

Oblivion Girl – Episode 3

ESSA NARRATION

Skyride Studios presents... Oblivion Girl, episode Three. Miss Misery.

ESSA NARRATION

The dream that night differed from all the previous ones. In the middle of the desert, there was a ship roasting in the hot sun.

Coral reefs had partly covered the massive wreck, now baked onto the outer shell.

Faded white letters stamped on the side of the ship read, “the S.S. Misery”.

What a gloomy name to give such a fine vessel, as if from the time it was born, it was cursed.

(Thunder Rumbling)

The feeling felt strangely familiar.

The land had long dried up and left the enormous ship stranded in a vast wasteland of sand and rock. I claimed the ship was my personal playground and ate lunch high up on the main deck.

Jumping aboard the turrets, I imagined shooting down enemy aircraft.

(Cawing) (Screaming) (Explosion)

Those things were awesome.

From the deck, I could see other stranded ships, far out in the distance. I readied myself for their inevitable attack.

ESSA

Pirates, off the starboard bow!

ESSA NARRATION

A sandstorm approached and engulfed the ship without warning.

Fast winds sandblasted my body. I put on my gas mask and took charge of steering the ship clear of the storm.

(Laughing)

The harsh winds pushed against its rusted side and made the metal creak and moan.

After the sandstorm passed, a silhouette of a young man stood at the bow of the ship. With the sun behind him, it was hard to see his face.

ESSA

Hello? Who goes there?

ESSA NARRATION

He put both arms out to his sides and jumped overboard. I rushed over in hopes of catching a better glimpse.

(Screaming)

It wasn't a fast fall. It felt more like falling through Jell-O. Right before I hit the ground.

I woke up in a place I didn't remember falling asleep.

A small circular window was the only light inside the metal coffin they called my quarters. My body was sprawled out on the hardest bed man could engineer. I'm sure someone got a great discount for buying all these awful mattresses in bulk.

ESSA

An earthquake? No, it was too slow.

ESSA NARRATION

Then I remembered we had already been on the ship for almost a week.

ESSA

We're still in the middle of nowhere.

ESSA NARRATION

Atticus and I were headed cross-country on a tanker to trade goods overseas.

BOAT CAPTAIN

They sent you to a security? Wonderful...

ESSA NARRATION

In the last couple of months, pirates have been seizing ships.

PIRATE

Yar!

ESSA NARRATION

Stealing the loot and selling them on the black market.

PIRATE

Hey, who wants uh... whatever this is? It's half off.

ESSA NARRATION

We were paid by this company to keep the goods intact and on time. It just took me a bit longer than I'd hoped to get my sea legs.

(Puking)

Five days in a row of throwing up wasn't very menacing, but at least I'd kept a slim figure. I got dressed and made my way up to the top deck. In the hallway stood Atticus, looking out into the whole lot of nothing ocean. He still hated the water and used any chance he got to let his mind wander back to dry land. I couldn't blame him, though. I didn't want to be here either.

Luckily for me, all it took was a friendly slap on the head to get him to come back from Never Neverland.

ESSA

See anything?

ATTICUS

Nothing.

ESSA

Well, we're supposed to be looking out for pirates. So I guess that means we're bad at our job.

ATTICUS

I thought pirates were supposed to find you, not the other way around.

ESSA

Maybe if they hear someone going overboard, they'll come to rescue you, I mean... them.

ATTICUS

Ha ha, isn't it time for you to stuff your face with food? Just like every other hour of the day?

ESSA NARRATION

I looked at my wrist even though I didn't have a watch.

ESSA

Right on time, care to join me?

ATTICUS

I already ate. I'll stay and keep an eye out.

ESSA

Suit yourself, don't work too hard.

ATTICUS

That's the problem.

ESSA NARRATION

Was it me, or did Atticus seem a little more down than usual? Oh well, chow time.

After breakfast, I made my way back to my room and opened my suitcase. Tear gas canisters glimmered hidden beneath my clothes. Since they weren't as effective in the last battle, I had Kial custom make new ones from scratch so I could broaden my offenses and defenses.

ESSA

I'll come play with you later.

ESSA NARRATION

Besides annoying Atticus and terrorizing the crew, there wasn't much else to do. We were only supposed to be on the ship for four weeks, but I was already over it. Then one night, my wish came true.

A small pirate ship had flanked us from behind and matched our speed. When their crew started to board our ship, Atticus covered my mouth and woke me.

ATTICUS

Shhh. They're here.

ESSA NARRATION

I grabbed two new canisters, one with a painted happy face I called Second Sun. It was like a flash grenade, mixed with a flare, times 10. The other canister had the words K-O scribbled on the outside. It had pressurized gas that worked like an anesthetic.

Once the victims took a deep breath of this magic dust, they'd be lights out. Sadly, the effects didn't last long. Kial was working on fixing that.

Equipped with a gas mask, knife, and canisters, I was actually fully prepared for a change. Screw discrete. Darth Vader was coming for their pirate booties.

ESSA

Ouch, that hurt.

ATTICUS

Here, allow me.

ESSA NARRATION

I looked at his smug face as he walked out first. Not the explosive start I had hoped for, but the fun had just begun.

Out on the deck, the air was calm and quiet. Moonlight glistened off the rippling water. I heard the whispers of the pirates as they moved throughout the ship, zapping the crew unconscious with tasers.

Primitive weapons. I liked the odds. I kissed the canister with my gas mask still on, before tossing the Second Sun into the air.

It turned night into day, lighting up the ship for miles around. The rightness was overwhelming, too much to bear. So I had Kial engineer Welder's glass into my gas mask. With one push of a button, I had instant sunglasses, baby.

(Man Screams)

PIRATE

Retreat, run away!

ESSA

Aw, where are you guys going? The buried treasure's over this way.

ESSA NARRATION

I popped the KO canister and tossed it right off a pirate's head, showering him with sandsman sand.

I hoped Freddy Krueger didn't get him before I had the chance. I ran up to sleep in beauty, but his pirate buddies dragged him away before I could carve him up.

They kamikaze's off the ledge with ropes and landed safely on our ship. Like that was going to stop me.

ESSA

Oh no, whatever will I do?

ESSA NARRATION

And just like in the action movies, I Mary Poppins off the ledge after them.

My landing, however, wasn't so supercalifragilistic.

(Woman Groans)

I'll need to work on those.

I stood and looked to my left. Two fleeing pirates dragged their unconscious pal away. Then their backup showed up and ruined everything.

(Draw sword) (Men Scream)

Classic pirate bullshit.

Two pirates crisscrossed down the ship towards me. I tossed them a couple of Second Suns each, but failed to slow them down. In a blink of an eye, they were within arm's distance.

Metal sparked as our blades danced together. I realized quickly that I needed extra backup.

An instant smoke screen consumed us. The pirate boat sped away from the tanker, along with my smoke screen.

ESSA

A pirate ship that uses engines.

(Man Screams)

You guys can't even pirate right.

ESSA NARRATION

With one already tucked into the night, only five crew members remained, and I wasn't about to stop anytime soon.

I crept through the vessel, still searching for the man I had knocked out. He was hiding, and I'd forgotten to read him his bedtime story.

Grown men should never hide from a girl, even if she does have murderous intentions. I made my way down to the lower deck, and guess what I found? The biggest pile of loot I'd ever seen. Stolen supplies from other cargo ships.

I explored the remainder of the lower deck, but only found dead rats.

ESSA

Who's driving this ship?

ESSA NARRATION

I peeked through a glass window on the main deck, but saw no one. What was this? A ghost pirate ship full of loot? I could taste the cliché in my mouth and wanted to gag.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp prick on the back of my neck, and my vision went blurry.

ESSA

What is this? A blow dart!?

ESSA NARRATION

Those bastards had drugged me.

ESSA

Cunts—

MR. MORNING BREATH

Don't worry, I'll find out who she is.

ESSA NARRATION

Once I was unconscious, they all came out of their hiding spots. My weapons had been stripped, and my hands and feet were tied.

ESSA

Worst wet t-shirt contest ever, boys. I'm the only participant, and the judges look like a bunch of dead men.

(Growling)

MR. MORNING BREATH

You've got a nasty mouth for such a pretty face.

ESSA

Yeah, you got nasty breath for such an ugly one.

ESSA NARRATION

Maybe I should untie myself next time before making fun of their hygiene?

ESSA

When you're done staring up my skirt and want to talk business, let me know. I'll be down here, making out with the rats.

ESSA NARRATION

Even though the fall bruised my dignity, it helped loosen the ropes. Before Morning Breath could speak, my hands were already free, but I didn't let on.

MR. MORNING BREATH

Who are you?

ESSA

You might have heard of me. I go by the dreaded name of Mrs. Go-Fuck-Yourself!

MR. MORNING BREATH

What are these? Where did you get them?

ESSA

Aren't those just cans of free fried beans? At least, that's what the guy at the grocery store told me.

MR. MORNING BREATH

Are you done being stupid?

ESSA

Is that's all you got? You punch like a child.

ESSA NARRATION

He pulled back for another, but this was getting old.

I caught his punch mid-air. The look on his face was priceless. I stood with my feet still tied to the chair.

ESSA

You look tired. Have a seat.

(Grunts)

MR. MORNING BREATH

My, my, my handddd.

(Passes out)

ESSA NARRATION

He'll feel that in the morning. Two pirates were left, but were too preoccupied with hiding their piss stains to fight me.

PIRATE

OUCH!

ESSA NARRATION

And the other lay down with his hands in the air.

PIRATE

No, don't. I give up.

ESSA NARRATION

Some scourge of the seven seas. I kicked him in the ribs.

PIRATE

Ouchies!

ESSA NARRATION

Grabbed my gear and walked out to the deck, only to find we'd been docked the entire time.

ESSA

Son of a...

ESSA NARRATION

I went back into the ship and gave the guy another kick in the ribs.

PIRATE

No, no, no.

(Grunts)

Why?!

ESSA

I thought you were kidnapping me, but you've just docked?

ESSA NARRATION

Finally, I could walk more than 30 feet in one direction. I knew I could explore the island later, after I had slid some food down my throat.

I stepped inside what looked like the only bar on the island. The best thing about places like this was the food would be fantastic, even if the place looked condemned.

ESSA

Give me the biggest plate of lobster you got!

BARTENDER

Coming right up!

ESSA NARRATION

Then, in the blink of an eye, it was gone.

ESSA

Thanks for the food.

BARTENDER

Hold up, you forgot your bill.

ESSA

Put my tab on the pirate ship docked outside.

BARTENDER

Afraid I need it paid, right now.

(Gun Clicks)

ESSA

But I don't have any money...

BARTENDER

Then I'll take your life instead.

ESSA NARRATION

I remembered the good old days when all a girl had to do was bat an eye and show her little skin to make money problems go away.

From the shine of his wedding ring and his beautiful wife standing in the corner holding a shotgun.

(Gun Clicks) (Grunts)

I could tell they weren't gonna have any of it.

ESSA

Listen, it's been a rough week. So, unless you want to end up as another feather tattoo on my back, I suggest you go back behind your bar, and charge the pirate ship like the good little boy you are. You sorry ass talky-talk neat puppet!

(Gun Fires) (Gasps)

ESSA NARRATION

I ran out of the bar and managed to lose him in the local market. I realized I was now lost.

Confident that Atticus had everything under control at the tanker.

(Snores)

I decided to treat this as my own personal vacation. Exploring around, I learned that this place was called Astor Island, a midway stop for tankers on long hauls.

(Horn Honks)

If that were true, it would just be a matter of time before the tanker docked here on its way back. I considered skipping out on the two-week journey as my reward. Perfect, I didn't have to deal with any of that bullshit.

(Bumps into someone)

ESSA

Hey buddy, watch it.

ESSA NARRATION

Hmm? I had known this coat, but from where?

ATTICUS

Nice to see you too.

ESSA

And I needed the break so bad too.

ATTICUS

What?

ESSA

Thanks for rescuing me, jerk. So happy to see you.

ATTICUS

Huh?

ESSA

Come on, Sherlock. On to the next case.

ATTICUS

Does that mean you're Watson?

ESSA

I'm sorry, did you just call me fat?

ATTICUS

Well, you do eat a lot of ice cream.

ESSA

You might want to sleep with one eye open tonight.

ATTICUS

Was already planning on it.

ESSA NARRATION

Apparently, if you mess with one pirate, the rest come running. We'd just passed Astor Island a few days ago when, in broad daylight, we found our ship surrounded by a fleet of scallywags.

(Screams)

Skull and crossbones to match.

Luckily, we'd already successfully dropped off the shipment before their attack. The raiders would be furious when they found out.

ESSA

Atticus, come with me.

ATTICUS

How do you always find me when I'm eating... What's going on?

ESSA

Pirates are here, isn't it wonderful?! Here's what I was thinking. If we go and prep our gear, I think we could...

ESSA NARRATION

Within minutes, the tanker crew were all tied up and forced to sit on the deck. That's when I got to see the famous one-eyed captain, Osiris himself.

He was a grim-looking son of a bitch. Without the beard, he'd probably look like an average, ugly, middle-aged man. His coat was beaten and battered from the sea wind. I'm sure if I'd looked hard enough, a few seagulls had used it as a toilet.

His voice was deep and thrashed. Skin baked and cracked. This was the type of man who didn't know the meaning of the word sunblock.

Perched high on the radar antenna, I spied on a group of marauders.

Atticus was hung off the side of the ship, tied with a rope. It took a bit of convincing, but I was pretty sure the rope would hold all his weight.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

Where's the girl?

ESSA NARRATION

No one said a word. They didn't have a clue.

(Clicks gun)

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

I'll ask again... Where is the girl?

ESSA NARRATION

I had to give it to him. It was persuasive. I pulled the pin on a smoke canister and watched it swan dive down. The smoke began to fill up the deck. And that's when I did the most stupid and coolest thing in my life.

Like an Olympic diver, I jumped off the radar antenna and flew down towards my prey. My blood pumped with enough adrenaline to give an elephant a heart attack. Had I lost my mind? Nope, not yet at least.

I had tied the rope around my holsters and connected it to the radar antenna. 10 feet before hitting the deck, the rope tightened, and I swooshed across the deck like Peter fucking Pan.

With the smoke screen, no one knew where my knife came from until it was too late. This cued Atticus to open fire on anyone standing.

(Gunshots)

A few of their bullets grazed his rope and slowly started to unravel.

ATTICUS

Nooo.

ESSA NARRATION

Now, I know for a fact that I'm not fat. However, that didn't stop the radar antenna from buckling under the weight.

ESSA

Ahhh!

ESSA NARRATION

I looked up just in time to roll away as the antenna crashed onto two pirates.

(Crash)

I cut the rope around my holsters and jumped behind a lifeboat. The smoke cleared, leaving Captain Angry with his sword drawn.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

Sweep the ship, find her!

ESSA NARRATION

Most headed towards the ship's cabins, while others went to the control room. This left our Jack Sparrow wannabe on the deck with only a few guards.

Sadly, they were big, steroid-filled men with tattoos covering most of their exposed skin. They started to follow the antenna rope that led straight to me. I had to think fast. The Second Sun canisters weren't going to do much with the sun already out. Before I could react, one of the meat heads was already looming over me.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

Well, well, well. What do we have here?

ESSA

Meow?

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

Looks to me like we caught a catfish out of water.

(Pirates laugh)

ESSA NARRATION

I guess that was considered funnier than my joke. In seconds, I was unarmed and restrained. I really needed to stop getting tied up by pirates.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

Is this the wench that bested you?

MR. MORNING BREATH

Yeah, that's her.

ESSA

Long time, no see, Morning Breath. I guess you wanted me to meet all your cool friends, huh? Don't worry, once I'm done with them, I'll come find you.

(Laughing while getting punched)

ESSA NARRATION

The only thing going through my head was the look on his face when I got mine.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

Okay, okay, that's enough... for now.

ESSA

And here's your prize.

(Spits in face)

MR. MORNING BREATH

What the fuck? Is that blood? Gross!

ESSA NARRATION

Where the fuck was Atticus?

That's right, still dangling over the edge, debating whether to save my life or take his chances in the ocean. Both were apparently on par.

ATTICUS

Well, here goes nothing.

(Splash)

ESSA NARRATION

He swam, poorly, over to the captain's ship and clung to the outside as quickly as he could.

(Coughing)

The pirates dangled me over the water as if to say, Lay nice or you are fish food.

I looked down and spotted Atticus staring at me.

ATTICUS

Huh?

ESSA NARRATION

Anything would have been better than being humiliated like that.

Atticus worked his squish away around the side of the ship and onto the main deck. He opened the nearest door and realized he was inside the captain's private bedroom. He looked around before deciding to hide in the closet.

In his brain, that was a clever idea.

PIRATE

All right, down to the brig with you.

ESSA NARRATION

Now, all I needed was my knife so I could whittle my way out. Sadly, I'd have to wait for Atticus to take his sweet ass time coming to rescue me.

ESSA

Atticus, where the fuck are you?

JAILED PIRATE

AT-TI-CUSSSSS. HAHAHA

ESSA

Are those playing cards? Care to wager your life against mine?

ESSA NARRATION

By nightfall, Atticus was still in the closet, as alert and ready as when he had first entered.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

And don't wake me before dinner.

PIRATE

Aye aye, sir.

(Captain falls asleep)

ESSA NARRATION

The only problem was the captain wasn't an easy sleeper. It took three hours before Atticus heard him snoring.

Atticus dressed himself in the captain's clothes and took out a pistol. He opened the closet and crept to the side of the bed.

(Knock at door)

Captain Osiris opened his eyes to see a surprise-looking Atticus pointing a gun at him.

ATTICUS

No funny stuff.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

What do you want?

PIRATE BUMBLEWISK

Yo, captain, it's me, Bumblewisk. I'm here to shiver ye timbers.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

I'm a bit tied up right now. You'll have to wait till tomorrow.

PIRATE BUMBLEWISK

Darn. Okay, bye-bye.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

And now what?

ATTICUS

That's simple. You're going to let me *and* the girl leave the ship alive and unharmed.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

And why would I do that?

ATTICUS

Because if you don't, I'll just shoot you right here.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

And what's to stop me from attacking you once you leave?

ATTICUS

Who said we're leaving?

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

Lead the way.

ESSA NARRATION

He hid the pistol under his coat and pressed the gun against the captain's back as they walked.

Crew saluted the captain as he and Atticus walked by.

PIRATE

Yarr.

ESSA NARRATION

I was in my cell about to make a pirate my new everlasting sidekick, when Atticus and the captain approached. All it took was a glance at the captain to have the inmate jump up and salute.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

Open the cell.

PIRATE

Aye aye sir.

ESSA

About time, jerk.

ATTICUS

You're welcome.

ESSA

So what's the plan?

ATTICUS

I thought you'd have one.

ESSA

Well, something does come to mind.

ESSA NARRATION

I walked up to Captain Osiris, cracked a sweet smile, and held both of his coarse hands in mine. I mustered up all my strength and kicked him as hard as I could in the nuts.

ESSA

Consider this a mutiny.

ESSA NARRATION

We placed Captain Osiris and the guard in my cell before we left. The last thing we needed was Mr. Crotchpane limping around and setting off a bunch of booby traps.

ESSA

All right, everyone, strip down and give us your clothes. NOW!

ESSA NARRATION

They handed me them through the bars and I tossed the captain's uncaringly to the floor.

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

Ugh. What do you want?

JAILED PIRATE

Want to play cards?

CAPTAIN OSIRIS

Ugh.

ESSA

Oh shit. Morning breath.

ATTICUS

Don't worry, there's toothbrushes back on the ship.

ESSA

Not me, him.

ATTICUS

Well, he can't use my toothbrush if that's what you're asking.

MR. MORNING BREATH

Yar!

ATTICUS

Yar! Uh, Yar!

MR. MORNING BREATH

Tis a beautiful night. A drink of me hearty!

ESSA NARRATION

He handed Atticus a drink and made his way over to the next group who cheered as he approached.

MR. MORNING BREATH

Yar!

ESSA NARRATION

Stereotype much? Atticus dumped the drink over the railing and we continued on.

In the distance, lights from other ships streamed across the vast ocean. I wondered if any of them were our tanker. I later found out from Kial that those cowards continued home without us. Suddenly, a low rumble grew louder and louder.

PIRATE

What is that?

ESSA NARRATION

On the port side of the ship, the crew were shouting and scattering about as a metal ship twice the size of ours headed straight towards us.

PIRATE

Everyone to your post! Brace for impact!

ESSA NARRATION

Atticus and I jumped up the side into the water as the wooden pirate ship cracked in half like a twig. This time, Atticus didn't hold back his screams.

ATTICUS

AHHHhhh!

(Splash)

ESSA NARRATION

The attacking ship's rotors silently sliced by us under the water before circling back around. The undertow slammed my head against the wooden ship.

I instantly blacked out. It only took seconds for the wooden ship to submerge into its watery grave.

On the surface, a bunch of panicked men splashed about for their lives. Probably the first bath they've had in years.

I awoke from the concussion to the most hideous thing imaginable.

JOPHIE

Welcome back.

ESSA

I think I'm gonna throw up.

JOPHIE

Well, you did get hit on the head quite hard.

ESSA

No, it's definitely because of your ugly face.

JOPHIE

She seems fine to me.

ESSA NARRATION

Later that day, Atticus helped me piece together the aftermath of what happened.

Apparently, the company that hired us felt they needed to take extra precautions, so they hired Jophie and his gypsies to trail us. If we had failed, neither of us would have received payment. The moment he heard we'd been captured, Jophie hunted down and retrieved us.

JOPHIE

Essa, MY LOVE... I'm coming to save youuu.

ESSA

We had it under control before you gave me this concussion.

JOPHIE

Necessary casualties.

ESSA NARRATION

I hated being rescued, especially by him. It just made me madder. I didn't leave my room the entire trip back home. If the news leaked that I'd been saved by this moron, I'd never hear the end of it. I'd have to move to a new town, and I hated moving.

Later that night, there was a knock on my door.

(Knocking)

ESSA

Go away.

JOPHIE

But I brought you peaches! Atticus said they're your favorite.

(Laughs)

ESSA

Atticus!

(Atticus laughs and runs away)

ESSA NARRATION

Jophie stayed by the door waiting for me to open it. Like that would ever happen.

ESSA NARRATION

When we arrived at Kial's place, he wasn't home. A note left on his door read,

KIAL

Welcome back. I'm gone till the end of the week. Enjoy your free time.

ESSA NARRATION

That's cute, as if we needed permission to have free time.

Atticus didn't even have time to ask where I was going before I was already gone. So he decided to go visit his favorite bar. I never understood why he liked that dump. It wasn't like there was anything special about what they served. They didn't even have good food.

The bar was called Mnemosyne, named after the goddess of memory. Ironic, because most of their customers lost exactly that.

Ayla owned and operated the bar by herself. The place was empty most of the week, so it wasn't like she was stretched thin or anything. Atticus, like most of the customers, had a crush on her. To each their own, I guess.

I've met Ayla before, but she didn't tickle my fancy. But what do I know? I wasn't a horny man-pig, and it wasn't like I could just go up to Atticus and ask why he liked her either. Trust me, I've tried before, and all he ever replied with was silence.

AYLA

Mr. Quiet.

ESSA NARRATION

Ayla could remember names very easily, but preferred to call people by their characteristics. Atticus barely said more than a few words to her, so he was dubbed Mr. Quiet. There was also Mr. Mouth.

MR. MOUTH

Hey, baby girl. Not gonna lie. You're like Sunshine.

ESSA NARRATION

Blue Eyes.

BLUE EYES

Hi there.

ESSA NARRATION

Grumpy, and so on. This was her way of interacting with the customers. If you ask me, Ms. Nicknames should stick to serving drinks.

Ayla was used to men hitting on her and handled their drunken pleas with ease, but to her, Atticus was different. She'd be lying if she said she didn't feel attracted to him as well. She was hopeful he would ask her out and always felt disappointed when he never did. It was like some sick game the two of them played night after night.

AYLA

What'll it be? Same as usual?

ATTICUS

Works for me.

(Pours 5 shot glasses)

AYLA

Ready?

ESSA NARRATION

They both froze with their hands hovering over the outside glasses. Then, as if someone shot a starter pistol, they drank their shots and raced to the middle. By the time Ayla finished her first two, Atticus had already finished the middle glass.

AYLA

Guess you win this time.

ATTICUS

First time for everything.

AYLA

Any new stories?

ESSA NARRATION

War stories was one of the few things she could get Atticus to talk about. Ayla would sit and listen sometimes for hours if the bar was empty enough. She didn't care what Atticus talked about. She just liked listening to his voice. Compared to her, Atticus had an exciting life, the kind she had read in books as a young girl. I was surprised she could stay awake.

AYLA

Want another? It's on the house.

ESSA NARRATION

Dinner time was approaching, and he hadn't even started cooking *my* dinner. The jerk.

ATTICUS

Best get home.

(Opens door)

Hey, Ayla.

AYLA

Yeah?

ATTICUS

You wouldn't happen to want to...uhhh

AYLA

Hmmm?

ESSA NARRATION

Was he going to do it? Was he going to finally ask her out?

ATTICUS

Want to... uhh... put the drinks on my tab?

AYLA

...Sure, hon.

ESSA NARRATION

He'd chickened out again. Oh well, there was always next time.

Atticus walked out to the chilly night air and leaned against the wall to replay his bad choice.

ATTICUS

....Put the drinks on my tab?

ATTICUS

Ugh, good job, idiot.

ESSA NARRATION

Back at home while prepping dinner, he tried figuring out how he would ask her out.

ATTICUS

Do you want to go out? Want to go out with me? Want to grab dinner? UGHHH.

ESSA NARRATION

That's when yours truly walked in, after a lovely night of eating ice cream. And discovered Atticus relaxing on the couch.

ESSA

You alright?

ATTICUS

I'm fine. I'm going to go to bed.

ESSA

Hey, Atticus.

ATTICUS

Uh-huh.

ESSA

Get some rest. You look like shit.

ATTICUS

Ughhhh.

ESSA NARRATION

When did my sidekick turn into a zombie?

That night, I couldn't sleep. Something in my heart told me to be prepared tonight.

I crept through my window and followed Atticus along the rooftops. I trailed him as he walked into a liquor store. No surprise there, but he didn't come out with just vodka. He also had something wrapped in a paper bag.

He made his way to the outskirts of the city, and I had no choice but to climb down from the roofs.

I followed him to a tree line, and he paused before walking through. How much further was he planning to go? I hid behind a tree as he walked into a gated cemetery. He opened the paper and took out a single flower. The translucent blue looked like a rose, mixed with a tulip, and used to grow natively around our city.

They're called "Lunaflo" because when the full moon's light hits the translucent blue, the flower gives off an eerie glow. The hills around town used to be infested with them. At night, you could see their glow from the next town over, but now they're hard to come by. It's gotten to the point that only shops sell them for unreasonable prices.

Atticus laid the flower gently on a grave and took out a flask of vodka. He took a few chugs of the drink and poured some onto the grave.

ATTICUS

You know, Essa, you're as loud as a marching band when it comes to tailing people.

ESSA

How did he know I was here?

ATTICUS

You going to come out from behind the tree and have a drink? Or what?

ESSA NARRATION

I stomped out of my hiding spot, grabbed the bottle from his hands, and took a swig.

ESSA

How can you drink this crap?

ATTICUS

It'll put hair on your chest.

ESSA

Yeah, perfect. Just what I need. Who's the chick?

ATTICUS

My... older sister.

ESSA

You never told me you had a sister.

ATTICUS

You never asked...

ESSA NARRATION

I'd never seen such sadness in his eyes before. He didn't go around smiling like a lunatic or anything, but this wasn't the Atticus I knew.

ATTICUS

Today's the anniversary of the day she passed away.

It was... an accident.

ESSA

What was? Her death?

ATTICUS

No. Micah's scar.

ESSA NARRATION

Wait, why was he switching the subject to Micah's scar? Why here? Why now? And why did I forget to bring a jacket?

Atticus took off his coat and wrapped it around me.

ATTICUS

He blames me for it. I see why. But honestly, deep down, he knows it wasn't my fault.

ESSA

So what happened?

ATTICUS

I was eating outside at Mnemosyne, minding my own business, waiting for Micah to join me for a game of mahjong. I just finished a chicken sandwich with a side of fries. If you haven't tried a chicken sandwich, it's amazing.

ESSA

Okay, weird details, but whatever. Go on.

ATTICUS

I couldn't eat all the fries, so I started feeding the pigeons.

Micah arrived, and we had a few drinks like we normally do before a game. Once we started playing, I realized the asshole was cheating. I watched him disregard tiles for more favorable ones. Like, hello? I could fucking see you, dude.

So anyways, we're five drinks in, and he starts saying shit like, "What are you talking about? I'd never cheat. You've lost your mind." That kind of bullshit. I grabbed a handful of fries and chucked at his face.

ESSA

Oh shit.

ATTICUS

Next thing I know, one of the pigeons jumps on his face and starts pecking away. The whole time he's screaming, "Ugh, fuck, fucking pigeon, get it off!"

He managed to grab the bird and threw it in the air. Halfway up, the pigeon realizes it could just fly away. So it does.

ESSA

Um, okay.

ATTICUS

So I look back at Micah, and he's got his hand pressed against his face. We haven't talked since.

ESSA

Let me get this straight. You guys weren't fighting over some love interest or breaking beer bottles over each other's heads. He was just attacked by a random pigeon?

ATTICUS

Yep.

ESSA

That's gotta be the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

ATTICUS

Yeah, I guess it was pretty dumb.

ESSA

Who the fuck plays mahjong anymore?

ESSA NARRATION

I didn't really know what to make of his story. I guess Atticus was protecting me because he didn't want to see me end up like his sister.

Who could blame him? He must have been traumatized by it. Maybe I should start going easier on the guy.

ATTICUS

I'm going to bed. I'll see you later.

ESSA

Oh no you don't. I need you to cook me dinner.

ATTICUS

Dinner? It's two in the morning. How can you possibly be hungry?

ESSA NARRATION

He sat at the table and barked out orders while I cooked flapjacks.

ATTICUS

Okay, so you need eggs, flour, and milk. Once those are mixed, then you're gonna have to—

ESSA NARRATION

I was fine with following his orders until he went off the recipe.

ESSA

No!

ATTICUS

Well, why not?!

ESSA

Because no one puts carrots in pancakes!

ESSA

Sleep well.

ATTICUS

Yeah, you too.

ESSA NARRATION

At least the meal seemed to shake him out of his depression. If nothing else, I knew his stomach would be thankful after that liquid diet.

The next morning, I woke up feeling remarkably rested. This would have been the perfect time for an ice cream breakfast. However, when I went into Atticus's house, when I went into Atticus's room to strongly suggest that he fetch us some, I found he'd left the house earlier without leaving a note, as if I didn't already know where he was or who he was with.

AYLA

Mr. Quiet.

ESSA NARRATION

I figured I'd leave him alone for the day and that tonight would be a me night. I checked the calendar in my room.

There was a music festival in Aurora, not far from Lumina. Aurora was known for its incredible dedication to the arts. Their museums were the best around. Their music festivals had free admittance, free contests, and best of all, free food. That's what I call a party.

The festival was mystery-themed, so everyone showed up wearing fancy Victorian outfits with Venetian masks. I had the dress, just not the mask, so guess what I had decided to use in its place? Yep, the gas mask.

I attached a few canisters around my garter belt, just in case shit hit the fan and I needed to switch into contract killer mode. I walked outside and followed the crowd as they walked towards the event. Everyone held candles and lanterns. There were so many, you could trace them headed all the way to Aurora.

Live bands set up and played music along the roadside to entertain people as they made the journey over. Since the festival lasted all weekend, there was no hurry to get there. People stopped on the side of the road to drink and dance. Others sat and watched all the lovely costumes as they paraded by.

Food vendors kept us full, while street artists kept us entertained. Sometimes the side parties were so fun, you wouldn't make it to the main event. I can't let myself get distracted like last time.

I arrived at the ballroom a little later than planned, stuffed my face with food before exploring around. Everyone looked straight out of a 1900s painting. Even though there were hundreds of people, I was the one with the gas mask getting all the looks. I couldn't care less. Let them stare.

I lifted my garter belt, which had stretched and slid down my thigh. Cheap piece of crap. It can't even hold up two simple military-grade canisters. Pathetic. I hid behind the food table and turned away from the crowd as I readjusted the garter belt. Turning back around, I spotted the most attractive man.

He was talking to a young lady, but his eyes were locked on me. Okay, everyone stared at me, but his stares were different. It was tall, dark, and, for what I could tell, handsome. If his voice didn't sound like he's in the middle of puberty, I might have a winner.

Violins started playing as the room paired up. The melody sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite remember where I heard it from. The masked man walked over, leaving his upset female friend, and put out his hand towards me. Under the mask, I was ecstatic. Happy birthday to me.

MASKED MAN

Care to dance?

ESSA

Me?

ESSA NARRATION

I took his hand before I knew it. I was sizing him up to see whether I could beat him in a fight. I must be working too hard.

His hands were strangely soft. Cologne was faint but familiar. I felt dizzy as his wonderful dance skills led me on a tour around the dance floor. I was falling in love.

I tried walking away for a drink but found myself pulled back into his arms for round two.

ESSA

Okay, hotshot. Let's see how long you can last.

ESSA NARRATION

Before I knew it, we danced to over 15 songs as my aching feet begged for us to stop.

The last song of the night ended when we could finally catch our breath. My mysterious masked man bowed to me and retreated outside for some fresh air. I followed and ripped off my steam-filled mask.

The night air poured over my face like ice cubes. The masked man tried to make a getaway, but this time I was the one to pull him back in.

ESSA

You're not going anywhere until you show me your face!

JOPHIE

Hello, Essa.

ESSA

Excuse me. I have to go burn my clothes and take 400 showers.

JOPHIE

Come now, Essa, my love. Was it really that horrible dancing with me?

ESSA NARRATION

Love?

LOVE?!?!

ESSA

In your dreams, buddy.

JOPHIE

Didn't you enjoy as we danced the night away under this beautiful, starlit sky?

ESSA

Let's get one thing straight. I'm no one's girl, especially yours.

JOPHIE

You could be, if you wanted to.

ESSA

Don't be gross, Jophie.

JOPHIE

So are you playing hard to get? Because I assure you, Essa, I'm quite the catch.

(Fart)

ESSA

Ew! No! You're what's hard to get. Read my lips.

JOPHIE

Your beautiful lips.

ESSA

This is never going to happen. It shouldn't have ever begun. I didn't even know it was you.

JOPHIE

Which is why you're so confused right now. Don't you see? Love does that to people. I know you feel the same way I did out on the dance floor. It was electrifying.

ESSA NARRATION

He shook his hips around in a weirdly erotic dance.

JOPHIE

You like that?

ESSA

The only thing I feel is like taking a disinfecting bath.

ESSA NARRATION

I pulled the gas mask back over my disgruntled face, grabbed my dress, and stomped away. I hope no one recognized us.

ESSA

I think I'm going to puke.

ESSA NARRATION

For the rest of the night, Jophie followed me around like a lapdog. So much for having a good time. That's when I found the booze. I don't drink often, but this week seemed to be an exception.

For such a tiny girl, I held my liquor quite well. Two drinks in, and I had already passed out. Apparently not before telling everyone that I loved them more than Jophie.

I woke up the next morning in a bedroom I didn't recognize.

ESSA

Huhhh?

ESSA NARRATION

Please, please don't let it be Jophie's bedroom.

ESSA

Where am I?

ESSA NARRATION

To my left sat an older woman in a chair next to the bed.

KEME

Good morning dear. How are you feeling?

ESSA

W-water.

KEME

My name is Keme. I found you asleep in front of my house after the party last night. Your legs had scratches, so I bandaged them up.

ESSA NARRATION

I should have stayed home. I felt embarrassed sitting in her house, on her bed, wearing her pajamas.

ESSA

I'm so sorry for the trouble. My name's Essa.

KEME

Such a pretty name. No trouble at all, my dear. It's very nice to meet you.

ESSA NARRATION

When she smiled, it was genuine, and I couldn't help but smile back. Something was off though. People like her were usually two-faced, but this woman had nothing but good vibes. I actually liked her.

KEME

How was breakfast?

ESSA

Fantastic!

KEME

Wonderful! You must stay for lunch. I insist.

KEME

What do you do for a living?

ESSA

I'm a bounty hunter.

KEME

A what?

(Swallows food)

ESSA

Sorry, I said I'm a bounty hunter.

ESSA NARRATION

I rolled up my pajama sleeves and showed her my war scars.

KEME

Oh wow, very impressive. Looks like you've been through quite a lot of battles.

ESSA

Oh yeah, more than I can count.

KEME

You must be a real pro.

ESSA

Well, they don't call me the best for nothing. Muhahah. What about you, Keme? Tell me about yourself.

KEME

Me? Oh dear, let's see. My husband, Elex, died a few years ago from a stroke. This was our dream home. I've lived here half my life. We used to stay up late and talk about the family we always wanted.

ESSA NARRATION

Because of the unfortunate incident, Keme and her husband couldn't have children. Each felt as though they'd let the other down.

KEME

Don't let my face fool you. I miss Elex terribly. I got to spend my whole life married to my soulmate. I'm one of the lucky ones.

ESSA NARRATION

When Keme met Elex, she worked as a nurse at Aurora's Medical Hospital, which solved the mystery as to why I was bandaged up so well. She told me about her golden years working in the ER and how the men used to think she was quite the catch.

(Whistle) (Giggles)

She bragged about how she could have had any man she wanted.

I knew at that moment we were going to be long-lasting friends. I wished I'd met her years ago.

KEME

When I met Elex, I didn't find him attractive at all. He was overconfident, self-absorbed, and would say anything to get you to like him.

ESSA NARRATION

That sounded a bit too familiar.

KEME

He was so nervous on our first date. He didn't know what to do.

(Giggles)

When he finally grabbed my hand during a movie, it was so sweaty! But I didn't care. He was sweet to me. We treated each other as equals because we were equals. I couldn't have asked for a better husband.

ESSA NARRATION

The next morning, my legs were feeling good enough to walk. I wished her well and told her I'd be back soon to visit her. Keme just smiled and waved as I disappeared down the road.

(Giggles)

I thought about the stories she'd told me and how things just didn't seem to happen like that anymore.

When I got home, Atticus acted as though I hadn't been missing for two days. It didn't even occur to him that I could have been left for dead in a gutter somewhere.

ATTICUS

If you didn't make it back, I'm sure your ghost would have.

ESSA

Your cooking is reason enough not to haunt you.

ESSA NARRATION

Men. You can't live with them, and you can't shoot them either...

Well...