



THE

Beggar Queen

SADHBH FROST

THE BEGGAR QUEEN

A Societas Aenigmatum Investigation

SADHBH FROST

Fungous Anthropoid Productions

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*For my trans siblings,
for whom the holidays are often fraught*

Author's Note

The events of this story take place roughly two months after *The Wolf Bane*. You don't need to have read that to understand this novelette, and this isn't required to appreciate the next book in the series. They all interact with each other, but this is intended to stand on its own.

This investigation is rooted in an article I read about a legend local to part of the greater London area. I took several liberties to make it work for the narrative, but it remains recognizably close to the source. Folk stories and urban legends are wild stuff!

CHAPTER ONE

Holiday Vacation

Dale

Cassiopeia had spent most of the flight looking out the window. They may not be a puppy girl anymore, but they could still be delightfully absorbed by new experiences. I'd never flown before either, but I'd gotten over the novelty quickly. It was loud, my ears were fucked, and the drinks were lousy. I had to pretend it was pleasant—mainly because I didn't want to harsh my girlfriend's buzz. The part that was harder to accept was that this trip was courtesy of Ms. Annette Kuiper, freshly appointed CEO of Kuiper Innovations and chairperson of the board for Societas Aenigmatum, the organization that paid Cassiopeia and me to wait around in case something preternatural needed to be looked at. That was Livinia's word, preternatural. You could say she was our supervisor, also our head researcher, den mother, landlady, and house. We tried not to think about that last part.

My girlfriend was wolf-touched, which up until a few months ago had meant that when they slept their mind rode shotgun in the phantom wolf that they'd inherited. It also meant that we had to be careful not to get them pregnant, because the wolf would pass to their child, and they wouldn't

survive the separation. Just after we'd met, wolf and nonbinary host had sort of combined, becoming ... something very large and vaguely canine, if canids had a mane of purple tentacles. For all of that, the most unusual thing about our relationship was that for the first time in my life, I wasn't worried about being abandoned. They were way too sweet to drop me like my ex had. I was far more concerned that I was holding them back.

Cassiopeia had managed to blackmail Annette into treating them as family, which would honestly have been proof enough that they're related. The Kuipers are all kinds of awful, and sometimes, I think that the family curse is all that saved my little wolf from being horrible themselves. They'd been kept in a cell for twenty-seven years to keep the wolf from escaping or migrating to another host. Before they'd met me, they hadn't even had a name. For some reason, I was the only one who saw the wolf as fully solid, and I'd met her first. Thinking she was a lost dog—look, I hadn't known wolves came in yellow—I'd named her Cassie. Then Janice had suggested Pia for the human, because together they'd be Cassie and Pia—Cassiopeia! Naturally, my dear, goofy enby had loved the idea.

This holiday trip was Annette's scheme to bond with her distant cousin, and I'd been brought along as their plus one. For Cassiopeia's sake, I'd promised myself that I would be on my best behavior and try to appear grateful or whatever. Fortunately, Mrs. Kuiper had made the flight a day earlier with her son Kevin. That left the two of us alone, at least as passengers, which was a nice treat. A four-hour trip together was relaxing, even in their evil cousin's corporate plane. While we had our own bedroom—with an attached dressing room that we'd converted into a space for gaming, watching movies, and reading yuri—we still lived in the mansion Aletheia with two other people. I wondered if Livinia was actually alive, or if she could be said to live inside of herself.

That thought required another espresso martini, the least awful drink the plane's steward could mix.

We hadn't talked much since takeoff, and that was okay. Living and working together—to the extent there was any work to do so far—gave us all the time with each other we could ever want. They'd asked a lot of questions about planes and flying, and I'd told her what little I knew on the subject that was unrelated to the likelihood of survival in an accident. I think they'd remained convinced that the wings should be flapping, but my knowledge of aeronautics wasn't up to the task of explaining why they didn't need to. Personally, I felt like we were stuck inside a steerable rocket, but I really didn't want to get into the history of missiles with them.

It was the Christmas season, and as much as neither of us had any particular religious leanings, I was excited for them to experience their first holiday. My mind was filled with images and songs from the tapes of old specials my parents had watched with me. The delight and frustration of trying to get the reindeer cookie cutter to leave the antlers on the dough when I pulled it out. All the time in the world to explore the snow and read comics and play both sides of a board game. It's possible I'd always been a bit antisocial. I wanted to share it all with my extremely cool girlfriend, though, so who's laughing now, Carly?

The plane had circled our destination's small private airfield, and we were told to strap in for landing. This was the part I dreaded most. Dumping all that velocity to land safely may be routine, but it was still dangerous, and no one could tell me otherwise. I grabbed their hand, and they squeezed mine back.

"I'm not worried, Dale. You shouldn't be either. Remember the numbers Livinia gave you? We're not likely to die."

Their concern showed in their eyes, clouding the perfect pale blue of them. Even as the weather had gotten colder and the days shorter, they'd spent so much time enjoying the freedom to go outside that they'd tanned a little. Now the

only one paler than me was our other housemate, the colony of fungus in a skin suit.

"I know," I told them. "My nerves don't much care about facts."

"It's okay. If the plane falls, I'll catch you."

That made perfect sense. I believed them completely and joined them at the window, watching the ground rise to greet us.

Cassiopeia

WE ARRIVED at the mansion's grounds in a limousine. Everything here in Arizona was so big. Blueberry Nipples and all of their equipment could have fit in the car with us, though that would be weird. They might recognize us from some of their performances, but we didn't really know each other. I'd thought that Aletheia was large, but whatever this place was called it made our home feel like another cell. A very nice cell, with no guards or keepers, but still a lot smaller than this. Honestly, I had trouble figuring out which building was the house. The spot where we were let out was just a security checkpoint, and beyond that were a bunch of other structures all within the same fenced area. Dale called it a compound.

We were offered our choice of riding in a golf cart or taking e-bikes to where we were expected, while our luggage was taken to our room. Dale wanted to try out one of the bikes, so I jogged alongside her as she drove down the path, carrying the shoes Cousin Annette had gotten me. All of this belonged to someone she did business with, and she had stressed that we needed to "dress and act like civilized people" while we were here. Dale had been offended, but the remark hadn't bothered me. I'd lived in shirt dresses for a few decades and was still getting used to having a choice in what

to wear. There were all kinds of social rules I was still learning, and Annette had lent helpful guidance. She could have been nicer about it, though.

And so I ran in a nice pair of pants, a button-down shirt, a loose tie, and a blazer. Not the most comfortable outfit I'd ever worn, and there weren't any bright colors, but I could tolerate it. Dale looked amazing in her skirt and sweater, but she'd complained about it for a week leading up to the trip. She'd dressed according to my cousin's wishes to make the visit go smoothly for me. She was lovely no matter what she wore, but it would be wonderful if this helped make her a little more comfortable in something other than sweats and hoodies. I wondered if we'd ever wear these clothes again.

We left the bike at a charging station by the entrance to the building. A sign marked it as the Kirkwood Museum of Art. A guard held the door open for us, which put me on edge. I'd been held by them for most of my life, and I wondered if there were cells holding people here. Dale stood protectively between me and the guard as we walked in past him. She never drew attention to it, but she remembered what made me anxious and took steps to help me. Janice called her a "gloomy Gus," but Dale always smiled around me and was very sweet. I think that she just frowned around it because she had to concentrate to figure out what it was saying. I'd learned to stop trying to understand its words and focus on what they felt like, but she insisted that words had meanings and that "vibes were a terrible way to communicate."

Inside the museum, we were met by a smiling woman in a black skirt suit. It looked like a more stiff version of what I was wearing, including a buttoned collar and snugly tight tie. She wore a tag on her jacket that was labeled "Stef."

"Hi! You must be Misses Kuiper and Alexander! We're delighted that you could be with us today!"

"Mx. Kuiper," Dale said. "They're nonbinary."

Stef's smile grew even bigger, and it reminded me of when Janice tried to show human emotions.

"Mx. Kuiper, I'm so happy for you!"

I had no idea what she was happy about, but I appreciated the thought.

"Thanks, Stef."

She looked astonished but quickly smiled again and pointed at her pin.

"I am Stef, and I'll be your point of contact for whatever you need to perform your job!"

Dale inhaled sharply.

"Sorry," I said. "We were invited by Ms. Annette Kuiper."

"And it was so kind of her to offer us your services for free! We appreciate your assistance with this matter so much!"

"Excuse us, please, uh, Stef," Dale said, putting a hand on my back. "We were supposed to check in with the office when we arrived. We'll only be a moment."

"Of course! I'll be right here when you're ready!"

Dale

WE STOOD some twenty feet away from Stef, as far away as the reception area allowed. I held my phone to my ear, angled slightly so Cassiopeia could hear. Their ears were sharp enough that they didn't need the help, but I wanted to invite them to listen.

"Howdy, Dale," Janice answered. "How's tricks?"

"Confusing. The staff here think we're on a case for them."

Silence.

"For free."

"Well, huh," it said. "Weren't you off making merry with the fam?"

"Yeah, that's what we thought. So this wasn't signed business?"

"Search me, hon. I'll ask Liv and give you a jingle. Have you quizzed Ms. Kuiper?"

"Uh, no. We haven't seen her yet, and I didn't know how she'd react to a phone call about this."

It made the dry, rasping bark that it used as a laugh.

"I catch your drift. Well, play nice, sweetie. Might as well sniff around and see if you get a whiff of anything. I'll ring you back."

After hanging up, I looked at Cassiopeia. They shrugged slightly and gave me a hopeful smile.

"Okay, but you deal with Stef."

They turned with a bounce, and we walked back to our escort.

"All set?" she asked, grinning inanely.

"We're good," Cassiopeia told her. "Can you tell us more about the problem here, please? We'd like to hear it in your words."

"Of course! Would you like to see the painting?"

We looked at each other, wondering what the fuck we'd stepped into.

Cassiopeia

WE STOOD in a gallery room slightly larger than Aletheia's parlor. From what Stef had said, this was only one of dozens of such rooms in the building. Her regular job turned out to be managing tours of our host's vast art collection, but they'd closed the museum after what had happened to a night watchman. I'd been impressed that a wealthy art collector would open her hoard to the public, but Stef had ruined that by joking about how much we'd ordinarily have had to pay to come in here. The rich monetized their hobbies in ways unavailable through crafting market sites.

This particular part of the collection had not yet been added to the pricey tour. There wasn't much in it yet, and from what I could tell, none of it particularly went together as

any theme. It was just a small gathering of pots, jewelry, figures, and paintings. Livinia's tchotchke shelves had more on them. I had no idea what we were looking at.

"So it's one of these paintings?" I asked, being otherwise at a loss.

"This is where our little thief is operating for now. We're glad he's not going into other rooms yet, but we'd like to put a stop to it before he branches out."

Did she think we were here to guard a painting from theft?

"Why don't you just move everything out of here?" Cassiopeia asked.

They had a way of cutting through distractions that I got hung up on. I guess wolf spirits weren't prone to chasing squirrels. Maybe dog spirits were less focused.

"We have moved the most valuable pieces already. Our losses have been relatively minor so far, thank God!"

"I'm sorry, but why is this a job for us? The police live to serve the weal—the well-intentioned," I finished lamely.

Stef looked embarrassed but pulled herself together.

"That would be because of the painting."

She led us to a large painting of an elegant woman standing in an old brick sewer. There were rats trailing behind the figure, and she held out a hand as though to receive something.

"This is *Le Reine des Mendiants*, the only surviving piece by London surrealist Augusta Philbrick. Painted in 1932, after a fever dream while staying with a friend in Hampstead. She left the painting there, saying that she didn't trust it."

"What's the title mean?" I asked.

"The Queen of Beggars," Cassiopeia replied.

Stef nodded. She had no idea how cool it was that they had picked up French and a few other European languages from their wolf half's centuries with their ancestors.

"We prefer The Beggar Queen, but yes, that's right."

"And what does it have to do with the robberies?"

Stef glanced nervously at the painting.

"Let's step outside," she said.

We followed her through the museum to an unpopulated gift shop with a sandwich counter. I guessed the prices would be as ridiculous as the admission fee. Cassiopeia stared longingly at the brownies as we sat at a small table. We were paid generously for our work—which amounted to hanging out at Aletheia or joining Maggie at the experimental laboratory Ms. Kuiper had set up for our use—but I felt a moral imperative to not pay for anything on our supposedly free vacation. Unless Cassiopeia kept drooling over that large and assuredly expensive brownie. I'm only human, but she's an adorable wolf girl.

"Last week, a night watchman claimed that a woman approached him in that chamber. She kissed him, bit his neck, and gave him two instructions: bring her gifts and never tell anyone about her. Obviously, he refused. The day after he told us, the infection from his wound sent him to the hospital. He died there."

"That sucks," I said. "Who was this woman?"

"The Beggar Queen. We'd hung the painting up that day. The thefts started the next night."

We all looked at the door of the gift shop, as though the Beggar Queen might walk in for a sandwich.

Cassiopeia

DALE AND JANICE had their phones on speaker so that Livinia and I could join the conversation. We had just explained the situation with the Beggar Queen coming out of the painting and biting people. I'd mostly ate a large brownie from the gift shop while Dale covered that. It tasted okay, but it was dry. I should have gotten a drink.

"A woman from a painting ..." Livinia said. "I've read of

such cases. There may be a dimensional portal attached to the piece."

"Like the Passage?" Janice asked.

They had mentioned the Passage a few times since we'd met but had never explained it. Dale and I had guessed that it might be the wooden door in the cellar of Aletheia, but we'd been warned about locked doors, and our time hiding in Livinia's shifting library had taught us to take that seriously. Besides, Livinia would instantly know if we opened it, and we didn't want to make her regret letting us live inside her. Life outside of my old cell was complicated, but it was also a lot more exciting.

"The Passage is the place between dimensions, made up of the leakage from all realities. Our door to it is an artifact built around a tear in our dimension. It's more of a seal than a portal. This would be more akin to a seam, such as what used to attach Madru Harbor to our dimension—a crossing that is always there, but which may be difficult to see. The major distinction would be that a portal may involve transformation or require special knowledge to activate."

Dale frowned.

"So this Beggar Queen is a real person, who comes out of a painting to bite people and steal expensive knickknacks? Why did she wait a century to start her crime spree?"

"We don't know yet what manner of creature she is, so it's difficult to conjecture. Perhaps a change in surroundings triggered her kleptomania or her activities went unnoticed prior to being relocated. We'll research the painting, subject, and disease and look for correlations with known phenomena."

I heard Janice groan in the background.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"I suggest napping if you can. The pair of you are going to be watching that painting tonight."