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Opening extract from

# Hercufleas

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# Prologue

Greta hurried over the bridge, autumn leaves crunching under her clogs like beetles. The full moon shone in the sky above and wobbled on the water below. She stopped for as long as she dared and stared down at the river's silver ripples, trying to make herself see the past: Mama chopping wood, Wuff with his paws crossed by the fire, Papa stirring soup on the stove. He had told her once about the magic in a full moon's reflection. If you looked long enough, it made a mirror to times long gone. Greta only ever saw her own face stare back. Green-brown eyes, freckles like sawdust, wild brambly hair she never bothered to brush.

She shook her head and blinked until tears rolled down her nose and into the river. It was tradition to cry when crossing the bridge called Two Tears that led to the jetty linking Tumber to the wide world beyond. Her salt mixed with the town's salt, so even though she left, part of her would always be there until she came back. If she made it.

Across Two Tears, the trees began and the rows of little boats bumped against each other in the shallows. Greta untethered one and lowered in her axe and satchel, checking over her shoulder each time. No one chased across the bridge after her. On the far side, the town lay empty and dark. Only in the ruined Church of Saint Katerina on the Hill were the tinderlamps lit. Tonight was a good night to be a thief. By the time the funeral ended, Greta would be halfway to Avalon with the florins.

She unfurled her fist to look at them again. Three glittering coins. The last of Tumber's gold.

Slipping her heel from one clog, she tucked the florins one by one under the leather insole for safe keeping. Then, clonking her feet into the boat, she turned to push herself out onto the river.

*Tap tap.*

Greta froze. At the end of the jetty stood Miss Witz in a black mourning dress, leaning on her cane. The minuscule copper bell hung from her ear on a hoop. A gypsy had charmed it so lies made it ring. When Miss Witz had been her teacher at school, Greta had set the bell chiming many times.

'Those florins are kept in the stone vault below the mayor's house,' Miss Witz said, her walking stick rapping

on the wooden boards, 'which can only be unlocked by the golden key he wears on a chain around his neck. They cannot have been easy to steal.'

All the old babushka had to do was shout. The Tumberfolk would come running down from the church and Greta would be caught. But for now Miss Witz's voice was just a whisper. Greta kept her hand on the jetty, feeling the current pulling at the boat, but she did not let go. She did not do anything except sit very still and listen to Miss Witz, the way she had in school.

'I suppose you waited until tonight because the mayor is in the ruined church, mourning with the rest of Tumber. And since he is only wearing black, I imagine he left his key in the hidden drawer of his desk. But you wouldn't know any of that. Unless, of course, you've been spying on him.' She cackled softly. 'And I wouldn't know any of it either. Unless, of course, *I've* been spying on *you*.'

As she spoke, Miss Witz hobbled closer. Her hair was like a roll of chicken wire and her eyes shone the same steely colour.

'So I suppose what I want to know first,' said Miss Witz, 'is where you are going with all that gold.'

'What gold?' Greta said.

The copper bell gave a tinkle. Miss Witz raised her eyebrows that were drawn on with charcoal and gave Greta a very long stare that seemed to say, *And now the truth, please.*

Greta felt her cheeks go hot. 'I'm not stealing it.' The copper bell rang again. 'Well, I am stealing it, but for good reason, miss. I'm going to Avalon, to buy Tumber another hero.'

'The mayor chooses which heroes will guard us,' said Miss Witz. 'Not you.'

'The mayor chooses wrong,' Greta blurted.

Miss Witz frowned, but this time the copper bell did not ring. She half smiled. 'So you believe what you say. But that does not mean you are right. It means you are either a very astute girl, or a fool.'

'I tried telling him,' Greta said, 'but he doesn't listen. The heroes he brings back—'

'Are the strongest in all Avalon, child. And the strongest in Avalon are the strongest in the world.'

'We don't *need* the strongest,' said Greta. Why was she the only one who understood? 'It isn't about being strong. Papa was strong. Mama was stronger. But the strongest will always be Yuk.'

At the sound of his name, Miss Witz flinched. She

looked away, pulling at a wispy hair on her chin.

'Remember the Crimson Knight?' Greta said quietly. 'With his sword of boiling lava? Yuk guzzled him, then used his sword as a toothpick. Remember the Stone Golem, chiselled from granite and brought to life with alchemy? Yuk crushed him into gravel with his heel.'

In the Church of Saint Katerina on the Hill, the mourning bell began to toll from the broken spire. It rang once for every life Yuk had taken. Greta sat in the boat, counting each faint chime. On and on the bell went. Even when the tolling ended, Greta knew it had not. It would never end. Next month when the moon was new Yuk would come again – and only one thing could stop him.

'Every month that passes, there are fewer of us left,' Greta said. 'Fewer florins. A little less hope. It has to be me who goes to Avalon. Tumber doesn't need a *strong* hero, it needs a *giant-slayer*.'

Miss Witz snorted. 'What a ridiculous idea.'

But Greta smiled, because below her teacher's words, she heard the tintinnabulation of the copper bell.

'You believe me too—'

'*Enough*, child,' snapped Miss Witz. 'You are being very foolish. And making me very ashamed. Who was

it that taught you to steal in this way? Not I.'

Greta scowled.

'You were clever in taking the florins,' Miss Witz continued, coming right up to the boat, 'but you did not think through your escape.'

She twisted the fox-head handle of her walking stick. With a click, a small silver tongue sprang from its mouth: a hidden blade. 'Did you think no one would come for you when your thieving was discovered?'

Before Greta could move, Miss Witz stabbed the cane down, slicing the ropes tethering all the other boats to the jetty. With sharp kicks, she sent each one spinning in lazy circles across the river, where the current took hold and swept them away.

'How will the mayor chase after you now?' With a wink, she tapped her cane on Greta's hand that still gripped tight to the jetty. 'You can let go now, child.'

Greta looked up at her teacher, searching for words.

'You are right,' Miss Witz said. 'Go to Avalon. Go. Bring us the hero we need.'

'I will,' she whispered. 'I promise.'

'I did not see you,' Miss Witz said, her copper bell tinkling mischievously. 'I was not here.'

Then Greta pushed out on the river, paddling

downstream with clumsy strokes, carrying the last of Tumber's gold, and the last of its hope.

Towards Avalon, the island of heroes.

To bring back a giant-slayer.



