

## **nobody's daughter**

by iztopher

Lydia takes a long look in the mirror.

A Hanukkah gift for Ishti. Chag sameach!

Title from *The Crooked, The Cradle* by the Crane Wives.

...

"You're absolutely sure about this, right?"

"Please, don't undermine me."

"I'm not, I promise. I guess I must just be worried this is some kind of set up." Even as she says it, one of Mel's hands threads through Lydia's hair, the other steadying the scissors. "I do need to warn you, I'm not a professional. Don't you have a stylist in town?"

"I'm not asking you because I want it done professionally, obviously."

"Okay, fair. Then why?"

...

Lydia Rupert was a girl, because that's what the midwife said she was.

It was quite convenient, really, because a year later the king and queen of Thais announced the birth of their son, and Lydia Rupert could feasibly grow up to be queen.

And Lydia Rupert was going to be queen, because that's what Lord Rupert said she was.

She was raised with all the certainty of a cobbler teaching her son to make shoes, or a cartographer showing his daughter to draw maps. Her fate was spoken of with confidence and with warmth, and Lydia followed along, sure and precise. She was so easy to dazzle, after all, with promises first of vast

wealth as a child and then of vast power as she grew. She was tailored dresses, and taught to curtsy, and she learned to enjoy the twirl of them. Her hair was never allowed to be cut above her shoulders, and she delighted in its versatility. She was taught how to paint her face, and didn't let herself look in the mirror long enough to learn, really learn, what she looked like without it.

So here she was, sitting in front of her vanity, finger trailing the cool glass of her cheek, taking stock of every imperfection littering her face. The skin beneath her eyes was just green and dark enough to notice without foundation. Scars from the acne that littered her face before her parents anxiously locked down a nightly regiment to banish it. The red of her cheeks looked more blotchy, warm and scrubbed raw from washing off her makeup, than rosy or attractive. Her green hair, falling loose down to her shoulders, was even too messy to save her.

She didn't look ugly. She knew herself too well for that. But beautiful didn't feel like the word anymore, or pretty, or any of the labels she'd been told to strive for. She just looked... nice. Charming, maybe, if she was feeling charitable.

Lydia wasn't sure how she was feeling. Her hand dropped from the mirror and onto the small table in front of it, grazed against the metal of the handles of the pair of scissors she'd laid in front of her. Sliding her hand into place, she felt both as if she was going to be sick and calmer than she'd ever felt at once. It was like all the tension swarming inside her body, by some law of entropy, managed to even out along the edges and hold her outline.

She knew, in the same way she wanted to know what her face looked like bare, that she wanted to know what she looked like with her hair above her shoulders. She wanted to know if it would solidify charming, or convert it to cute, or perhaps even to handsome-

Her chest tightened. Lydia snuck into offices and said things about rank that her teachers had to pretend not to hear, but she did those things following the instructions of her parents, and her objective of securing Edward as her husband. She did not wonder, did not wish, for things that went against everything in service of that duty, that goal. She was the most beautiful, cunning, and powerful noblewoman in Thais, and she was not to question or put into jeopardy any piece of that identity.

And yet she had been for months now.

And yet she had spent the past five months traveling with someone she thought was a rat girl off of the streets who laughed and said just rat saves breath y'know, who wore their hair short and told her to use them or him for him every now and then, who didn't seem to answer to anyone for her identity, not even the sorcerer who did everything to set it in stone two hundred years ago. Five months she'd spent filled with envy, trying desperately to kill every thought that crossed her mind that she might feel just a little better, just a little freer, if she could look a little more like them.

First it had been easy. Edward adored Mel, and Lydia needed Edward to adore her, so it was only natural to consider rethinking her strategy accordingly. It was a foolish idea, of course, as Mel was by no means fit to be queen, but she could scarcely blame herself for wondering about it. But then Edward started buying gifts for Stella, and resting his head on her stomach beside the campfire, and tucking flowers behind her ears and his arm behind her back, and although that brought its own host of uncomfortable, envious feelings Lydia didn't grant herself the space to thoroughly dissect, it more importantly didn't make the way she felt looking at Mel go away. Stella clearly held Edward's favor, and was gorgeous to boot, even if it was in a different, less thoroughly ornamented (less put on?) way than Lydia. Shouldn't she want to be more like that instead?

Now they were back in Thais for the first time in weeks, and Stella had defied death with magic, and Edward had defied expectations with his decision, and Mel had defied destiny, or so it might seem, and Lydia was staring in her vanity wondering if she really had to comply with the standard she'd been taught ought to rule her life now that she'd failed its sole purpose.

She knew exactly what she could do, what she should do. She should find Stella tomorrow and use a stun spell on her, tie her up for when the feeling returned to her limbs, and lock her in a closet for the precise duration of the wedding. She should steal the gown and a strand of her hair and cast the spell that would let her take her form, and trick Edward into marrying her in her place.

If only she wanted to. If only the drive that had fueled her for years hadn't fizzled out over the course of the quest, leaving her feeling a little burnt and smouldering in its wake. It wasn't even tiredness, not really - she knew, as much as it scared her to admit, that she wasn't giving up. This feeling was too deliberate for that. She wanted to sit and sift through her ashes for a little bit, see what she found left there.

She wanted to cut her hair. She wanted to make a decision because she wanted to, without following the directions given to her by her parents or the expectations subtly laid out by a midwife. She wanted Mel's ability to scoff in the face of the people they came from, to carve their shape on their own. She wanted to pick and choose cropped hair and dresses, or men's clothes and makeup, the way Mel wore a bow but dressed like a boy. Lydia was powerful - had just helped save the world in a dozen different ways, with her magic, with her cleverness - so why should she have to bow to everyone else in her life? Why not do what she wanted, instead?

The truth was Lydia didn't really know what she wanted, but she wanted to break away the space to find out. She wanted to try things like short hair, and pants, and not thinking of herself as a noblewoman anymore. As a woman anymore. She wanted to hear someone say they and know it meant Lydia.

Lydia looked in the mirror and knew, above all else, that they wanted this done right.

...

Why was a tricky question.

Mel was not, by any regular definition of the word, the "right" person to play hairdresser. He was inexperienced, and a bit too rough around the edges, and for all Lydia had come to admire his lack of care what others thought about his presentation, they also felt like he didn't particularly give off the quality of caring enough himself. But he was the one Lydia wanted to do it, and at the moment, barely calming their racing chest or lurching stomach, that was what mattered most to them.

Her hands felt nice in Lydia's hair as she stood behind them at their vanity. They briefly wished they'd gotten to feel the way she threaded them through the strands earlier - goddess knew it wouldn't be the same going forward. They watched their reflection and thought about how this was the last time in a long time, maybe ever, that they would see their face like this, framed by long strands of green. Years of hard work - at hair maintenance, at learning how to be a proper lady, at attempting to win over Edward - gone with a pair of scissors wielded by someone Lydia couldn't even confidently label their relationship with. "Frankly, my stylist might refuse."

"Aren't you paying them to do what you say?"

"My parents do."

"Oh. I guess that makes sense. But still, me? Of everyone in this city? I can hardly believe you trust me behind you with a sharp object."

Lydia couldn't help but laugh a little, and found it smoothed over the roughest edges of their nerves. "You've been trying to goad Te'ijal into killing me for months, yet have taken no attempt at my life yourself. You clearly don't want my blood on your hands directly."

"Fair point." It earned a chuckle, and then settled into silence. It was awkward, searching. She clearly knew something, after all, with the prodding, but not enough - Lydia was certain they looked like they were in some sort of crisis to her, walking into her room without makeup or hair done, half-dressed in their pajamas after their closet failed to turn up any real clothes that didn't feel like a costume. "Do you know how short you want it?"

"Longer than Galahad's, but shorter than yours. About Edward's length, maybe?"

Mel jokingly whistled. "Bold move for what must be your first real haircut in what, a decade?"

They wanted to answer what was clearly being asked here, the why behind the haircut and not just choice of stylist. They wanted someone to know, and they wanted it to be Mel, and in that moment Lydia steeled herself to say as much. "I just... want to make sure it doesn't read like a woman's hairstyle."

Mel's hand froze immediately. "Oh." Their voice was surprised, but then, warmly and slowly, like they knew they were looking at someone familiar but couldn't quite place who, "Lydia?"

There it was. They'd committed to it, so they took a deep breath and stumble through the rest of it. It was easier now that the angle had been set. "I'm... not sure about a lot right now. But my whole life, I've wanted certain things because I was told to, and there was never any question I would. I was a girl, because that's what people said I was." Being around you made me think I didn't have to listen to them. It felt like too much to say, too open, too reverent. "But I want to decide who I am. I've more than earned that. And I don't want to be... a lady. I'm not a girl."

It felt good to say - heavier than they expected, but the weight was firm and satisfying.

"Maybe I'll want to keep parts of it, if I find myself missing them. The dresses and the long hair and the makeup. I know it must be hard to imagine me without them. I barely can. But right now, I can't truly tell what's me, and what's everything I've been told to be up until now. I want to take some time away from all of it and just... sort it out."

Mel was quiet, but Lydia felt like they could sense their smile from behind them. "I'm really happy for you." They paused, then added, "maybe the new you won't be completely insufferable."

"Hey!"

"Just kidding. You wouldn't be Lydia then." It was a cheap shot by the second time, but Lydia laughed harder at it all the same. There was a fondness to it that they appreciated, that made it almost feel kinder than a real compliment. "Wait, do you still want to use Lydia?"

"Yes. But, ah, different pronouns? They and them. At least with..." they realized in the moment that pronoun usage necessitates a third party, and that shifting all at once made their head spin a little to think about. "Stella. Maybe Edward, too?"

"Got it. Just let me know when you want to add people to that list."

"Will do."

He raised the scissors again, and this time Lydia felt ready for it. When they exhaled, they actually felt steadied by it. "Now that I know why you asked for this, I'm actually looking forward to doing it for you. Just a warning, it probably won't be completely even, or like... pretty."

Lydia looked at their reflection in the mirror, tried to imagine the hundred different directions it could take, and smiled. "That's just fine. I don't need to be right now."