

"WINTER OF THE ECHOWOOD"
Tales of the Echowood - Winter Special 2022
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by

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Based on story and characters from
"Homestead on the Corner"
By Trevor Van Winkle

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Homestead on the Corner

1. INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

A fireplace crackles as a pot of soup bubbles over the flames. MOTHER alternates between stirring, letting it simmer, maybe adding a dash of spices here and there.

In the far corner of the room, a TEEN sits at the table, sulking.

MOTHER

Supper is nearly ready. Just needs to simmer a bit, I think.

THE TEEN GIVES A LONG, TIRED SIGH.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

(mildly annoyed)

It's not the exact same thing we had yesterday. And it's good food -- don't roll your eyes at me. Elizabeth is going to like it, and you will too.

TEEN

(grumbles, almost unintelligible)

Why are you even bothering.

MOTHER

(SIGHS)

There's no need for that attitude, son. You know she's been having a rough time.

(beat -- he's staring at her)

Yes... just like us. It's better for everyone when neighbors band together.

TEEN

(grumbles beneath his breath)

Yeah right.

Mother stirs the soup for a little longer, then steps back.

MOTHER

(to herself)

This needs to stay on a bit longer... it isn't ready yet.

(turns and walks towards where teen is sitting)

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Well if you're not too old for stories, I could always tell you one of my favorites to pass the time.

TEEN

(UNINTELLIGIBLE GRUNT THAT SOUNDS AFFIRMATIVE)

MOTHER

Good. Well... This is a story about the darkest midwinter of the Echowood, and a girl named Sparrow, and a town not unlike this one... and it began many thousands of years ago. Before the woods were shattered and remade, before the old god met the child from beyond and made her queen, before the fall of Caraway -- all the way back in the days of the Dragon.

The sounds of the kitchen fade away as her story begins.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

All her life, Sparrow had only ever known the cold of winter. Her father told her tales of a time when the frost melted, and the sun shone, and the Echowood burst with green at the birth of something called "Spring," but Sparrow never quite believed him. He was always full of stories. Once, he told her that midwinter used to be a time of celebration, when the community gathered in front of a roaring fire in the village square and celebrated the coming of this so-called "spring..." But Sparrow knew her father was making this up. She didn't blame him for trying to raise her spirits, but she couldn't believe a word of it. She had never seen a fire roar. It might crackle, or sputter, or even glow with a faint thin warmth that just barely kept off the chill... but the only thing that ever roared in this world was the wind.

(beat)

Besides, Sparrow couldn't imagine ever wanting to gather with her neighbors.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Not the kids who made fun of her father's crutches, nor the old woman who refused to call her by her name, and especially not the Lord Galdron, who ruled over her home with a petty, impotent cruelty that made her blood boil. Galdron had been born into wealth and status from a long line of petty lords, yet he sent his heralds into town time and again to preach on the merits of hard work and berate his citizens for any sign of laziness. Sparrow doubted that he'd ever done a day of hard work in his life, sending his missives from his manor full of servants paid for with his coffers full of gold.

(beat)

Her father, on the other hand, knew all too well the meaning and cost of "hard work." He'd spent his life before Sparrow's birth in Lord Galdron's coal mine, extracting fuel that could help to fight the never-ending winter and bring warmth and light to the village in a way most had never seen. But Galdron sold all but the dregs to the rich and powerful in other towns and cities while paying his workers a mere pittance, as the work that kept him rich took its toll on their bodies and minds. When an unexpected cave-in broke her father's legs at the start of his shift, Sparrow was forced to become the breadwinner of her house at the age of ten. That was the way it was in this town: if you couldn't work the mines, Galdron threw you out to die in the cold, and no one would lift a finger to help you.

(beat)

Sparrow was strong for her age, and the overseers were always looking for younger workers to squeeze into cracks and crevices in search of new veins of coal... but her father forbade her to enter the mines under any circumstance.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

So Sparrow took to feeding the two of them the only way she could -- by hunting and gathering, although most days her weapon of choice was a fishing pole and a rusty handsaw, her prey the small, sickly species of Char found deep in the lake below a thick layer of ice. It was difficult for smaller animals to survive in the deep, never-ending winter of the Northern Echwood, and Sparrow didn't have the weapons to take down a bison, even if she could catch one. That type of hunting was more suited to Lord Galdron and his men. *He must eat well*, she thought as she drew the dull metal teeth of her saw through the ice, cutting through it with friction more than any real sharpness. *He probably has warm food every day, and mulled wine to boot.* Sparrow did her best not to think too much about his dinner table as she shivered on the frozen lake, hoping to pull her own small meal up through a hole in the ice before too long.

(beat)

It seemed like she might just get her wish. After a few minutes of waiting, something tugged on the line from below, and she scrambled to her feet to pull back on it when CRACK! The ice thrummed beneath her feet as something broke through the surface. Looking across the lake, Sparrow could see a small, irregular gap near the shoreline, where the water was always slightly warmer and the ice was weaker. The hole was far enough away that Sparrow wasn't in danger of the ice breaking where she stood, but as she watched she saw a small, desperate face burst out of the icy water, sputtering and crying out before sinking below the surface. It was only for a moment, but she recognized who it was. It was one of the neighbor's kids, an oaf about two years younger than her and almost twice her size already.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

He must have been taking a shortcut home, stomping over a patch of ice that Sparrow knew all-too-well to avoid. He surfaced again, limbs thrashing. Sparrow glanced over to the shore to see if his parents were with him, but of course there was no one else. Sparrow gulped... she knew what was going to happen next. In a matter of minutes, he would sink too far into the dark water and lose his way back up to the surface, getting stuck under the ice. His movements were already growing weaker and slower, and he wouldn't be able to tread water much longer. Sparrow looked around the lake, but it just confirmed what she already knew -- there was no one else around. If she didn't help and help soon, he'd die.

(beat)

But Sparrow hated this kid. Arthur or Alex or whatever his name was... he'd always been a thorn in Sparrow's side, like all the kids in the village. Throwing pebbles at her when she went down to the market alone, laughing at her father whenever the cold lessened and he could go outside without making the pain in his legs worse, spreading rumors about the blankets they sold and driving away business from people credulous enough to believe him... he'd cost her plenty of tears and not a few meals over the years, and a little voice in the back of her head whispered that walking away would certainly make life just that little bit easier. There was no one around to see her leave him, and it was more than likely he'd been trying to sneak up and throw pebbles at her when he broke the ice. Served him right, honestly.

(beat)

But another voice, louder and clearer, said that she would never be rid of the guilt if she didn't help.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

No matter how horrible he was, this child didn't deserve to die -- not like this, cold and alone with lungs screaming for air. Sparrow swore under her breath as she tore off her jacket and shoes, trying not to think about all the firewood they'd have to burn to keep her from catching frostbite after this.

(beat)

There was no use in lowering herself in slowly, so she leapt into the water with a noisy splash, screaming against the cold as she grabbed Arthur Alex Andrew AIDAN that's his name -- grabbed Aidan by the collar and hauled him up towards the surface as he kicked and squirmed. *Stop squirming Aidan, she thought, you're making this even harder, just swim up and - there!*

(beat)

Aidan shivered as he hauled himself over the edge of the ice and rolled away from the crack. Sparrow followed a moment later, being careful to crawl away from him and towards the thicker ice at the center of the lake. Aidan shivered violently, his breaths shallow and shuddering, but even so he caught a glimpse of Sparrow as she rubbed warmth back into her arms. His eyes went wide as he stammered "W-- why did you do that?" before they narrowed suspiciously, and he added "What do you want?"

(beat)

Sparrow didn't know what to say. Why *did* she do that? What about this kid was worth risking frostbite, sickness, and death... not just her death, but her father's as well if she couldn't take care of him. She didn't like him, and it wasn't like he had anything to offer her. *This was a mistake*, she thought. She couldn't even continue fishing like this, so she'd have to go home empty handed and soaking wet, all because she couldn't just walk away.

(beat)

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

"Just -- just go." Sparrow said. Her hair was already frozen and she could feel her lips starting to turn blue. After a long, confused moment, Aidan stood and ran on shaking legs -- first off the ice, then around the lake towards the main road. Sparrow sighed as soon as he was out of earshot. Now she needed to get home without being seen, lest the neighbors accuse her of pushing Aidan into the lake herself. She may have saved his life, but she knew that wouldn't stop him from running his mouth as soon as his teeth stopped chattering.

(beat)

But Sparrow did tell her father what happened... that wasn't even a question for her, and she could hardly avoid his gaze when she returned to their one-room cottage at the edge of the village, half-frozen and soaking wet. She'd expected disappointment at the very least, maybe even some anger at the loss of food and firewood. But much to her surprise, he responded by wrapping her in a warm, strong hug and saying he was proud of her. He put an extra log on the fire and pulled out one of his handmade blankets for Sparrow, giving up his chair to let her sit closer to the meager flames. They didn't have fish for dinner, but the potato stew her father made was piping hot when he pulled it off the fire. That evening, Sparrow thought it tasted better than it ever had.

(beat)

It didn't taste nearly as good the fifth night in a row however, and they would eventually exhaust the contents of their root cellar if Sparrow didn't get back to work. A quick visit to the village square confirmed the other children had already spread the rumor that someone pushed Aidan into the lake, so out of an abundance of caution Sparrow opted to avoid the area entirely.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Instead of fishing, she spent the short daylight hours gathering the foxberries that still grew in the wild forest some distance past the lake. They were a favorite of the old ladies who tended the furnace-warmed greenhouses back in the village, and her reward for braving the cold winds and thorny underbrush would be enough vegetables for a few more servings of stew. Again. Still... better than starving.

(beat)

Within a month, the other children grew tired of talking about Aidan's imaginary attacker and instead began to whisper that old Maggy Oakroot was a secret witch, and so Sparrow was able to return to ice fishing on the lake. In all that time, Aidan hadn't pointed a finger at her, though he did avoid making eye contact whenever they passed each other in the street. It was better than him making fun of her at least, and Sparrow considered her increased peace and quiet payment enough for her good deed. She definitely wouldn't do it again, though -- the lake was very, very cold.

(beat)

But not as cold as Lord Galdron's heart, it seemed. On the first day of every month (except when it fell on a holiday), the petty noble required every household in the village to pay a tax, supposedly for the privilege of "living on his land." He insisted the tax was for the upkeep and maintenance of the village, but since the only servants he ever sent down into the streets were heralds to proclaim his will and guards to enforce it, that struck everyone involved as highly unlikely. Regardless, they could pay his tax in coin or in firewood, or not pay at all and face the consequences. When Sparrow and her father had the coin to spare, they opted for the former...

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

but that was a rare event, and only really happened when her father sold several of his blankets at once. This month Sparrow would be paying in firewood, taking from their already dwindling supplies to keep Galdron's wolves from the door. Getting warm after her dip in the lake had used up almost all of it, and if they were to avoid frostbite in their home, she would need to cut more. And so, on the day the tax was due, she made the long trek away from town into the thicker forest. The old deepwood that once surrounded their village had dwindled over the years, as people cut more and more trees down to burn for warmth. Sparrow hated the thought of tearing these beautiful old trees down -- but she hated freezing more, so she hefted the axe and began chopping at the almost frozen trunks.

(beat)

She hated a lot of things, come to think of it: the cold, her routine, the constant scraping by... and Lord Galdron most of all. As the short, cold, dark days wore on one after another, nothing ever seemed to change. Sparrow tried to improve her home, save money for her father, create any kind of comfort in the endless winter... but it never worked. There was never enough time, not between making sure the house stayed warm, the cupboards stayed full, and the tax was paid each month. Her father remained optimistic that spring would eventually return, clinging to that hope like a religion. But Sparrow didn't share his faith, much as she admired it. Nothing had changed in all the years of her life... and nothing ever would.

(beat)

Her dour thoughts continued as she finished gathering as much firewood as she could carry, then made her way across town and up the hill to the lord's mansion.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Lord Galdron required that all the townspeople pay their taxes at the manor itself, regardless of age, infirmity, or illness, and by the time Sparrow arrived they formed a long, sullen queue leading into his great hall. Sparrow scowled as she thought about how much he must love this little ritual. It probably made him feel like a king, everyone wasting their time and standing in line just to see him. What made it even worse was that he didn't need the money or the firewood -- he was already rich from the coal mines, and his house was always warm. According to Sparrow's father, the lord was one of the few people who cheered the arrival of the endless winter that began before her birth. His coal mines were only really needed by the few blacksmiths in the Echowood who worked in steel and a handful of small villages in the more barren regions of the cold north... but when the burning of fuel for warmth became a constant requirement, the mine might as well have been full of gold. Even Sparrow could vaguely remember that his clothing and manor had become more flashy and extravagant since she was younger... with a growing ego to match.

(beat)

Despite the cold and dark of the winter outside, his mansion was well-lit with slow-burning torches, and well-heated by multiple brick fireplaces in every room she could see. It was the only place Sparrow had ever felt truly warm in her entire life, and she despised that fact almost as much as she despised the lord himself. All her work kept the cottage just above freezing, but never warm -- no matter how much straw she stuffed into the roof for insulation or how many rocks she stacked around the cracks to block the wind, the cold always found its way in. And here was Lord Galdron, living in wasteful opulence and still demanding more.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Even with the sheer number of servants and guards who lived and worked on the massive estate, the coal and firewood used for each person in this mansion was easily triple what anyone else in the village could afford.

(beat)

As she fumed, a set of footsteps echoed in the cavernous room as one of Galdron's servants carried a platter of coins from the great hall and down the queue. Sparrow scowled. This was another one of the lord's blatant performances of wealth: parading his payments along the line of townsfolk before it vanished into the vault forever. The servant was close enough to see her now, and Sparrow quickly looked down at the richly tiled floor. The lord was not known for his even temper, and he was liable to throw people in the dungeons overnight for displaying even the smallest sign of defiance in his halls. She'd only seen it happen once, but once was all she needed. Her father would suffer in her absence, and she doubted Galdron's cells were half as warm as his halls.

(beat)

Off to one side, Sparrow heard a light clatter as the servant lost their footing slightly -- then she saw a single gold coin, rolling towards her shoe. She could hear the servant already walking away, apparently not noticing the missing tribute. In an instant, she realized Galdron probably wouldn't miss it either. Sparrow shifted her foot and stepped on the coin, stopping it... then she froze in terror, waiting to see if anyone noticed.

(long beat, tension)

Nothing happened. The queue shuffled forward with its usual deliberate slowness, and no one said a word. Unsure what else to do, Sparrow reached down and tucked the coin inside her sock as she pretended to adjust her boot.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

It felt colder against her skin than she expected. Shouldn't everything in this man's mansion be warm? But Sparrow hadn't held a coin in years... maybe they were always cold to the touch, and she just noticed it more here. Nearly all the gold that was once used in the village was now locked up in Galdron's vaults or spent on luxuries for his manor, and these days almost all her trade was done in barter -- blankets for food, or extra fish she'd caught for yarn. The only ones even who used gold anymore were the few well-off older families who still lived in the village, and they were becoming fewer and fewer every year, as they could afford to move away. She suddenly realized her neighbors would realize that as well. They'd be suspicious if Sparrow suddenly had a coin to pay the tax. They'd ask questions. The rumors would start to spread again.

(beat)

She kicked herself -- she should have told the servant what they'd dropped. She shouldn't have stolen from Lord Galdron. She wasn't raised to take things... her father would be disappointed. But then again, didn't Galdron himself steal from the townspeople? Sparrow was bringing him a bundle of firewood that would easily heat her home for a whole week in exchange for... well, nothing really, besides protection from the lord's threats. Lord Galdron didn't need this coin, and it might keep her alive if things got worse. In a moment, she decided that it would stay in her sock until she could hide it somewhere in the cottage. Her father didn't have to know about this either... no one did.

(beat)

When Sparrow made it to the front of the hall, she handed over her tribute with as much of a smile as she could muster.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Lord Galdron, leaning back in his great plush throne wrapped in velvet and furs, barely managed a nod in acknowledgement. She made her way back down the hill to her house as quickly as possible, hugged her father as she shed her heavier coat, then hid the coin between two of the rafters, buried beneath the straw. She'd find a use for it sooner or later, and avoid drawing any more attention to herself in the meantime.

(beat)

Turns out, that use presented itself sooner rather than later. When Sparrow went down to the market that week, the latest gossip surrounded Sparrow's neighbor, the widow Fern, who hadn't been able to pay her tax for the month. She was one of the main greenhouse keepers in the village, and her most recent crop of mushrooms had completely failed when her furnace went out during a sudden cold snap. Between rounds of barter and trade, people speculated about whether Fern would try to sell her belongings, run away into the frozen woods, or appeal directly to the lord for mercy -- a mercy she was unlikely to find. Those who failed to pay the tax were often sentenced to work the mines and pay off their debts with hard labor... a task which would almost certainly be a death sentence for the older woman. Sparrow's guts twisted, thinking of Fern dying in the dark and cold beneath the ground, but she tried to avoid the topic. Every time it came up, all she could think about was her forbidden treasure, hidden in the roof. But eventually, the same little voice that told her to save Aidan became too loud to ignore. Early the next morning, Sparrow collected her secret coin from the straw-stuffed roof and hid it in the frame of Fern's front door, hurrying away to avoid being seen.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Strangely enough, she almost felt guilty leaving it there, like it was a selfish choice. Fern's mushrooms made medicines for the sick and elderly of the village, who always needed blankets. If Fern was locked away in the dungeons or worse, at least some of them were sure to die, and Sparrow and her father would lose valuable customers. Better to make sure Fern stayed in the village. Sparrow couldn't use the coin she stole anyways.

(beat)

Within a day, the market was ablaze with the news that Fern somehow managed to scrounge enough together to pay her tax, as the guards who arrived at her doorstep to arrest her were seen returning to the manor empty handed and confused. Nobody asked her outright, and Fern let the rumor persist as the weeks went by. Sparrow couldn't help but smile -- the gifted coin would give her enough time to get back on her feet, saving lives and keeping Sparrow's customers healthy. And, for the first time, Fern smiled at her when she purchased a woven shawl for herself, thanking Sparrow by name.

(beat)

As time went on, other things began to change. The children in the village stopped making fun of her and her father. Once, she even saw Aidan shove his friend into the snow when he tried to get some insult out. Maybe there was something to this doing good, she thought. If nothing else, it would break up the monotony of life in the frozen, isolated village. Why not?

(beat)

A few days later, a heavy snowfall choked the narrow lanes of the village overnight. Sparrow was up early, as she was most days, and so she took her father's shovel and cut a path to the road on her way to market before first light.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

She even paid special attention to clearing the snow in front of the Sleet sisters' home. The sisters were responsible for most of the gossip in the village, and if she did a bad job, the whole town was sure to hear about it.

(beat)

As the sun came up and the first stalls began to open for business, the sisters couldn't stop talking about the suspicious path cut through the snow and the ulterior motives of whoever made it. Sparrow couldn't help but roll her eyes as they whispered. They'd arrived at the market unscathed, true -- but what if someone was lurking in the snowbank to steal their purchases on the way back? Something was clearly amiss. The carpenter, a strong young man obviously tired of hearing them whine, offered to escort the sisters home if they were so worried. The sisters responded, of course, by turning up their noses and accusing him of trying to steal their belongings. Before he could respond, Fern, clearly annoyed at her neighbors, piped up that the carpenter had built their house himself. He knew it inside and out. If he was a thief, then surely he could take their things in a much less roundabout manner.

(beat)

The carpenter chuckled at this, as did Fern, and then several others until the laughter filled the square. Even the Sleet sisters eventually broke into embarrassed laughs, realizing Fern was probably right. Sparrow tried to keep a straight face, though she couldn't help but crack a smile too. It was the first time she'd heard anyone laughing in the market in a long time, and she couldn't say she disliked it.

(beat)

When she told her father about the events of the morning, he burst into a deep-bellied laugh as well.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

The Sisters had always been a suspicious bunch, but this was overkill even for them. It was about time someone called them out for it. Through laughs, he said that Sparrow should do something like this again if she got the chance. Sparrow agreed a little faster than she expected. As much as she liked seeing her neighbors smile, she liked hearing her dad laugh again a lot more. Even if the people in the town turned up their noses at her work, she knew that it would make her father happier than he'd been in a long time, and that was more than enough.

(beat)

On the next market day, she noticed one of the Sleet sisters clearing snow from the path, muttering about how she'd "better do it before someone else does." Sparrow couldn't help but stare -- at least, until the sister turned, narrowed her eyes, and barked "what do you want?" Sparrow jumped and hurried along... but on her way back from the market, she quietly left a handful of foxberries on the woman's doorstep.

(beat)

A week later, Sparrow's walk to the market was interrupted by a commotion in the village square, as Lord Galdron's guards and a handful of his servants raced through in pursuit of a man with a dusty face and ragged clothes. From their shouts, Sparrow guessed that he'd escaped from the mines -- evidentially with quite a head start, if he'd made it this far without being caught. As she watched from the path, it became clear that the man was heading in her direction, followed closely by one of the servants. The others had clearly become lost in the maze of narrow lanes and high snow banks of the town.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Sparrow had no interest in stopping the runaway prisoner, though she briefly considered the possibility of tripping the servant -- namely whether or not she could get away with it without being caught herself. But before they rushed past her, the servant paused to push over a snowbank, covering both their tracks, and for a brief moment their eyes locked with Sparrow's in a silent plea for secrecy. The runaway man paused, then turned back to the servant. "Which direction, Morgan?" he panted, breath white in the freezing cold. The servant caught their breath, then answered, "Straight on to the lake, and then left. I'll meet you at the rendezvous." The man nodded, and then continued running down the path Sparrow had cleared just that morning. Sparrow could already hear the others approaching, and so with a nod to Morgan, she climbed up one of the nearby trees and shouted that she could see the prisoner escaping further into town. With renewed vigor, Morgan shouted for the guards to follow, then helped Sparrow down from the tree and raced after them.

(beat)

With her knowledge of the village and Morgan's apparent knack for trickery, they led the guards on a ferocious chase through the most impassable streets and alleys they could find: the untended back corners behind the older homes, the thick patches of long dead brambles along the abandoned mill, through the center of the market square just as it became too crowded to pass through quickly, until ultimately, the guards ran out of breath, patience, and stamina right outside the tavern.

(beat)

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Morgan was the first to concede that they may have lost their quarry, and the exhausted guards reluctantly agreed. Sparrow apologized that she couldn't find a faster route, before offering the pursuers a round of warm cider at the tavern. Excited by the prospect of a hot drink and a chance to rest their feet, the guards and other servants happily agreed -- except Morgan, who mumbled about other tasks they needed to attend to before vanishing down the street in the direction of the lake. Sparrow exchanged a few quick, hushed words with the barkeeper that made the situation clear, and he happily agreed to serve this round on the house in exchange for some extra foxberries the following market day.

(beat)

The next time Sparrow saw Morgan, she was delivering another bundle of firewood to the manor on tax day. They saw her too, and as they made their way past on some other errand they pretended to trip, losing their footing on the tiles. Sparrow saw and moved to catch their fall, then felt Morgan slip a small pouch of coins with the unmistakable weight of gold into her pocket -- gold that must have been taken from Galdron's vault. Sparrow's eyes went wide as she realized that this was a display of trust even more than gratitude. Morgan could get thrown into the mines if they were caught... or worse. There would probably be a reward for reporting the theft to Lord Galdron as well... but she would never tell him. Instead, she whispered: "Did he make it out?" Morgan nodded. "Thanks to you." "Anytime," she found herself saying - and to her surprise, she actually meant it.

(beat)

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Instead of hiding these coins in the roof like the first one, Sparrow took them to her father and explained what happened -- the prisoner, the chase, Morgan's words and the way she felt. As soon as Sparrow finished, her father beamed, telling her she may have saved another life that day. Sparrow shrugged it off, saying he was just being dramatic, but he motioned for her to come close, hugging her tight as he said, "Little bird, you've done more good than you know."

(beat)

Sparrow couldn't see it, but her father had keener eyes and ears than most gave him credit for. The effects of her actions had begun to spread across the town. People were less suspicious of their neighbors, more willing to lend a hand. Trade had become less hostile as vendors felt like they could trust that people weren't trying to rip them off. And people had even begun to exchange gifts -- gifts! -- for the first time in almost 50 years, giving things away without expecting anything in return. Lord Galdron had also begun to notice the changes, though he couldn't begin to guess their cause. Neighbors paid each other's taxes on his very doorstep, chronic debtors miraculously arrived at his manor with the coin or firewood to pay off their debts, and his dungeons were more empty than they'd been since the long winter began. This worried the lord more than it should have: without a source of conscripted workers, the mine was starting to lose money, and if there was one thing Lord Galdon hated more than these damned peasants, it was losing money.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

He decided his best course of action was to double the tax on the town, hoping to solve both problems at once: when the poor amongst them failed to pay and everyone else was too worried about themselves to help, it would destroy the townspeople's newfound sense of camaraderie, refill his mines with fresh workers fattened on the generosity of others, and bring more gold into his coffers to replace the coin he'd lost. And so, he sent his guards to announce it across town the next morning, a week before the month ended and the tax was due.

(beat)

The increased tax was all the market was able to talk about that day. People whispered nervously about how they couldn't possibly afford the increased payment, complaining to one another about their good-for-nothing lord as soon as the guards were out of earshot. All the while, Sparrow seethed quietly on the periphery. She should have known Galdron would pull something like this the moment he figured out that people were happy without him. Her blood boiled with rage against the petty man and her own helplessness to stop him. The gold Morgan had given her could help pay the increased tax for a few people, but she hated the idea of returning it to his vaults willingly. She wanted to scream at him, to curse his name, to fight... but he was untouchable, surrounded by his guards and their swords and the walls of his manor.

(beat)

It was then that she spotted Morgan across the square, clearly listening in on the discontented murmurs -- but also nodding along. A thought suddenly took hold of Sparrow: Morgan wasn't afraid of Galdron, and they worked for him... why should the whole village be afraid? "

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

What if we don't pay the tax?" The words tumbled out of her mouth before she realized she was saying them. It seemed like no one but Morgan had noticed, looking at her with wide eyes. Sparrow just cleared her throat, then said it again, louder: "What if we just don't pay it?"

(tense beat)

Nervous laughter and scoffs rose up to meet her words, along with a few variations on "that's just not an option kid" -- at least, until Fern piped up in agreement. "What's the worst Galdron could do?" she asked. If no one paid, he couldn't arrest everyone... there simply wasn't enough room in the mines or his dungeons for all of them, and who would pay the tax if they were all gone? It was then that Morgan joined in, saying that she was right: even if he'd never admit it, Galdron was more afraid of the townsfolk than they were of him. Even Aidan gave a small cheer, though most people ignored him. A few started to argue that Galdron would just arrest the leaders to force them to back down, but Fern pointed out that the town was better off when they all stuck together, and they should be looking out for one another instead of serving a rich and useless lord. She gave Sparrow a sneaky smile when she said this, and Sparrow suddenly realized she probably hadn't been as stealthy leaving her that coin as she thought.

(beat)

Everyone at the market spent hours arguing about the risks of just not paying Lord Galdron. Then they went home and talked about it some more. And the next day, everyone assembled in the square agreed. On the first of the new month, as Galdron's servants rang the bells to summon the townsfolk for tax day, nobody arrived.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

The lord's manor was open and warm fires blazed wastefully in every hearth, but nobody stepped through the doors. Lord Galdron spent the entire day in his chair in the great hall, alternating between fits of confusion, anger, and shock before settling into a deep, dark mood of irritation. By midday, he ordered his guards to go into town and escort people back to the mansion to pay their dues, but when they arrived in the village the streets were empty, and no one answered their doors when they knocked. When the guards returned and sheepishly told Galdron they couldn't find anyone, he yelled at them so harshly that several of them just walked out of the manor immediately, taking their swords and armor with them and never returning. Those who remained were sent back into town with explicit instructions to break down doors and rough up any townspeople they could find until they got their payment. This order stunned them all, as most of them grew up in the village and still had family living there. They took to complaining about their good-for-nothing Lord the moment they left the great hall, dreading what they might have to do.

(beat)

Of course they told the townsfolk what they'd been ordered to do, yelling through locked doors they had no desire to break down in hopes of avoiding violence entirely. After a few hours of fruitless yelling in the freezing cold, Fern opened her door a crack and yelled back: "What if you just didn't do it?" She offered them a warm drink at the tavern if they agreed to hear her out. Across the square, the Sleet sisters (listening through their doors, of course), offered the guards a warm meal in exchange for the same promise.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

The guards -- exhausted, freezing, and already angry at their employer's demands -- agreed, and soon a good portion of the town had gathered in the tavern, talking through their reasons for turning on the lord. By nightfall, all of the guards finally agreed to listen to Fern's suggestion, joining the quiet rebellion.

(beat)

When none of those guards arrived at their posts the following day, Lord Galdron became fully enraged. He spent the day furiously pacing from one room to another, screaming abuses at any servant who dared to cross his path. He fired his baker on the spot for the unforgivable crime of baking his pastry a little too long. The woman was nearly 78 years old and had no family left to go to, but that didn't matter to the Lord. Taking her by the arm, he threw her bodily out into the cold that very night, barring the doors and leaving her to wander through the snow, alone.

(beat)

The next morning, Sparrow was again one of the first people awake. She strolled through the quiet streets with her father's shovel in hand, even though there hadn't been any fresh snowfall that night. But as she passed the market square and reached the outskirts of the town, she found the baker. She'd made it much further than anyone could reasonably expect her to in the sub-freezing temperatures with no light to guide her... but she'd collapsed into a snowbank within sight of the village and never got back up. Sparrow stared at the baker's frozen body for a long time before someone else found her.

(beat)

Word got back to the other servants within a day. As Lord Galdon continued to fume, his servants and the few remaining guards at the manor raged against their lord.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

They knew that if he heard it, their own lives and those of their friends would be in danger. But they raged all the same, behind closed doors and in empty rooms all around the house. The baker had been working at the manor for as long as anyone could remember, and she was kind... kinder than anyone who worked for Galdron had any right to be. And though Galdron didn't hear their discontent, he felt it all the same. Servants gave him furtive glances around corners. Guards took longer than they should to meet his eyes. His staff began to mysteriously shrink as people vanished from their quarters without leave. And all the while, the townsfolk continued their disobedience.

(beat)

His grip on his home and the village were slipping, and he knew it -- so he played the very last card in his hand, sending one of his most trusted servants to the town with a message. He ordered them not to open it before they posted it in the square, but of course the servant ignored him and read it the moment they were outside the manor. Their eyes went wide as they took in the words on the page, and they shoved the parchment into their coat before running full pelt all the way to the tavern and demanding a meeting with whoever was in charge of the rebellion. Within the hour, the whole town was once again gathered in the common room as the servant read Lord Galdron's proclamation aloud: If they continued to refuse him payment, he would use his remaining guards to permanently seal the mines... with the captive workers still inside.

(beat)

Everyone in town knew someone working in the mines. Fern had a cousin. Aidan, an uncle. The barkeep's old brewer. The carpenter's best friend.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

The servant warned them not to take it lightly, but they didn't need to. They'd only buried the baker a few days ago, and the image was burned into their minds.

(beat)

The whole tavern went silent as everyone considered the threat. At the edge of the room, Sparrow stood in silence, as she had ever since she found the baker. Her heart felt cold as she thought of her father's accident and how it reshaped her life... of how her mother died in those very tunnels, a victim of the same rockfall. In her nightmares, it was all Sparrow ever saw -- darkness closing in, air running out, layers and layers of stone holding her in place...

(beat)

No. She wouldn't let that happen to anyone else. She wasn't going to let Galdron get away with this... not anymore. She'd had enough. No one else was going to die -- not if she could help it. The silence shattered as Sparrow leapt up on the table and yelled: "No more deaths! We're stronger than he is! We can free the prisoners ourselves!"

(beat)

There was a moment of stunned silence as the entire village stared at this scrawny, ragged looking child standing on a table just to be seen... but her eyes blazed with a fire brighter than any of them had ever seen before. In a moment, the former guards began to cheer, raising their swords to the sky. The others soon joined in. Before Sparrow knew what was happening, the carpenter and blacksmith began handing out whatever weapons and tools they could repurpose from their workshops. Fern and the other growers distributed pitchforks, while the Sleet Sisters rushed into their home and returned wielding their sharpest knitting needles like twin daggers.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

And quite unexpectedly, Sparrow found herself leading this small but fierce army up the road towards the mines.

(beat)

The fight was over before it began. The handful of guards remaining at the entrance put up no fight, gratefully surrendering when it became clear they didn't have to execute Galdron's plan. Soon, the mines were emptied of the workers and prisoners, and hugs were exchanged as frozen tears were shed. But Sparrow didn't stop there. Now doubled in size, she led the rebellious townsfolk down the hill to Lord Galdron's manor, pounding at the door and demanding to be let in. It was opened a moment later by a shy, smiling servant, who quickly raised his hands and surrendered the manor without hesitation. The townsfolk quickly took control of the estate, securing the vaults and searching high and low for Lord Galdron... but there was no sign of him. A few hours later, reports arrived from those remaining in the village that he had been seen fleeing south on horseback. A few of his guards considered giving chase and arresting him... but they soon decided against it. Galdron wasn't worth the time it would take to catch him, and without his gold it was unlikely that he'd get far.

(beat)

And so it was. With the greedy lord gone, the town began to thrive in ways it hadn't since before the long winter began. The newly elected village council -- on which Fern sat as spokeswoman -- decided to continue mining coal, but only once the mine could be made safe... and with no forced labor. The coal was distributed amongst the townsfolk instead of selling it off as Galdron had done...

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

after all, they could hardly burn gold for warmth, though the contents of Galdron's vaults meant they had no shortage of that either. His former estate, meanwhile, remained open and warm: a shelter for any who needed it. The endless waste of opulent furs and empty rooms was finally put to use as warm, safe housing for the elderly and sick, with even Sparrow and her father moving into one of the rooms for a time. Sitting there beside a fire that actually warmed her bones, she finally felt some small measure of hope for the future. She still didn't think the winter would ever end, but she finally had something to look forward to besides just surviving. She had friends now -- a community -- a home. And many years later -- when the fires had slowly begun to burn hotter and the days began to grow longer and warmer -- she was taking a walk in the thawing deepwood when she saw a flower blooming through the snow for the first time in her life.

The sounds of the fire and cooking stew slowly return as mother's story ends.

TEEN

(annoyed, but accepting)
Okay, I get it.

MOTHER

Get what?

TEEN

(admitting they care)
We should share our food with Elizabeth. You're right.

MOTHER

(goes back to stirring the soup)
Does that mean it was a good story?

TEEN

(slightly reluctant)
...yeah.

(MORE)

TEEN (CONT'D)

(beat)
Thank you.

MOTHER

(pleased)
You're welcome. Now how about you
set the table? We're just about
ready to eat.

The Teen stands up and begins laying wooden plates on the table -- then pauses.

TEEN

(worried, but almost
hopeful)
Do you think... do you think
something good will come out of
this, too?

MOTHER

(long pause, thoughtful)
Maybe. Maybe not.
(beat)
But that doesn't make the people
around us any less important... and
it doesn't mean we can't make
things a little better by helping
them now.

The Teen thinks about that for a moment... then goes back to setting the table.

ROLL END THEME
AND CREDITS