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Scatterheart

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Once upon a time, there was a poor man who had a daughter. She was very beautiful, but she was selfish and vain, and her heart was as fickle as the changing winds. For this reason, she was known as Scatterheart.

The turnkey pushed Hannah into the cell, and clanged the door shut behind her. Hannah's eyes stung and she felt a heavy churning in her belly. The smell of urine, vomit, sweat and rotting flesh was overpowering, and she broke out in a hot, prickly sweat, despite the icy night.

Her mouth filled with saliva, and she doubled over and threw up onto the grimy stone floor. Wiping her mouth, she drew a ragged breath, but the smell was so unbearable that her throat closed over and her stomach heaved again. She fell

to her hands and knees, gasping and retching.

'Look here,' remarked a dry voice. 'This blowse must have a padlock on her arse, that she shites through her teeth.'

There was a ripple of coarse laughter.

Hannah closed her eyes, and breathed through her mouth. After a few moments, the nausea subsided, and she opened her eyes.

The cell was small; smaller than her bedroom at home. It was dark, with only a dim torch in the hallway outside to shine a weak light through the thick, black iron bars. The flickering torch seemed to create more shadows than light, but Hannah could make out the shapes of bodies: some moving about in the dark, others still. In sleep or death, Hannah couldn't tell.

There were more than fifty, to Hannah's count. Apart from the comment as she'd come in, no one paid any attention to her. They lay on the floor, some sprawled out with others in a dirty tangle of arms and legs.

Men and women.

She felt sick again.

There was a single window in the cell, high up and barred like the door, with iron rods thicker than Hannah's arm. Grey snowflakes were drifting down through the night sky, illuminated by the gas-lights in the street outside. There were no beds, and only one or two people had a blanket. At the back of the cell, there was a wooden bench that ran the length of the wall. A wooden plank was nailed to the side of the bench closest to the wall. People were curled up on the bench

as if it were a mattress, and the plank were a pillow.

Hannah picked her way through the sleeping people, and crawled onto the bench, into a gap between two sleeping inmates. She curled up, her throat still stinging with bile. She would never be able to sleep in a place like this. Strange sounds came from corners of the cell: grunts and moans and snores. Even though it was freezing, the room felt stifling.

Hannah closed her eyes, and tried to pretend she was back in her own bed. She tried to think about Thomas's story, but all she could see was ice collapsing around her, and a white bear shaking his head and saying, over and over again, *What have you done? What have you done?*

There were only two men in Hannah Cheshire's life, and they could not be more different. Hannah's father, Arthur Cheshire, spent his evenings at respectable gentlemen's clubs, gambling and drinking porter with other men of Quality. Hannah was not exactly sure what her father *did*, but she knew that he was an important businessman.

Her father was always immaculately presented. His necktie was starched and extravagantly folded according to the latest mode. His hats and coats were crafted by the very best tailors. He wore knee-high black hessian boots with golden tassels. He spent a small fortune on a rainbow-coloured assortment of ointments and tinctures for his skin and hair, and he was always well-buffed and delicately perfumed with lavender.

Thomas Behr was Hannah's tutor. *His* coat was shabby and fraying about the cuffs. Holes had been clumsily mended, and his wrists stuck out from the too-short sleeves. The fabric was stretched and pulled across his broad shoulders, creaking when he bent down to pick something up.

Mr Behr was not fat, nor thin, nor did he seem particularly strong or solid. Hannah had the impression that he was ill-at-ease with his large frame. He hunched his shoulders to appear smaller, and seemed restless and awkward in his ill-fitting clothes. He had pale hair that had always slipped out of its neat style by the time he reached Hannah's front door. His silver-rimmed spectacles were slightly bent, and sat askew on his rather beaked nose. His pale skin was flushed and he was very quick to blush when embarrassed. Thomas Behr's modest necktie was carefully tied, but always sat a little crooked.

Arthur Cheshire had met Thomas's uncle at a gentlemen's club. On discovering that Thomas was an Oxford graduate (on scholarship), he immediately sent for him and employed him as Hannah's tutor.

The two men had vastly different opinions about her education. Arthur Cheshire had hired Mr Behr when Hannah was eleven years old, feeling that she had outgrown her nurse. He warned Thomas not to teach Hannah *too* much; he didn't want his daughter to turn into a blue-stocking.

'Just teach her enough to appear *accomplished* to her suitors,' he said.

Thomas Behr had ignored him. He taught Hannah about

history and poetry and mathematics and stars. He told her about the animals that lived in Africa, and about men who made houses from snow in the far north. He taught her French and German and Latin. He read to her from great works of fiction. He told her stories about glass slippers, poisoned apples and white bears.

Hannah didn't notice his worn cuffs. She loved the way he took off his glasses when he got excited – telling her about the Crusades, or about Copernicus's discovery that the earth revolved around the sun. He would pace around the room, talking, throwing his arms around. Hannah thought he looked like a wild animal, trapped in city-clothes. His grey eyes would shine, and Hannah thought that the ocean might be that colour – a sparkling, mottled grey.

Hannah started awake as someone grabbed her, and yanked her off the bench. She looked around, dazed. It was still dark, so she couldn't have been asleep for long. Her assailant grabbed the front of her dress and shoved a pock-marked, gap-toothed face before Hannah's.

'That's my bed,' it hissed through lips that were blotchy with red and white sores. The person – Hannah couldn't tell if it was man or woman – spat on Hannah, and its breath made her gag. 'Doxie slut. You have to pay to kip on the bed. So show us your blunt, else it's on the floor with the rest of the maggots.'

Hannah stared, uncomprehending. The person shoved her roughly, and she sprawled to the floor, colliding with several sleeping bodies, that grunted in protest. Hannah crawled to a small patch of floor beneath the window. A gust of wind blew a flurry of snow down on her, but at least it brought clean air in with it.

The stone floor was hard, and damp with urine and saliva. Hannah's hips and shoulders ached. She rested her head on her arm, and remembered the day when everything had changed. It had started well.

She and Mr Behr were in Hyde Park, their laughter billowing out before them in white clouds. Mr Behr was making snow animals. Hannah had to guess what they were. Sheep, elephants and tigers paraded across the white-blanketed gardens. Then he made something that Hannah had never seen before.

'Is it a rabbit?' she said.

'No,' said Mr Behr. 'Much bigger than a rabbit.'

'A hare?'

Mr Behr laughed, and Hannah felt his warm breath on her cheek. 'It's a kangaroo.'

'A what?'

'A kangaroo. From New South Wales.'

And he told her about the strange animals, as big as seven feet tall, who carried their young around in a pocket.

'What a funny creature,' said Hannah. 'I would like to see one.'

Mr Behr smiled. 'I can show you a picture of one when we go back to the house,' he said. 'I brought a book.'

Mr Behr always arrived with a parcel of books tucked under his arm. Her father didn't approve of books, and Hannah hid them in her bedroom, and read them by candlelight.

'I want to make an animal first,' said Hannah.

She pulled off the fur muff keeping her hands warm, and knelt in the snow. She frowned, concentrating. She was trying to make a giraffe, but she couldn't get the neck right. It kept breaking when she tried to add the head. Her fingers ached with cold, and icy water soaked through her dress.

'A chicken?' guessed Mr Behr.

'No,' said Hannah. 'I'm not finished yet.'

'A turkey? An otter?'

Hannah's creation crumbled again.

'Hmm,' said Mr Behr, looking at the shapeless mound of snow. 'A mole hiding under a molehill? An anteater disguised as an anthill?'

'It was *supposed* to be a giraffe,' said Hannah.

'Of course,' he said, the corner of his mouth twitching. 'I can see that now.'

Hannah heard the rattle of a carriage, and looked up to see a smart curricle, with lamps and silver moulding, go flying down Rotten Row. She wondered what people of Quality would think to see her playing children's games in the snow.

'We should go home, Mr Behr,' she said.

Mr Behr glanced at the curricle, and raised an eyebrow.

'You should call me Thomas,' he said. '*Mr Behr* makes me feel about a hundred.'

Hannah felt herself blushing, and looked away.

The twitch around Mr Behr's mouth curled into a real smile. 'How about one more,' he said.

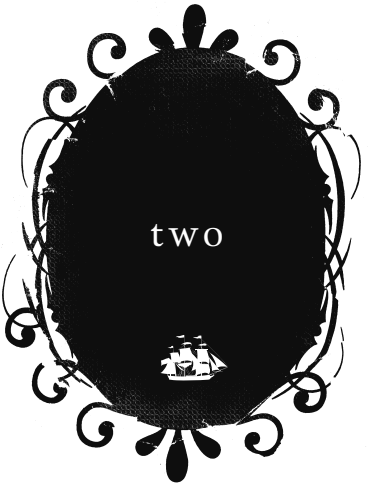
He got down on his knees beside her, and scooped some more snow onto Hannah's failed giraffe. He smelled like cinnamon. He smoothed the snow, and shaped four short legs, a rounded body, and a long, angular head. Hannah watched him. His hat fell off as he bent his head, and landed upside down. The faded grey silk lining was so worn it was crumbling away. Mr Behr's hair was pale, almost as white as the snow. It was rumpled and stuck out at strange angles like ruffled goose-down. Hannah had a sudden desire to run her fingers through it.

Two little ears appeared on either side of the head of Mr Behr's creation. He felt in his pocket, and produced two currants, which became black, beady eyes.

'There.' He stood up, brushing snow from his knees.

It was a bear. A white ice-bear.

'Once upon a time,' he said. 'There was a girl called Scatterheart…'



One dark, wicked evening, Scatterheart and her father were sitting by the fire. The rain fell hard and the wind blew so fiercely that the walls of their little cottage shook. All at once, there were three taps on the window. The man looked out, and saw a great white bear.

When Hannah woke again, pale daylight was leaking in through the little barred window. She sat up, and the room spun a little. She was shivering.

Her gloves were gone. So were her bonnet and shoes. Even the lace from the hem of her dress had been torn off.

An old woman sat with her back against the wall. Her face was deeply lined, and Hannah thought she must be at least a hundred. She wore an old-fashioned pair of stays with no

over-dress and a moth-eaten skirt of indeterminate colour. She looked at Hannah with glittering black eyes.

'Someone took my bonnet and my shoes,' said Hannah to the old woman. 'Did you see who it was?'

The woman spoke in a Scots accent so thick Hannah could barely understand her.

'Tis na more a pity to see a woman greit, than to see a goose go barefoot.'

Hannah watched a fat louse crawling up the woman's arm. All at once, the woman grabbed the tiny insect, and popped it into her toothless mouth.

She chuckled. 'There is none so crouse, as a new-washen louse,' she said, chewing.

The door to the cell banged open, and a turnkey tossed two buckets into the room, one sloshing with water, the other filled with scraps of bread. The other people quickly crowded around them, grasping and snarling at one another like dogs. Hannah's stomach rumbled, and she got up cautiously and went over to the bread bucket. It was empty.

'Is you hungry, little miss?' said a voice behind her.

Hannah turned around. It was the person who had evicted her from the wooden bench during the night. In the watery daylight, Hannah could now see that it was a young woman, not much older than twenty, but very tall, with broad shoulders and long legs. She was filthy, her face was scabbed and pock-marked. Several of her teeth were missing, and her hair was thin and wispy. She wore a dirty skirt and stays laced tight to

push up her bosom. On her head sat Hannah's bonnet. She sat on the floor, skirt hitched up and bare legs spread out before her. She leaned against a dark, bearded man, who casually laid his hand on her leg. She stared insolently at Hannah, and held up a hunk of bread.

'You wants this?'

Hannah's mouth watered at the sight of the bread, but she tried to remain demure.

'I think you have my hat,' she said politely.

The woman laughed, and affected a posh-sounding accent. 'I'm sure madam must be mistook,' she said. 'This here is my bonney, bought for me by Black Jack, here. A bonney from my bonny love.' She patted the arm of the bearded man, who pushed her skirt back to move his hand further up her thigh. Hannah blushed.

The woman dropped the posh voice, and looked at the bread in her hand. 'I'll give you this here pannam. Does you want it?'

Hannah nodded.

The woman smiled, showing a few lonely grey teeth. 'I wants that coat you're wearin'.'

She put her hand up to the fur collar. The woman had already stolen her bonnet, and probably her shoes and gloves as well. She wasn't getting her pelisse!

'I'll give you my bonnet for the bread,' said Hannah.

'Sounds like a round deal,' agreed the woman. 'Let's see it, then.'

Hannah frowned. 'You're wearing it.'

The woman shook her head. 'You must think me a rum cull, tryin' to trade me me own hat! Give me that there coat, and the belly timber is yours.'

'No, thank you,' said Hannah. 'I think I'll just wait until nuncheon.'

The woman burst out laughing, a deep open laugh. 'Nuncheon!' She clutched the arm of the bearded man. 'Does you hear this moll, Black Jack? Nuncheon! She must've come from the royal palace I expect. Nuncheon, your ladyship!' She slapped her thigh. 'We don't gets nuncheon in Newgate, y'ladyship. Nor dinner, nor supper, nor high tea. This here,' she waved the bread around, 'is it. Until tomorrow.'

Hannah looked at the piece of bread, and her stomach ached. But she remembered the cold of the night before, and shook her head. 'I won't be staying long anyway,' she said. 'This is all a misunderstanding.'

This set the woman off into a fresh gale of laughter. 'Sure it is, y'ladyship. You ain't done nuffin.'

Hannah narrowed her eyes. 'You have no idea who I am,' she said. 'But sooner or later someone is going to come along who does, and then you will all be sorry.'

She went over to the water bucket, and dipped a cupped hand in. The water tasted like mud and metal, but her throat was parched and sore from being sick the previous night. She then picked her way over to the bars to wait for the turnkey to return.

Some of the inmates slept, others played at cards or dice, swigging great mouthfuls of gin from dark brown bottles. A heavily pregnant woman lay awkwardly on the ground, her hands resting on her swollen stomach. Another woman suckled an infant. Hannah watched for a moment, fascinated and faintly horrified, then blushed and looked away when the woman met her eyes. Did all babies feed like that? Hannah thought it quite strange. Had she drunk from her own mother's breast? Hannah couldn't remember anything about her mother, but she was sure she wouldn't have fed Hannah that way. Her father would have thought it vulgar.

Hannah and Mr Behr arrived home from Hyde Park just as Arthur Cheshire was coming down the stairs for breakfast. He wore a green brocade dressing gown embroidered with brightly coloured oriental birds and flowers. His eyes were ringed with dark circles, and his face seemed to be sagging with exhaustion.

He took one look at his bedraggled daughter, her hair slipping out from its pins, and pursed his lips. Thomas looked down at his feet.

'Go and change your dress,' Arthur Cheshire said to Hannah. 'I need to have a word with Mr Behr.'

They went into the dining room. Hannah crouched on the stairs, straining to hear what was going on. Her father's voice sounded low and angry.

'…anyone could have seen her…'

Mr Behr murmured a response. Arthur Cheshire's voice continued its lecture.

'…high expectations for my daughter… attract a man of great fortune…'

Hannah bit her lip and crept upstairs to her room to change.

After about an hour, her father called her down to the dining room. Hannah pinched her cheeks and smoothed her hair before she went in.

He was sitting, reading a newspaper. A large glass of brandy was on the table in front of him.

'Morning, my love,' he said absently.

'It's afternoon, Papa.'

'Is it?' He looked up. 'I'll be damned.' He reached for the brandy glass.

Her father's manservant, Adams, entered the room, followed by Lettie, the maid. They laid silver and porcelain dishes of soused herrings, buttered eggs, cold sirloin and wafer-thin slices of ham on the white linen tablecloth. Arthur Cheshire gestured for Adams to refill his glass.

'Did you have a late night, Papa?' asked Hannah, sitting down at the table.

'Devilish late,' he replied, loading his plate with food. He shovelled eggs into his mouth, and washed them down with brandy. Then he looked at her and narrowed his eyes.

'Angel, I want you to know I'm very disappointed.'

Hannah twisted the tablecloth between her hands, feeling that she might cry. 'Papa, please don't let Thomas go.'

Arthur Cheshire raised a well-plucked eyebrow. 'I have spoken at length to *Mr Behr* about his… methods of education. They are entirely inappropriate for a young lady of Quality.'

Hannah said nothing.

'When I hired him,' Arthur Cheshire continued, 'I expressly outlined the kind of education that I wished for you.'

'But Papa,' said Hannah. 'Thom– Mr Behr has been the very best of teachers. He has taught me all sorts of wonderful things.'

Arthur Cheshire frowned. 'That is precisely the problem,' he said. 'It is quite unnecessary for a young lady of Quality to know about the heathen gods of Egypt, or the voyages of Marco Polo. Unnecessary and undesirable.'

Hannah's lower lip trembled.

'Hannah, you need to understand that you must conduct yourself in a proper and dignified fashion if you want to find a good husband.'

Hannah looked at him. 'A husband?'

He smiled. 'Of course, my love. Isn't that what you want?'

She reached out and took a slice of ham.

'You're a beautiful young lady,' said Arthur Cheshire. 'You'll catch yourself a fine man.'

Hannah tore the ham into thin strips. *Was* she beautiful?

Her father leaned over and patted her on the knee. 'We shall find you a rich husband, and you shall have a grand house in Mayfair, and carriages, and fifty servants, and you will hold the finest parties London has ever seen.'

Hannah thought about that. It *did* sound wonderful.

'But what about Mr Behr?' she asked.

'I shall let Behr go at the end of the month.'

Hannah stopped, her hand half-raised to her mouth. She put the ham down again on a plate.

Her father sighed. 'You're nearly fifteen, Hannah. Much too old for a tutor.'

'Oh,' said Hannah. She wondered what she would do all day without Thomas Behr.

'You shall be far too busy going to parties and meeting rich men,' said Arthur Cheshire.

'Yes, Papa,' said Hannah.

'We'll get you tutors to teach you skills more appropriate for a young lady. Dancing. Pianoforte. Painting. Then, when you are fifteen, you shall be ready to enter Society.'

Hannah said nothing.

'That reminds me,' said Arthur Cheshire. 'Mr Harris is coming to dine with us tonight. Make sure you dress well.'

Hannah made a face. Mr Harris was a fat, asthmatic man who played cards with Arthur Cheshire. He was at least fifty years old, and was always pink and sweating.

'Now, Hannah,' said her father, downing the last of his brandy and standing up. 'Mr Harris is a very rich man. You'd

do well to impress him. He has a house on Grosvenor Square, you know.'

He touched an elegant finger to her cheek, and then left the room, his dressing gown billowing behind him.

Hannah scowled at the thought of having to spend an entire evening in Mr Harris's company, listening to him wheeze and stammer, and watching the sweat stains under his arms grow as the evening wore on. Thomas Behr despised Mr Harris, calling him a toad-eater.

Hannah sighed, and poked half-heartedly at the buttered eggs with a fork. It didn't really matter what Thomas Behr thought, because Papa was letting him go.

When Hannah was younger, she and Thomas used to make up stories about the animals woven into the Turkish rug in the sitting room. Hannah would tell him about the outrageous adventures of the tiger and the elephant, and he would laugh and laugh, until his eyes filled with tears.

She put down the fork and stood up. She only had a few lessons left with Thomas. At the end of the month he would leave, and she would probably never see him again. She thought about Thomas, with his rumpled coat and snow animals. The way he looked at her sometimes. She thought about how she had wanted to touch his hair in the park. Then she imagined wearing jewels and beautiful dresses. She thought about riding through Hyde Park in her own carriage. Perhaps her father was right, it *was* time to grow up.