re already here,” the Lord Magistrate said. “It’s too late to change your mind now. Unless you’d like the soldiers to escort you outside?”

The flute player finished his song. His knees gave out as he ended the last note. He fell to the ground with a soft *thud*, silent sobs shaking his shoulders.

“Play,” the priest whispered.

The fiddler raised his bow, his eyes following the soldiers as they hauled the flute player to the side of the temple, leaving him to cry against the wall. The fiddler didn’t look at the pit as he played. I don’t know if it was brave or foolish for him to keep his back to the chasm, but he did. The whole song he stared at the crying flute player. Maybe he was trying to convince himself if the flute player got through his turn alive, there was hope for a poor fiddler, too. Maybe he was plotting his revenge upon the flute player for having ended his song.

Either way, he played, and well. The haunting melody something like lovers walking through the dark.

“Be ready,” the Lord Magistrate turned to me.

I set my blanket down on the ground and unwrapped my guitar, testing the tuning as quietly as I could. Testing my fingers to be sure they still knew how to play.

The fiddler inched away from the pit, his eyes finally leaving the flute player to find me.

“What do I play?” My voice wavered as I spoke.

“The same song you played before,” the Lord Magistrate said. “Play the whole ballad. I think the beast might recognize it.”

I nodded, not knowing what to say and not trusting my voice to work properly.

The fiddler finished on a long low note. As soon as he pulled his bow from his strings, he ran to join the still crying flute player in the corner.

I started the first chord of the song, letting my fingers pick along the strings, buying myself time. Maybe I could just play until morning. I'd never have to sing. Never have to get near the dark pit.

Another huff of rancid air carried up from below.

"Now," the priest growled.

*"In the depths of the winter I shall sing to you,  
Songs of lands far beyond our shore."*

I stepped up to the edge of the chasm. The black of the onyx matched the darkness of the pit. But there was something in the shadows below, a terrible blackness that did not belong in this world.

*"Where the darkness shall never come with fear,  
And we'll find the peace we once knew."*

The longer I stared into the black the more I could see. A shape waited far below, a monstrous head resting on hands large enough to break a horse in half. The body had the shape of a man, but the beast would have towered over the temple. A tail with sharp spikes as long as my arm wrapped around his legs.

I gasped at the horrible sight. If that beast came into the city, he'd stomp through our warehouse and kill my family with one swipe of his tail.

The demon huffed a growl, baring white fangs.

The soldiers around me drew their swords.

"Play." Fear crackled in the Lord Magistrate's voice.

I hadn't even realized my fingers had stopped moving. I tried to reason with them, to make them find the patterns on the strings they knew so well, but they had locked up, and my mind couldn't make them move.

The beast opened one, blood-red eye. His gaze flicked up to my face.

Terror vibrated every nerve in my body. Not on my worst night sleeping on the streets had I ever felt such consuming fear. I opened my mouth, but not

even a scream would come out.

“If that beast fully wakes, there will be no home for you to run to,” the Lord Magistrate whispered. “If there is anything you truly love in this life, sing.”

*“While you sleep sound and fast I’ll keep you from  
the cold,  
I’ll protect you from all harm.”*

My voice faltered as I sang without playing. Thinking of Lia sitting at home with Sharp Tooth in her lap. Of Eb who would be talking louder than the others tonight, forcing himself to laugh so no one would know how scared he was for me. They would all be there waiting for me. I had to protect them. My fingers found their way back to the strings.

*“And the promised light shall burn true and strong,  
With the wonder that was foretold.*

*In the depths of the winter I shall sing to you,  
Songs of lands far beyond our shore,  
Where the darkness shall never come with fear,  
And we’ll find the peace we once knew.”*

The red eye closed, and the beast gave a sigh.

*“Come rest in my arms and I’ll hold you tight,  
my love,  
There’s nothing for you to fear,  
The vows that we made will all be kept,  
And light shall reign from above.”*

“Play a little longer.” The priest took my shoulders, guiding me off the

onyx and onto the white marble.

The other priests moved as well, leaving the black path to the door clear.

*“In the depths of the winter I shall sing to you,  
Songs of lands far beyond our shore.”*

The door to the streets swung open. Dark beasts, like men dipped in black, pushed their way into the temple. Sharp claws had taken the place of hands, white teeth as long as my fingers glinted from their mouths, and flat skin stretched tight across where eyes should have been.

The musicians in the corner whimpered in fear, but I kept playing, terrified that letting the music stop would draw the monsters’ claws toward my belly.

The priest stepped in front of me as the beasts drew near, bowing them toward the pit like a gentleman seeing a fine lady through the front door of a home. The monsters leapt into the pit, landing without a sound by the giant far below.

*“Where the darkness shall never come with fear,  
And we’ll find the peace we once knew,  
And we’ll find the peace we once knew.”*

With a *crack* and a *rumble*, the floor shifted, covering the pit and locking the monsters out of sight.

The flames on the platform sank back to a dull shimmer. The white-haired priest seemed to shrink with them, his shoulders folding in like he’d carried too heavy a burden for too long. “And so it is done for another year.”

“What is done?” The flute player wobbled to his feet. “What is that monster, and why have the soldiers not gone down to kill it instead of us playing it to sleep? What kind of nightmare bargain did you strike with the beast?”

“The dark one can’t be killed,” said the Lord Magistrate. “Hundreds of years ago, the ones who dug deep enough to crack the ceiling of the beast’s lair

tried. Sent a hoard of soldiers down to their deaths. For every drop of the monster's blood they spilled, one of his dark minions grew. And now they come at Nighttide to spill the blood of our people in retribution. I would not risk any attempt to kill the dark one. If we managed to spill enough of his blood to end his life, our city would be slaughtered by the progeny of his suffering."

"Why didn't I know this?" I asked. "I was born here, why didn't anyone tell me?"

"No one can know," the priest said. "It's safer to let the people believe the darkest part of the year brings shadows to life than to have them know an ageless monster constantly sleeps beneath our feet. They wouldn't understand the fragile peace we have with the dark one. Better to have the truth lost to song and legend."

"I'll tell them," the flute player said. "I'll tell them all."

The Lord Magistrate waved a hand. A soldier stepped forward, holding three red bags. The Lord Magistrate tossed one at the flute player's feet. The bag landed with a heavy clatter.

"If you tell anyone, you forfeit your fee," the Lord Magistrate said.

The flute player lifted the bag and pulled out a handful of gold coins.

"If you take the money and break your oath of silence," the Lord Magistrate said, "you forfeit your life and will be hanged for theft."

"What do we say we were called here for?" I held out my hand for my bag of gold.

"To play for the temple's service of thanks for the First Dawn," the priest said.

The Lord Magistrate placed a red bag in my hands. The weight of it burned in my shoulder. The idea of the riches I now possessed dulled the edges of my terror at what slept beneath my feet.

"It was an honor to play for your services tonight." I gave a curtsy.

"A wise child," the Lord Magistrate said. "The soldiers will escort you back to the warehouse you call home."

“Now?” I knelt, tucking my guitar back into its blanket. “Wouldn’t it be better to wait here until dawn?”

“The night is safe,” the Lord Magistrate said. “The darkness is locked below until Nighttide nears again.”

“May the First Dawn bring us all safety.” I gave a nod, my arms too full of coins and instrument to attempt another curtsy.

As fast as could be found proper in a temple, I hurried toward the front door.

“Well done, child,” the priest called after me. “An excellent song.”

“Thank you, Lord Priest.” I didn’t turn back as I spoke.

I shifted the coin bag in my hand to wrench open the door to the outside. The cold night air hadn’t been contaminated by the breath of the beast. The shadows of the city didn’t shift in the moonlight. Peace and safety filled the night.

“Is it done?” A soldier stepped out of line to face me.

“Yes,” I said. “They said I could go home.”

“We’ll escort you across the city.”

Four more soldiers stepped up to join the first.

“I thought we were all safe now.” I clutched my bag of gold so tightly my fingers ached.

“From monsters,” the soldier said, “but it’s our job to protect the city from the dangers of people as well.”

“Right,” I said. “Then I suppose we should start walking. Don’t want to waste any time getting to a nice bit of cobblestone where I can curl up until dawn.”

The soldiers led me away from the temple.

I don’t know if it was my imagination or not, but I swear I felt the ground quiver as though a giant beast snored beneath my feet.

“You don’t think your family will let you in?” the soldier asked as we rounded a corner and the temple disappeared from view.

“I’d kill them if they tried to unlock the door,” I laughed, “but they’ll all be glad to see me when dawn breaks.”

## The End

Want more of Prace’s story?

Download the sheet music for “I’m Yours Till I Die” by clicking (or entering) the link below.

And don’t forget to join the Megan O’Russell mailing list community to stay up to date on other exclusive extras, including sheet music for the rest of Prace’s songs.

Get the sheet music here:

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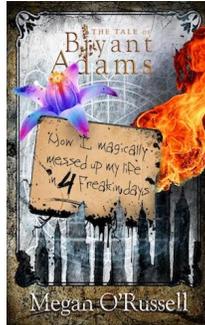


[The Girl Without Magic](#) (The Chronicles of Maggie Trent, Book One)

Death would have been easier, but the Siren wasn’t through with her.

Seventeen-year-old Maggie Trent fell out of a battle and into the Siren’s Realm,

a land where secrets hide in the shadows and pleasure comes at a price Maggie is unwilling to pay.



### [How I Magically Messed Up My Life in Four Freakin' Days](#) (The Tale of Bryant Adams, Book One)

Ever wanted to grow a five-story tall flower in central park? How about fight a deadly battle under the subway tunnels of Manhattan? Don't worry. I never wanted to either. But if you're ever being chased by ladies made of mist and you have to save the girl with the sparkly eyes you've never had the guts to say actual words to, there's an app for that.

*The Tale of Bryant Adams* is a humorous take on the modern boy wizard living in Manhattan.

Thanks for Reading!

*Megan O'Russell*  
Fantastic Worlds. Unlikely Heroes.