

## The Go-Between

by Mia Sundby

"Who are you?" The young man's voice trembled on the last word.

Isobela did her best not to look intimidating, which was hard when she was wearing the scarred up armour of a dead order of monster slayers.

"It is... a very long story." With a sigh, she glanced around the cramped kitchen. Her eyes landed on a pot of tea. Slowly, so as not to startle the man, she pointed to it, "...May I?"

He blinked. Then frowned. "You want tea?"

"Sir, 'want' does not even begin to describe it. I would ki--" She stopped herself as the young man's eyes widened. Clearing her throat, she said, "I would love some tea."

She heard him swallow from across the small room. He gestured to the pot. "I, er... Help yourself."

"Very kind of you." Luckily, she was covered only in mud today and not in blood, but still she did her best not to smear any of it on the chipped little teapot and the scratched-up ceramic mug beside it.

The man stared as she poured.

She glanced up. "Do you have any milk?"

"Er-- milk?"

"Yes," she said, as patiently as she could. "Milk."

"I-- Of course!" Isobela watched as he scrambled for the cupboards, still doing his best to remain facing her. It looked incredibly uncomfortable. "Did you-- Did you want any sugar?"

Isobela felt her knees go weak. "Sugar? Sir, if you can offer me sugar you are surely a saint in disguise."

A fraught smile scrambled onto the man's face. He flushed. "I, well, that is-- I'm not."

Isobela waited for the sugar.

The sugar pot was miniscule --hardly as big as her fist-- and the ceramic was painted with flowers and leaves, all of which looked done by hand.

"This is lovely," she said, "Did you paint these?"

"I, erm. Yes. Yes, I did."

"Lovely," she said again, smiling as she spooned the tiniest amount of sugar into her cup. She gestured to one of the two chairs tucked against the beaten-up table. "May I?"

"Oh, um-- Yes, yes of course."

"Appreciated." So saying, she eased herself down into the chair. Wrapping a hand around the tea mug --the mud there was dry and mostly dust at this point--, she looked up at the young man whose home she had inadvertently invaded when she had fallen through an interdimensional portal not five minutes before.

"You're a scholar aren't you?"

He recoiled. "How do you know that?"

"You've got ink stains all over you and --I mean this in the nicest way-- your home is very small. Pared-back." She smiled ruefully. "Scribes don't get paid nearly as much as they should."

He nodded, grimacing. "I'm an apprentice."

"Ooh, tough. How long is the apprenticeship?"

The man stared glumly down at the table. "Nine years."

Isobela's eyes widened. "Nine years?"

He nodded. "My mother promised her firstborn child to a witch." He gestured. "The witch wasn't all that interested in looking after a child but she's smart as all the hells put together, so she agreed to take me when I turned sixteen and put me to work for her as a scribe." He gave Isobela a wide-eyed look. "You wouldn't believe the number of meetings she has, and at such bizarre times as well."

Isobela, who had known more than her fair share of witches and had dated one once, nodded solemnly. "I believe it." She sipped from her tea, which had cooled to just below the state where she might burn her mouth. "So you would know about the Outerworlds."

The scribe nodded. "I know enough."

"Well, I got lost."

"Lost?"

"Yes, in the Outerworlds."

The man's eyes bugged. Slowly, he sank into the chair opposite her. "How?"

"That is an even longer story." Taking a gulp of tea, Isobela eyed the young man before her. On his wrist was a witch's mark, a crest which denoted his tenure. It was oddly familiar. Isobela's eyes narrowed.

"What's the name of your witch?"

"Er, my witch? Her name is Seren."

Isobela felt her mouth curl into something that wasn't quite a smile. "Seren Heise?"

The scribe's brows drew together. "Do you know her?"

Downing the last of her tea, she said, "Oh, your witch and I go back a long ways." Eyeing the time piece which the scribe had left on the table, she asked, "When is her next meeting?"

"...The third hour of the morning."

"Witching Hour. Brilliant." Her chair scraped against the flagstone floor as she stood. "How do you feel about being a go-between? I need to have a talk with a witch."