

A Midwinter Gift

Celesta

It was a strange feeling, being a doll.

Though that was primarily due to the fact that Celesta could barely feel anything at all. Her delicate pixie wings were temporarily gone, and her rigid, wooden limbs no longer registered anything but the vague feeling of warmth and the pressure from being stuffed into a child's coat pocket—a situation that should have felt stifling, if not for the fact that she couldn't breathe anyway.

Because she was a doll.

Made of wood.

Ready to play her part in the so-wild-it-just-might-work scheme that she and Drosselmeyer had concocted in order to find the hero she needed to save the Winter Court.

This is only temporary. As soon as Drosselmeyer is able to connect with the soldier, he can change me back.

The voice in her head sounded louder than normal.

But one thing is for sure—I don't think I'll ever take blinking for granted again.

The muffled voices above her grew quiet, and Celesta strained her ears to try to hear what had caused it. She ignored the pitch-black darkness of the woolen prison around her, focusing all her attention on deciphering the sounds outside.

Strains of music filtered through the fabric of the coat, hauntingly sad and lonely. The notes wound around themselves around her heart, tugging and pulling at her emotions until she was thankful for the fact that wooden dolls were unable to shed real tears. She had never before thought of the harmonica as an instrument capable of producing such stirring sounds.

But then again, she had also never thought that a human could be capable of making real magic.

This could really work. He could really be the one to do it.

The music stopped, leaving behind a sad, heavy stillness that was nearly more moving than the notes themselves, and Celesta wanted nothing more than to jump out of the dark, stuffy coat pocket and wrap the musician in a hug.

Even though he's obviously been through some darkness, he's still able to make beauty.

"That was really quite something," Drosselmeyer's familiar voice, deep and rich, rumbled above her.

There was a scuffling sound, as if someone had jumped to their feet too quickly and dropped something. The body behind her shifted, and the pocket around Celesta pressed tighter around her.

He must be putting Sadie behind him. I wondered why he would bring a child along, but I suppose, given everything she's been through recently, she wouldn't take well to being left behind.

"I'm sorry, my boy; I didn't mean to startle you." Drosselmeyer's voice dropped to a low, soothing tone. "We heard your music and were so intrigued that we had to come to investigate."

Intrigued is rather an understatement, don't you think Dross? We heard his music from across the Realms.

"It's fine." The man's voice was a warm baritone, and despite the curtness of his tone, it sent a thrill of expectation from her head to her toes. Even his speaking voice held the sparkling hints of music, and she suspected that he was just as marvelous a singer as he was an instrumentalist.

"Little Sadie here loves music," Drosselmeyer stated.

"Oh?"

Celesta would have giggled at the obvious bland disinterest in his voice, if she only had lungs and a working mouth.

He's going to be a tough nut to crack, that's for sure.

"We both do," Drosselmeyer was still speaking. "You have a remarkable talent, young man. You could do great things with it."

Like help me save Faerie from a selfish tyrant.

"I just play for myself." There was a clear dismissal in the man's words.

A tense silence followed. "That's a shame," Drosselmyer answered. "Such a gift is meant to be shared with others. Speaking of gifts..."

Celesta felt as if her insides were made entirely of butterflies as Sadie's hand—impossibly large, thanks to Celesta's diminished size—pushed in through the top of the pocket and her fingers wrapped around Celesta's middle. The next thing Celesta knew, she felt the faintest brush of the crisp winter air as she looked up into a dark winter sky with snowflakes gently falling around her. In her peripheral vision, she could just barely make out the blurry shape of a pale face and a head of dark, curly hair.

I want to see him! What I wouldn't give for a neck that could move.

As if reading her thoughts, Sadie shifted Celesta slightly as the little girl presented her as if she were a prize.

"Here," Sadie said, her voice high and musical. "This is for you. So she can dance to your music."

Celesta got a full view of the soldier they were hanging all their hopes on—broad shoulders under a red jacket, a strong, stern chin, and blue eyes under dark brows that were shadowed with grief and pain. She watched as he eyed Sadie and her offering dubiously, looking back and forth from her to the space behind her where Drosselmeyer must be standing. He was seemingly at war with himself, and then finally capitulated and accepted the present.

His hands, much larger than Sadie's, completely enveloped her. Despite lacking the normal feeling in her body, Celesta had the impression of a warm hug, and she immediately felt safe in his strong, gentle hold.

"Thank you." The man's voice was gruff.

Sadie gave him a beaming smile, bouncing lightly on her toes in an excited energy that Celesta could completely relate to. "You're welcome!"

From her new position, she was able to see Drosselmeyer, looking as wise and impressive as usual in his dark coat, with his long white beard spilling over his chest from underneath his red scarf and bushy eyebrows poking out under the rim of his matching hat. He smiled, the expression suddenly turning his face from wizened advisor to a genial grandfather. "Well, we had better return inside and leave you to your solitude, Mister..." He lifted a questioning brow.

The man's clipped answer was immediate. "Alexander Monde, sir."

Alexander. It suits him.

"Mr. Monde." Drosselmeyer reached out and gave Alexander's free hand a hearty-looking shake. Celesta could hear just the faintest sparkle of magic in the air. "It has been a pleasure to meet you. My name is Drosselmeyer. I hope we see you again soon."

His eyes briefly dropped to Celesta, and she read the same sentiment in his eyes as she felt blossoming in her own chest.

Hope.