

When Rei heard the families who lived on the outskirts of Bloodrealm had vanished overnight, she imagined the smoke of hastily doused fires, shattered windows revealing overturned chairs in the kitchen, front doors off their hinges. What she saw instead was an empty lot of blackened earth.

A day ago, five homes had stood here. They'd been old houses, haphazardly repaired again and again by a combination of masonry and magick. The one on the end had been Rei's favorite: a cottage bursting with lavender nightshade from every crack in the cement, one side of its roof held up by protection wards.

A young girl had lived there, a little fae with amber eyes and delicate, golden wings. One day, those eyes had peeked through the cottage's window, spying Rei with a pilfered arsenberry in hand. She'd expected the girl to gasp at the sight of her shriveled wings, or reprimand her for stealing from the neighborhood orchard, but instead, she asked if Rei truly carried a sword everywhere.

Actually, it was a dagger, Rei had explained, and a plain one at that: a straight, silver blade with a braided leather hilt dyed black. She kept it tucked high on her back, between her wing joints, and yes, she did carry it everywhere. Of course, she brought it into the outhouse with her, too.

The girl's laugh had been sweet and high, and Rei, who so rarely experienced kindness, allowed her to touch the blade's flat side. The little fae shrieked with mirth, then scampered into the lavender house, giggling. After that, she met Rei once a phase, bearing either freshly picked fruit or questions about sword training.

Rei tried to reconcile her memory of the laughing, curious girl with what she saw now and drew only wicked conclusions. Something terrible had happened here.