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A Tale from a Goblin's Heart

Chelsea DeTorres

*Run, run!
The goblin boys come!
They'll steal your heart, your eyes, your bones.
They suck your soul right out from your skin!
Or worse, or worse, or worse....*

In a time that has been forgotten, when young ladies and gentleman courted each other with chivalry and grace and a proper young lady did what a proper lady did, there existed the night market. In the night market, one could find love potions and beauty powders, small charms that died in the day, hexes for malice and jinxes for mischievous ways. Most of the treasures and curses that propriety bought broke down quickly, however. They were only toys after all.

There were darker things to play with if one dared. Society may turn up its noses, but at times the young ladies and gentleman did want certain pleasures that could not be bought with money, pleasures their parents would deny ever having used in their own youth.

And, of course, there were the goblin boys.

The goblin boys always stood in the alleys between the brightly colored, moonlit stalls. They leaned against the building walls like malevolent shadows, their green or golden eyes flashing violence if one dared to peek out of the corner of one's eye.

Melinda dared.

She had been thrust of the house with the son of one of her father's acquaintances. Her mother had forced a parasol into her hands before shoving her out the door, as if even the moon's light would be too much for her daughter. Melinda was a beauty: with her flowing dark hair and deep blue eyes, not to mention the china-bone skin that was heartily desired at the time.

Her father hadn't even bothered with a proper introduction to the gentleman whose hand was escorting her around the night market – a hand that was producing surely a fatal amount of sweat through his gloves, the yellow stain rapidly spreading. The boy was a son of her father's superior at the bank, Melinda's best offer. Her father had probably already arranged the match and considered it a sure thing; surely a lady like Melinda would never refuse.

Carl James Frederickson VI had wasted no time letting Melinda know his name, and his polo pony preferences, and his choice of gaming tables as well as, of course, what a handsome and perfect specimen of man he was and that Melinda should consider herself lucky to be with him.

She was surprised that he had agreed to take her to the night market. She often asked her mother or her lady's maid, but it was considered improper for a young woman without a male guard. This was her first unchaperoned date, a date where she could potentially be led

around to things she did not want to see, such as polo ponies. Instead, Carl James had agreed without hesitation and she was finally here.

Adjusting her shawl, and trying to draw a deep breath against her tightly tied corset, she stepped away from Carl, letting his hand slip out of hers of its own accord. Carl did not notice. He had been distracted by a buxom blonde maid selling lilies and roses, guaranteed to bring luck. Melinda wondered if she cared about polo ponies.

Melinda's shawl dropped to the ground as she began walking away.

"Miss Braxton! Your shawl!" Carl's voice caught up to her and she turned. She was shocked that he had noticed, but there he was. With the shawl, stained by a mud puddle in his hands, he readjusted it around her shoulders. She let him. What else could she do?

"Really, Miss Braxton! What would your father say?" He bowed curtly to her and for a moment he made as if to take her arm once more, to begin the charade of their date anew, when a delicate laugh caught his attention. Adjusting his silk tie – made by the finest silkworms in all of China, of course – he bowed to Melinda.

"I will just be a moment more and then we can proceed to dinner." He turned from her then, presuming she'd follow as expected of a lady, but he did not turn again as he leaned into the stall with flower seller.

Instead, Melinda strolled alone through the night market, attracting the stares and glares of propriety as they too strolled about, whispering that she must be a fallen woman or worse, of no class; no proper young lady would walk unescorted. Melinda didn't mind. She liked being alone and there was plenty to see at the night market.

Cats, tabbies and Persians and the like, stood on table tops, caterwauling about mugs of milk, beer, wine, blood that never emptied. Old men sold beans that could sprout stalks straight into the sky. Blacksmiths brought forth hero-swords, an item that had fallen out of favor in these times, but blacksmiths lived in perpetual hope. There were glass flowers that one cracked to make a wish. Stars burned brightly, scorching the tabletops upon which they rested, while small, dirty urchin children swore the stars would keep one safe from harm on dark nights like tonight, of course.

Carl was obviously not concerned about keeping Melinda from harm any longer. The last she saw of him that night was out of the corner of her eye, as he slyly stepped behind the stall with the blonde. It was obvious he wanted something besides roses or lilies or luck.

The moon had been shamelessly showing the fullness of her figure, when the clouds, guardians of propriety, had rushed into to stop her. It had even begun to drizzle a little.

Melinda paused by a table, where a hunched old crone was selling fruit. The elderly woman wore a coarse black cape over a dark burlap dress. One eye was squeezed shut and the other seemed to be made of glass. Melinda wondered how she saw. The crone was crying out to the night, advertising her wonders and wares, of apples to make one sleep, of peaches to make one cry, strawberries to make one die. Melinda gently fondled the dark red apples, but it was the strawberries that she held in her hands a moment or two, considering her fate.

"Not for you, dearie," the crone snarled, before snatching the strawberry from her hands. "Move along. Your fate is not here." The crone turned and walked deeper into the hut, leaving her wares unattended.

Melinda was shocked and appalled by the crone's assumption. Death was certainly an option. She wanted freedom. She wanted to stop being a proper young lady and death was obviously the easiest route.

She was sick of her mother tying her laces too tight, preparing her waistline to impress her father's guests. She was tired of her lady's maid, smacking her with her fan, when Melinda expressed an opinion opposing a gentleman's at any of society's ball. She was sick of her father, meeting men in the den, where it was assumed Melinda would not dare to eavesdrop, where her father would decide her fate in exchange for money, cigars, power, where he would use a daughter as if she were no more than breeding stock. Melinda was done with tight dresses, ladylike silences and a future as a wife and mother. Melinda wanted to breathe and dance and run and scream and her family, society, would never let her.

She rolled the strawberry in her hands, unconsciously, never realizing she had stolen it from the hag. The sordid juices leaked out and stained her hands. Was this her choice? Would she really just go silently into the night, fainting and dying delicately as a proper young lady should?

That was when the green glinting in the alleyway caught her attention. She took a step forward, gripping the cloth of her blue silk gown.

"Hello," she whispered.

His eyes glinted in response.

She was never told his name, and it pleased her, for it meant that her father had no one to blame when Carl James Frederickson VI did not call the next day or when his father tore up the marriage contract. There was no man he could hunt down when Melinda began to return later and later each night, always managing to escape her locked room and chambermaid guards. Perhaps there was magic involved; her goblin boy leaking sleep over the household. Perhaps the chambermaids were bribed with the father's stash of bourbon and passed out obediently. Perhaps it was a little of both. Eventually, her father gave up, each time swearing only to disown her; he would, too, if he could ever get his hands on enough money without a daughter to barter in the game of marriage.

Her mother cried when Melinda began leaving not only the pointless parasol, but her shawl and her gloves and the pins that caught up her hair, and sometimes even her elegant boots, but Melinda was rarely around to see.

"Hello," she whispered, racing barefoot into his arms, yet again, moonlight tickling the white pearls of her toes.

"Hello," his husky voice growled back. He grabbed the back of her head and kissed her roughly, the stubble on his chin scratching delightfully against her satin skin. She stood back and stared at him. She could never quite believe he was real, but at least the red marks on her face proved real enough to her mother.

He stood at least six feet tall, always dressed in black that blended well with the darkness. His booted feet took tremendous steps, as if the size alone provided force - he never went barefoot. His shoulders were broad and the ends of his long blond hair brushed them seductively. His sharp green eyes were always flashing at her for one thing or another, and he was constantly, consistently, heartily kissing her.

And if the kisses always left her a little light-headed and woozy, and if her color wasn't entirely good afterwards, well, perhaps it was best to chalk it up to love.

They walked quietly arm in arm through the night market. Their strolls took them everywhere around town, but Melinda was most pleased when perusing the place they had first met. They rarely said much, but Melinda was just happy that with him she felt free

from the world. The sleeves of her dress often fell down, revealing sudden glimpses of the moons on her chest. She shook her head with the delight she found in having her curls bounce around her face.

At times, he tugged up her dress or pushed back her hair, but Melinda knew he loved doing it. He never once mentioned the words propriety, society, or courtship, another attribute Melinda adored. She learned to dance down the alleyways, learn to smell the faint scent of glass flowers amidst the heavy smog of the city, to bite into unenchanted fruit and leave the juices dripping down her chin. He was always there smiling ruefully at her antics and experiments with her freshly created liberty. He never joined in, but he was always quick to snub the comments of passersby, whether with a look or the threat of something more. He was Melinda's protector and she loved it. She reveled in it. She was finally free to be whoever she wanted to be and that was enough.

Something was different this time, though, and Melinda was the one smiling ruefully. They had walked past the city limits, a little ways into the countryside. It was quite a walk. She didn't mind. She knew what he wanted. And she was ready.

Gurgling gently among beeches and oaks was a small stream, and they settled themselves by it. Melinda was pleased. He had never led her here before and she knew it was perfect for this night.

He gripped her again and began his deep kisses. She inhaled his scent, lustfully relished the taste of his strong lips. He paused and pressed her to him, and she clutched back, memorizing the shape of his shoulders, the feel of his muscles, the slight scent of sweat from their walk.

"Melinda, I must tell you something," he began. She put a finger to his lips and then replaced it with her own set of ruby ones.

"I already know," she replied. "I love you." She hugged him again and felt the press of his lips to her ears.

"Oh, Melinda, I love you too," he whispered, "but you can't know this. I must tell you—"

She pulled away, arms still around his neck. She looked deep into his eyes, the green only sparking sadness right now. She saw the pain in his eyes and knew it was almost time. She pushed a stray strand of blond hair from his eyes and smiled.

"I have always known you, my goblin boy," Melinda said softly, a tear falling despite the joyous smile on her lips. "And I know what you must do. I will always love you." She kissed him for the last time.

His eyes betrayed his shock, and he paused. "I will always love you as well, Melinda." He replied in the same tone. The moon was their only witness. She turned away at the last moment, hidden in a veil of proper clouds that guarded her from the intimacy of their moment.

Later, while he was still sucking on the last juicy remnants on her thigh bone, he gathered up his love and buried his by the side of the stream, something he had never done for any of his 'loves' before. Melinda had been different, though, and it left a funny feeling in the corners of his eyes. He would always love her, of course. He had promised, but it didn't mean he wouldn't eat her; she was food, after all. He had never loved any of the other girls; oh, he may have told them he did, but only because love gave off the best flavor, a flavor worth waiting the weeks necessary to cultivate it. In memory of that taste, a line of

drool began to leak from his mouth before he wiped it away. His eyes flashed in the moonlight, green and greedy as ever. He slowly returned to the city to hunt, remnants of sadness over the one girl who had truly known him still throbbing in his heart.

But a goblin has to eat.