

ONCE UPON
HER TIME

BY WENDIE CHEN



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ONCE UPON HER TIME is a collection of three mythology/fairytale adaptations that tell the tales from the female protagonists' perspectives. The stories will be presented as illustrated novels with full-page and spot illustrations. Each story will be about 50 to 60 pages in length. The thesis will focus on the book's first story, "Portia", which is inspired by an Asian fairytale called "Angel and the Woodcutter".

Audiences: **Fairytale/mythology lovers, Young adults, Adults**

Keywords: **Dark Fantasy Fairytale; Readaptation; Female protagonists**

150-180 Page Illustrated Novel

Single Page Specs: 6 x 8 in

This story is for people who enjoy fairytales and mythology stories but want to explore brand new interpretations like **Beauty (Robin McKinley)**; to add in modern points of view like **Other Ever Afters (Melanie Gillman)**; to enjoy unique, funny ways to look at old-fashioned narratives like **Gender Swapped Fairytales and Gender Swapped Greek Myths (Karrie Fransman and Jonathan Plackett)**; to support stories that focus on realistic, strong female protagonists like **The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea (Axie Oh)**.

PORTIA STORY SUMMARY

Portia, an angel from the clouds, lost her magical dress while attending a ceremony on the surface. Without her dress, she was unable to fly back. She met a woodcutter who helped her and fell in love. A year after their marriage, Portia accidentally found out that her husband was the one who stole her dress and manipulated her into their relationship. Upon knowing the truth, she left her husband but faced the misunderstanding from both other angels and the people on the surface. While Portia was exiled from the clouds, her husband directed rumors against her, claiming that she was a witch. Unable to get justice from both places, Portia's anger and grief burst into a phoenix and burned down the crowd that came to execute her.

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PORTIA
—THE LAMENT OF A PHOENIX

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“Once upon a time, there was a beautiful continent called Aumera. Situated peacefully to its far west, embraced by the gentle waves of the Aumera Sea, was an island that generously nourished many creatures and plants that lived within. Above the clouds of Aumera, there was another beautiful group of beings...”

“That’s us!”

“Yes, that’s us, cloud dwellers. We were the observers of the land, who seldomly interacted with the other species. Isolated from the surface, we stayed unnoticed for a long time.”

I paused intentionally and looked up from the book in my hands. I saw the girls sitting around me, curious little eyes all focused on the book in my hand. They impatiently rushed me to continue the tale.

“And? What happened next?”

I couldn't help but let out a chuckle. “You've all heard this story so many times, you must know what happened next.”

The girls moved closer to me from their seats and started rocking my arms, “But we want you to tell the story, Sister Portia!” “Yeah, you promised to read stories to us today!” They surely knew that I could not refuse their glistening eyes.

“Alright, alright.” I patted on their heads and gestured for them to sit down, “Ahem... The surface people discovered us eventually. They gave us many names: ‘stellar’, ‘celestial’ ‘winged-ones’...But the most commonly used term was: ‘angel’. Slowly, we started to call ourselves “angels” as well.”

“But I like ‘ce-les-teel’ better. Sounds much fancier.” One of them mumbled.

“No, I like that ‘Ste-llar’ one better. Sounds like stars!” Another one argued. All of a sudden, they seemed to have lost interest in the story and started to debate which name was “fancier”. The room was soon filled with children's laughter and chatter.

I smiled and watched them chasing each other around. They were ever so energetic. I remember sitting in this room with my sisters when I was younger. I could hardly believe how much time had passed since then. Those days almost still felt like yesterday.

A wave of tranquil chimes dispelled the chaos in the room. The children almost immediately silenced themselves and sat back in their seats.

“Alright, little ones, I guess that's it for today's story.” I stood up and put the book aside.

“Good luck with your ceremony, sister Portia!” They waved at me with big smiles on their faces. “Next time you come back you'll have to tell us what you saw on the surface!”

“Okay, I promise.” I waved back at them and walked out of the room.

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Once an angel reached the age of two hundred, they were required to partake in a sacred coming-of-age ceremony. On that chosen day, they would wear their ceremonial dress and bathe in the celestial pond on the surface. The pond had been gathering magic from the surface since long, long ago. Before the completion of the ceremony, young angels could only borrow magic from the ceremonial dress in order to travel between the cloud and surface. Once they reached the pond, they could spend a whole day there, but they must return before sunset. After their return, the ceremony would be marked complete. The angels would be considered “grown up” and be blessed with permanent magical powers.

I had dreamed about that day for ages. I love life on the cloud, of course, but sometimes it felt a bit...redundant. We angels followed a strict routine

from sunrise to sunset every day. Everyone had their own duty and set of rules to follow. Houses, paths, and almost all things were covered in white, fluffy clouds. Our world revolved around the concept of “Order”. But I wanted to know what else could there be besides “Order”. I was curious to see the surface with my own eyes.

“Mum, what is the surface like?” I asked as my mother brushed my hair before the ceremony started.

Her hands continued dancing around my head, “Remember? You used to ask questions like this all the time when you were little.” Her voice was so gentle and soft, soft enough to melt down any worries in my heart. “You’ve always been a curious one, Portia. I can’t believe that my little girl has grown up so much.” She finished up by putting a hairpin on my head.

“They say the surface is full of chaos.” I was so excited when preparing for the ceremony, but when the time really came, I suddenly felt a bit scared.

“Look, my sweet girl.” She pointed at the mirror in front of me, “What do you see?”

“I see...the dress you made for me.”

My mother knew how important the ceremony would be for me, so she handmade my dress all by herself. She made sure that the fabric she used was the softest she could find since my skin couldn’t bear any rough textures. Knowing that I liked sunflowers, she made the dress in a warm yellow tone. The color was so gentle, almost as warm as the beaming sunlight. There were hundreds of star shards stitched on the dress. When viewed from afar, the dress almost looked like the sky itself. Every tiny detail was thoughtfully designed. She knew that I disliked tight sleeves, so she made the sleeves loose and flowy. I could almost feel the movement of the wind when wearing it. She knew that I loved cloud candies, so she

made the dress smell exactly like them. I felt so beautiful wearing the dress, and I felt so very loved.

“Some may say the star shards on your dress are messy, since I did not follow any patterns while making it. How do you like it?” She put her hand on my shoulder.

“Of course I love it!” I reached down to those shiny stars on my dress, “I think they are so pretty, just like the stars in the sky.”

“I always think there is a kind of beauty in chaos too. But the only thing that really matters is what you think about it.” She hugged me tightly from the back. “Portia, don’t be afraid. You’ve always been dreaming about going to the surface. Just enjoy the ceremony and see for yourself.”

“I will, mum.”



I stood at the gate of the clouds among my sisters. Of course we had to listen to a long lecture about the rules we had to follow down there on the surface first:

You must return before the sun completely sets;

You must not interact with anyone on the surface;

You must...

I could barely pay attention to anything the counselor said with the bursting feeling of anticipation in my chest. Those words entered my head from one side and vanished away from the other. Just before I thought this lecture would never finish, the bell at the gate sounded as the gate slowly opened. My dreams, my fantasies, all in front of me within reach. My dress was filled with beaming magic. Gusts of wind gathered below my feet. All of a sudden, transparent wings stemmed from my back, and I was ready to depart. I looked back and saw my mother smiling at me in the crowd. I

waved at her and spread my wings.

I rode the wind and headed down. The surface was right in front of my eyes. Mountains, rivers, and patches of wildflowers gathered here and there. With so many colors, so many smells and sounds, I was almost overwhelmed by how rich the surroundings were. The celestial pond sat in the center of the forest, peacefully, silently, with a beam of sunlight filtering through the leaves above. A hint of magic weaved through the water as if it was inviting us to step in. I was mesmerized by the sight, almost forgetting to breathe. We stood in front of the pond for a moment of silence, until one of the sisters asked, “So...do we take off our dress and go in, or directly go in?” The group suddenly burst into laughter.

With lively chatters and chuckles, we took off our magical dresses and set them down carefully on a rock near the pond. I cautiously followed my sisters down into the pond. The water was oddly not too cold. We spent a long time in the pond bathing and playing in the water. Time was almost frozen at this moment, the joy and excitement lingered in the air. Fallen leaves peacefully floated on the pond, patches of sunlight embellishing its glassy surface, like a pool of stars. For a split second, I could not even tell if I was standing in a body of water or above a starry sky. I hoped this moment could last longer.

But the sun wandered across the sky more quickly than I expected—it was almost time to head back. Some of my sisters went to fetch our dresses. As I was getting ready to leave the pond, I heard their panicked footsteps. “Portia, we couldn’t find your dress...Did you put it with the others?” My heart skipped a beat.

We spent the next hour looking for my dress. Everyone was trying their best to help. We looked under the bushes, thinking maybe the wind blew it farther away. We looked at the trees nearby, thinking maybe some

naughty animals fetched it away. But nothing. It simply vanished. As the sun brushed the sky in orange, all of us became more and more desperate—if we delayed any longer, the gate to the clouds would be closed. Eventually, one of the sisters decided to leave. “I am so sorry, Portia...We have to go back now... Maybe if you find the dress later, you can catch up with us.” She said as she spread her wings and departed, and soon, most of the others followed. Eventually, I urged the rest of the sisters to leave. I didn’t want them to be punished because of me. When the sun finally sunk below the horizon, it was only me left in the darkness, surrounded by nothing but cold, misty air.



Who knew that the surface during nighttime would be so bitterly cold? I was shivering in the pond water, frozen by the overwhelming fear and despair. Nobody told me that something like this could happen. Many thoughts wandered through my brain but I couldn’t seem to catch any of them. I could hear nothing but my own breathing, with the buzzing sound of insects singing in the background. What would happen next? Would I never be able to fly back? Even if I found a way back, would I be punished for breaking the rules? My mother’s face flashed into my mind. I saw her anxiously asking my sisters what happened today. I saw her standing by the gate, praying that her lost daughter would fly back soon...The visions were so real that I could almost touch them, but then all of it disappeared as I was brought back to reality by a gust of chilling wind.

I shrouded myself in the shade of the bushes around the pond. I tried my best to recall when the last time I saw my dress was, but my memory was as foggy as the surroundings. I was so distracted by everything happening around me that I didn’t pay attention to anything else. A wave of

regret and fear washed over me. I did not know how long I was standing in the freezing water, I only knew the temperature of my limbs was slowly fading away. Suddenly, I heard footsteps approaching. My heart was racing, my blood flushing to my cheeks. A beast perhaps, waiting to make me its meal? I tried to hold my breath, praying that whatever the creature was, it would not discover my existence.

From the shadow, a man emerged with a burning torch held in one hand and an axe in the other. He waved the torch around as if he was looking for something. The dim torchlight moved around the pond, the orange light reflected by the glistening water. I tried to stay as still as possible, but eventually, he spotted me. A fleeting surprise flashed through his face. He stood there for a moment, locking his eyes with mine, as if trying to see what, or who I was. And then, his gaze softened. He slowly approached the water and kneeled down, "...Perhaps you need some help?"



I knew I was forbidden to interact with people on the surface, not to mention living with a man that I've never met. For months, I tried my best to find my way back home. I almost knew nothing about surviving on the surface. The man who rescued me was the woodcutter of the village. He took me in when I was most helpless, and he gave me a place to stay without asking any questions. He slept in his workshop so that I could rest in his room. He brought me to the forest to look for my dress. He guided my hand and showed me how to split the firewood. He took me to the forest and taught me how to pick out mushrooms. He invited me to the town festival and introduced me to the villagers. Tell me, what does it take for one to fall in love? A handsome face? A gentle heart? A helping hand when most needed? He had all three, and gave me even more. I tried my best to

resist my growing affection for him. But my feelings were out of my control. With him by my side, I started to think that maybe everything would still be okay even if I could never find my way home.

Every day when I sat beside the fireplace with him, my heart couldn't stop pounding. Sometimes I couldn't even bring myself to look at him at all, but when I did, I would instantly drown in his gaze. His eyes, oh his eyes, they were blue as the sky, and deep as the ocean. He always smiled when he looked at me. His voice, like a melody every time he called my name. I began to follow him to the woods almost every day. He did not talk much, just quietly working on his own. I enjoyed staying by his side. Even silence sounded so sweet when I was with him.

Once or twice, I caught him looking at me. My eyes quickly shifted away, warmth flushing onto my cheeks. He let out a soft chuckle and put down his axe. His footsteps approached and the scent of fresh forest slowly surrounded me. He always smelled like freshly cut wood. Perhaps because he spent a lot of time in the sawmill, or perhaps because of the herbs he dried his clothes with. Either way, I enjoyed the smell, and my heart yearned to be closer to him.

"Can I tell you a secret?" I kept my eyes on the ground.

"You can tell me anything, Portia." His voice, calm, luring me to say more.

"Please don't freak out...but I am actually an angel."

"I know."

I turned to look at his face in surprise, "you know?"

"I always knew." His eyes met mine. There was something in his gaze. Something deep, something hidden. But it faded away before I could hold onto it. A quick and easy smile flashed across his face, "Otherwise how can you not know what a horse is? I will never forget your face when you saw

a horse for the first time...”

“Please! We agreed not to talk about THAT anymore...” Embarrassed, I shied away from his gaze once more.

We sat there for a while without talking. The woods were silent, just like that night. My thoughts wandered back to the day of the ceremony. It was not a long time ago, yet the memories started to get blurry. The string of memories pushed and pulled, leading me back to the days above the clouds. My sisters, my mother, my friends, whose faces I never thought I would forget. But now when I tried to picture their smiles in my mind, there seemed to be a fog between me and them. I wondered what life without me was like to them. I wondered if I would ever return home. A shiver ran across my body. My heart ached as the cold autumn wind cut right through my body.

“You look troubled.” His voice pulled me back to reality.

“...I...I think I’m okay.” I tried to hold back the tears in my eyes.

“You’re sure?” He asked. His voice speaks magic, I couldn’t hide anything in front of him.

“...maybe not.” I immediately regretted answering after hearing my shaky voice. Sourness spread in my nose. I saw the grass beneath my feet smudged wet with my tears. And then, a warm embrace came. The scent of pinewood wrapped me in. Firm, yet gentle, melting away my tears, closing up my wounds.

“Thank you,” I mumbled in his arms. He did not answer, just held me even tighter. Perhaps all the emotions that burst out at this one moment gave me courage, or perhaps it was the relief after revealing my secrets, the words came out of my mouth before I could realize.

“I love you,” I said.

He held my face up with his palms. The time slowed down around us.

His lips opened and he whispered something. His answer got lost in the wind, but I didn't need to hear it to know what he said. At that moment, our hearts were drawn ever so close.

I stopped looking for means to fly back at all. I told him that I wanted to live with him on the surface forever. I told him that I had found my home here. His eyes filled with joy, his face full of affection. He promised me his eternal love. He promised that he would never let any harm be brought upon me.



I buried my past away. As I truly embraced life on the surface, I realized how many things I wanted to learn. I only resented the limited time I had every day. The old lady next door taught me how to sew beautiful patterns on his coat; the owner of the tavern showed me how to cook delicious meals from materials I gathered in the forest. I asked the woodcutter to teach me about woodcutting and sculpturing, and he eventually agreed to let me do some woodwork under his supervision. He laughed at how I wanted to learn a million things in a single day, saying that he was worried that I would tire myself out.

"I want to help you out, you know?" I responded while landing the axe atop the standing wooden log on the ground, "It doesn't feel right if you are the only one working."

"Careful." He smiled and grabbed the axe from my hand, "You are so silly, darling. You are already helping me a lot. The house looks so much nicer with you sorting things out."

I sat down on the tree stump. "Is that so? I thought you were still feeling bitter about me throwing all those 'precious wood scraps' away."

"...Maybe a little. But honestly, it's not like I will ever use them in the

near future.” He winked and sat down beside me. A fuzzy, warm feeling surrounded me as I fell into his embrace.

On a beautiful autumn day, his friends and family wished us a long and happy marriage. Laughing, singing, dancing around the tables, so many things happening all at once. Back on the clouds, we valued order over anything. But I liked it here, I liked the noisy streets and celebrations. There was beauty to this chaos, the atmosphere beamed with joy and liveliness. The crowd kept telling me how lucky I was, to be married to the best man in the town. I blushed and nodded. I was indeed very lucky to have met him. I was ready for my new life. As he hugged me tight and kissed me, I wished the happiness of this moment would last forever.



Winter came and went, followed by the warm breeze of the spring. The air was once again filled with the scent of the sizzling mud. We spent so much time together, yet it was not nearly enough. He was the best husband one could ever ask for. Hardworking as he was, he always tried to make time for the two of us. Whenever I needed to go into the forest, he always made sure that he was by my side. I admired him more and more with each day passing. Not only because he was my husband, but also because he was such a talented soul. I was so surprised when he gifted me a pair of ducklings that he carved by himself on our anniversary. I was not aware that his hands were not only good at chopping wood but also polishing them. From that day, he made many more sculptures for me. I was always mesmerized by the beauty of his little creations.

“Can I come in and watch you work?” I handed him a cup of tea from the window of his workshop the next day.

“My dear, I told you already. It’s so dusty inside. And there are a lot of sharp tools lying around.” He took off his gloves and carefully set the tea aside. “We wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself, right?”

“I’ll be careful, I promise! Please, please, please?” I kept blinking at him, “I just want to see how you turn those wood blocks into cute ducklings.”

He smiled and gave in. “Fine, I’ll show you. But not in here.” He turned to look at the logs, wood chips and wooden boxes scattering around in the tiny workshop, “Let’s sit outside. I need a break anyway.”

That afternoon we sat in our little garden and he showed me how to carve ducklings. A fine afternoon, just like all the other beautiful afternoons we spent together.

A smile climbed upon my face. These memories always made me very happy, whenever I thought about them.

“I will not let anything take you away, Portia.”

“Hmm?” my attention was pulled back from the endless string of thoughts. Following his voice I looked up to him. There he is, my perfect husband, sipping his morning tea.

“Where did that come from?” I asked.

“Nothing, really. Just reassuring myself that you are mine,” He looked at me, “and you are not going anywhere.”

“Of course I’m not going anywhere, silly,” I took my eyes off the messed up hoop and looked at him, “I am your darling wife, after all.”

He smiled, and kissed me on my cheeks, “Have a good day, my love.”

I smiled back at him as he grabbed his tools and walked out.

I was not feeling my best, and perhaps he noticed. As summertime approached, I found myself digging up the hidden memories once more.

Those I promised to put away, those I decided never to speak of again. Guilt crawled up my back as I found myself imagining going back to the celestial pond, and maybe meeting my sisters there. I didn't want to mention this to my husband, since he was never too fond of me talking about my past. It was only fair, I thought to myself, I did promise him to focus on our future instead of the past. But I couldn't resist the temptation of being able to see my family once again.

The desire stirred within me every day. It itched under my skin and almost drove me mad. Different emotions emerged when I spent my nights with him, perhaps guilt, perhaps sadness, or perhaps it was something else. I couldn't bring myself to talk to him about all of this, fearing that it would anger him. I tried to conceal my feelings, but alas, nothing could hide from his eyes.



One night after dinner, I caught myself once again, thinking about the ceremony. I slipped outside the cabin and hoped to take a walk to clear my mind.

"Where are you going?" His voice suddenly approached.

I turned around and saw him standing at the door. "Oh, nothing really. I was planning to take a walk."

"I'll walk with you." He proceeded to follow me.

"It's alright, darling. I just want to catch some air by myself." I smiled at him, "You must be tired from today's work. I'll be back very soon." I turned around and walked towards the garden gate.

"There's something on your mind," he suddenly grabbed my arms from behind, "what secrets are you hiding from me?"

"No..." I tried to come up with a response. The silence sounded almost

unsettling. I could hear my heartbeats accelerating. "It was nothing, really. Maybe it's the weather? I feel quite lazy these..."

"You are going to the pond, aren't you?" He interrupted my sentence and pulled me closer. His face was lit up by the dim moonlight. I couldn't read the emotions on his face. Was it worry...? Was it...anger?

"We talked about this, Portia," He turned his face away from my sight, "It is not safe there, and I hate to think anything will happen to you."

"I wasn't going to..." I tried to pull my arms free and hug him, but he recoiled from my embrace. For the first time, I felt fear in my heart. I didn't understand why he was so mad. "... I thought about going back to the pond, yes. But I was not thinking about leaving or anything! Just this once, I want to tell my sisters that I am okay so they can stop worrying about me. After this time, I will never, ever go back there ever again, I promise!"

"And what if they took you away? What if they punish you for breaking the rules?" His voice, was it ever this demanding? He locked his eyes with me as if he was making sure I understood him. "You are not going near there, Portia. I won't allow it."

Silence pierced through the air. It took me a while to gather my courage to respond. It was the first time he ever raised his voice at me. I never imagined how scary it would be. The man I loved sincerely and trusted with my whole heart, why did he suddenly look so distant?

"I...I understand. I am sorry, I didn't mean to make you worry." My voice trembled. He was worried about me, I thought to myself, he cared about me. I shouldn't have mentioned this, I shouldn't have made him this upset. I hoped he could forgive me for being this selfish.

Finally, he reached out and pulled me into his arms. His voice was gentle again, apologetic, even. "I shouldn't have yelled," He kissed my tears away, "I just can't afford to lose you, Portia. I love you."

I sank into his embrace. This is enough, I thought to myself.
“I love you too,” I mumbled.

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Everything was back to normal. He was still my perfect husband, and I was still his beloved wife. We pretended the conversation that day never happened. He treated me the same way as before, but I knew something deep down had changed. Something strange was growing slowly inside our marriage.

The day of the ceremony, I stayed at home while he was out at work.

“Remember your promise, love.” He firmly squeezed my shoulder before he headed out the door, “don’t make me worry.”

“I won’t. I’m staying at home today.” I brushed the wood dust off his coat and said, “Come back before dinner time, okay?”

He smiled and kissed my forehead.

When he was away, everything was quieter. His absence gave me room

to think, to listen to my thoughts. Portia, Portia, since when did you start to hope that you could have more time alone? I thought to myself. My dear sisters in the clouds, could they see me down here? My dear mother, how was she doing without me by her side?

“He was right, perhaps. If I went to the pond, they might want to take me back,” I mumbled to myself, “I...would never abandon him. No, no... I wouldn't.”

...I caught myself hesitating when saying that.

“Anyone home? Portia?” A scream followed by hasty footsteps interrupted my thoughts. I opened the door and saw the old lady next door standing there, “Quickly, the well, Lil' Ed fell into the dry well! That darn kid... good heavens, I told him not to stand on the edge!” I saw the panic in her eyes, and I knew that I had to act quickly. “Blessed skies! I'll go grab a ladder!”

I led the lady to sit down in our house and rushed to the workshop. I was not supposed to go in there, the thought flashed through my mind, he would be so mad if he found out. But there was no time for hesitation. I tried to push the door open, only to find out it was locked from the inside. I ran to the window on the side of the workshop and saw it was open. My body acted all on its own, I threw myself through the window and started looking for the ladder inside.

As I was rushing out, a subtle scent slipped into my sinuses: sweet and soft, like the cloud candy I used to eat back home — like the dress my mother made for me. I froze and looked back. Saws, axes, and logs broken into smaller pieces, the room was dark and cluttered. Somewhere within the smell of wood dust, the scent was there, subtle but abrupt, haunting my senses. My heart skipped a beat, my brain fogged up. What was hidden

here the whole time? I forced myself to take a deep breath. No matter what it was, it had to wait. I closed the door and rushed out with the ladder in my hand.

The morning ended with crying children and the yelling of the worried grandmother. All was well, at least. The kid was okay, barely hurt. I found myself spacing out while tending to his wounds. “Thank you so much, dear,” the old lady turned back to me after tending to the child, “I’m so glad we have your family living next door. These old bones wouldn’t have made it to the town to get help.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, ma’am. My husband and I are always here to help.” I smiled, “I’m glad Lil’Ed is okay.” She insisted that I stay for tea, but I found an excuse to leave as soon as possible—My heart was somewhere else. I ran back to the workshop and pushed open the door again.

There it was. The familiar scent of my past. Sweet and fluffy, maybe a little bit humid as well. The cloud candies, an angel delicacy. Made by only the finest and purest part of the rain cloud, served as a dessert during festivals and important ceremonies. The smell stood out from the other scents in the workshop, as it clearly did not belong to the surface. It pulled me back to my past like a magnet, it reignited the desire I had buried so deep inside of me. I wanted to find it. I HAD to find it.

I spent hours searching. I was covered by dust and wood chips. Beneath the scraps and garbage, I found a locked box in the corner of the room. The lock was old and heavy, concealing the secret inside. Impulses, or perhaps intuition, urged me to open it. I grabbed a saw from the table. An orange glow started to leak out as I cut out a small hole in the box. My heart was pounding, my breathing became heavier. Almost maniacally I started to tear the box apart. Splinters stabbed into my fingers, sharp edges

scraped my skin open, but I couldn't feel it. My hands were shaking as I pulled out the thing in the box.

My dress.

The dress my mother made. The dress I was wearing a year ago. The dress I lost that day.

I dashed out of the workshop. My knees hit the floor and I collapsed with the dress in my hands. The afternoon sun dazed my eyes. All of the surroundings were twisted into a blur.

Gasping. I was gasping for air. There was a sour rusty taste in my throat.

I held the dress close to my chest. I would never let go again.

The next thing I remembered I was sitting in the living room, fixing my dress. My thoughts were as tangled up as the threads. I saw my hands tremble, barely able to hold the needle steady. Swarms of questions trespassed my mind.

...How? But why?

I caught sight of the blood on the fabric before I felt the sting in my finger.

...Why was the dress there? For how long?

I rushed to the wash basin. No matter how hard I tried, the stain wouldn't come off.

...I wanted to know the answers, I wanted to hear his explanation.

"There must be a reason behind all of this. He would never lie to me like this." I mumbled to myself.

He kept his word and came back before sundown. I was waiting for

him in the house, wearing the dress. His smile dropped as soon as he saw me. His face turned ice cold.

“What is this all about? So you are abandoning me, after all.” I saw him slowly close the door behind him, the lock clicked. When he turned back to me, his expression looked sad. So extremely sad.

“Tell me, how long have you had my dress?” I tried to stay calm, but I could hear anger in my voice, “Why didn’t you tell me that you found it? Was it that time when we were searching in the woods?”

“The woods? No, no, I...” He stopped for a moment and sighed, “I only found the dress recently... Portia, I trusted you. How many times did I tell you not to enter my workshop?”

He almost sounded sincere, if only I hadn’t caught the hesitation in his tone. Chills climbed up from my spine. I suddenly remembered the first couple of days I spent in his house, how he always urged me not to enter his workshop, how he promised he would look for the dress with me.

He started to pace back and forth in front of me, “...like I just said, you are truly the best thing that happened to me. You are my special girl, I...”

“Ever since we met...” I interrupted him.

“...what?”

“Ever since we met, you have been forbidding me to enter your workshop.” My voice was trembling, “...Was it there from the start? Were you the one who took my dress in the first place?”

He did not answer. He walked towards the dining room and pulled a chair out. “Look, there is no point in talking about the past, my love. I love you. I love you more than anything in this world. Is this not enough for you?”

It would have been enough. It would have been all I ever wanted. But the truth was like a lump in my throat, suffocating me. I could taste the

bitterness of heartbreak in my mouth. I wanted to know the answers, but now I almost hoped I'd never know. He continued to talk about how special I was to him, and how much love he had for me. But his voice dissolved into the air before entering my ears. I stood there, unresponsive, letting the wave of despair consume me.

"You manipulated me." I interrupted him.

"What? No! I did it because I love you! I..."

"You love me? You didn't even know me back then! You just picked a random dress and took it home, hoping to trap an angel on the surface!"

Perhaps startled by my sudden eruption, he just stared at me, eyes wide.

"You...You! You deceived me... You separated me from my family... You pretended to be so helpful so I... I would put down my guard! Even now, you want to manipulate me to stay..." I wanted to scream at him, but all that went out of my mouth was broken sentences. I tried my best to hold my tears back. "I never asked for any of this... I just want to go home!"

Silence. The silence was loud enough to slap me awake. The silence echoed in the room. From that moment I knew that I had lost everything once again.



A lot of things happened next, yet all were a haze to me. I only remembered how he followed me all the way into the woods, how he tried to stop me from flying away. I remembered how he desperately begged me to stay, how he grabbed my arms and refused to let go. But I slipped away, at last. I rode the winds and ascended into the air. His figure became smaller and smaller below and soon disappeared from my vision.

I felt the wind become colder on my skin as I climbed up the clouds, and there I saw it, the outlines of the town where I grew up, the neverend-

ing white in all directions. I could not feel joy, somehow, only tiredness and emptiness. I'm back home.

I saw a crowd at the Cloud Gate, waiting to return home. Among them, a familiar face was anxiously looking around. Eventually, her eyes landed on me.

"Portia! Is it really you!?" She shouted. Her voice was exactly how I remembered: full of love and tenderness.

"Mum! I...!" I wanted to shout back, but a sudden soreness filled my nose. I couldn't describe how much I missed her. Her tender smile melted away my brittle toughness. Tears rushed down my cheeks.

"How could you get me worried like this!" She ran to me and hugged me tightly, "...I heard what happened last year from the other angels...I tried to look for you, but the counsel wouldn't let me. I missed you so, so much!"

I collapsed into her embrace. I wanted to tell her so many things, but at the same time, I didn't know how to start at all.

She stroked my back following a rhythm, as if I was still a little child. As the other angels started to approach us, I saw different emotions on their faces. Mostly happy, but there was also worry and fear.

"Portia, we are glad that you're okay. But you broke the rules, I'm worried that the council won't take it lightly."

I wiped my tears off and gathered my voice. "I know. But I wanted to tell them what happened. It was not my fault, truly! Maybe they will make an exception..."

The bell rang and the gate slowly opened. From the inside walked out the council and the other families. They were here to congratulate the young angels for their completion of the ceremony, but they did not expect to see me here as well. My mother held me close to her side, I felt her

anxiety. I heard the council call out my name.

“Portia, step ahead.”

My mother was still holding my arms firmly, not willing to let go. I gently shook her hands away and gave her a reassuring smile.

“Here I am. But please, let me explain...”

“We have witnessed the incident. We need no more explanations. Portia, you knew the rules. It is forbidden to stay on the surface. It is forbidden to interact, let alone, to unite with the surface dwellers. We are disappointed in your actions.”

“I am sorry. But I didn’t have a choice...”

“There is always a choice. You could have hidden somewhere and waited for our rescue during the next ceremony. Yet you didn’t. You let your guard down and made yourself so easily deceived. You married a surface dweller and abandoned our rules, our orders. Foolish girl, by doing so you have tainted yourself with vices of the land, you have lost your sense of justice. We will have to exile you from our realm.”

I heard whispers coming from the crowd. Everyone was looking at me with apologetic eyes. I saw pity on some of their faces. I saw disagreement on some of their faces. Yet nobody dared to oppose, nobody dared to stand against the decision. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t scared of the council, as I was always taught to be. But at this very moment, fear did not conquer me.

“I was manipulated, I was misled. You are well aware of that. Still, you wish to punish me for the crime I did not commit. You thought you were fair and impartial, yet you view all the surface dwellers as inferior. I cannot deny that evil exists on the surface, but that shouldn’t mean all of it is bad. If this is the justice you want, if this is what it means to be an angel, I do not want to be a part of it! Do you think isolating yourself can save you from

the chaos? You are wrong! If you insist on exiling me from the clouds, then so be it.”

The council did not respond. They hushed the gossip within the crowd and ordered the angels to close the gates.

My mother was the last one to leave. She sat behind the gate and asked me to stay a little longer. She did not ask me anything, or questioned my decision. She just gently wiped the tears off my face, telling me that it’s going to be okay. I did not regret my decision, not even a little bit. I just wanted to savor this moment with her a bit longer, I did not know if I will ever see her again.

When the last string of sunlight disappeared from the horizon, I let go of her hands.

“Portia, I will miss you a lot. I will always be watching over you from the clouds, I promise.”

“And so will I, mum. I will protect the land in my own ways. I’ll make sure no other sisters will have to go through the same thing that I did.”

The wind carried me away. I flew to the woods where everything started. Looking down, I could see the celestial pond, still beaming with magic. I circled above the forest for a while, letting the summer air clear out my mind. I found it almost amusing how much things could change in a single day. Yesterday, I was still looking forward to attending the town fair over the weekend. I was still picking out the herbs for breakfast. I was still joking with my husband about the chicken in the backyard. But today, my husband became my captor. My home became my prison. The people who should restore justice for me cast me away. I had nowhere to go. I had nothing else to lose.

I spent a long time deciding where I should settle down. Eventually, I started building up a small settlement beside the celestial pond. A tiny wooden hut with a small garden in the front. Quiet and peaceful, accompanied by the magical aura emanating from the pond. Living here, I felt close to home. It was not long before he discovered my new living place. One day, he came knocking at my door, holding a flower bouquet in his hands. I knew he would come, I was preparing for this day. I thought I was at peace, but the eventual sight of him shattered it completely. I still couldn't help but feel bitter about it all. He had his best clothes on, and had his hair all cleaned up and combed back. He looked quite pleasant, despite all the things that happened to us.

"Hi, my love. I figured you would probably come back. You are still as beautiful as I remembered." He held out the bouquet to me, a smile on his face, "We were both a little worked up that day, and I figured I should come talk to you now that you have calmed down a bit."

He made it sound like we just had a tiny quarrel. He seemed so sure that I would forgive him right away. I interrupted him before he could continue.

"Don't call me that. I am just Portia, not your love anymore. Also, 'a little worked up' is quite an understatement, don't you think?"

His smile stiffened a little bit, but he continued to force the bouquet into my hands. "Aw, come on, don't be so dramatic. Aren't you going to let me in? At least hear me out before driving me away so cold-heartedly."

There he was. As if all the bad memories that haunted me for the past two weeks were just an illusion. I found myself clinging onto the hope that we could go back to the past, pretending nothing ever happened. Perhaps he was truly sorry? Perhaps I should at least hear him out?

I sighed. "...fine. You may come in."



I led him into the room. He sat down in a chair and casually pulled out an empty teacup, waiting for me to fill it up. “Quite a nice place you got yourself. You always have your way with tidying up spaces. You can’t imagine how messy the house has become without you.”

I left his teacup empty. I walked to the kitchen to set the bouquet down in a vase.

He continued his rambling, “Even the old lady next door was saying how it felt so different without you being there.”

I pulled out another chair in front of him. “Oh, so she came to visit?”

“Oh yeah. She was there to thank you for saving her grandson. You could have told me! I knew you wouldn’t enter my workshop without any

reason. I'm sorry I misunderstood you."

He picked the teacup up and gently tapped it on the table. I poured myself a cup of tea. Perhaps noticing my cold attitude, he awkwardly set his teacup aside and pulled his chair closer to mine. After a while of silence, he grabbed my hands and forced me to look at him, "Look, Portia. I'll get to the point. I'm really sorry, love. All these days I have been thinking. I realized that I can't live without you. If you could just give me another chance, we could still be the loving husband and wife like before! Nothing has to change."

"Let me go." I tried to pull my hands away from him, but he tightened his grip. Once again, I felt the fear consuming me, just like that night when he first raised his voice at me. Who was I lying to?

"You really don't understand, do you? ...A lot has changed." I said, "I cannot pretend nothing ever happened and return to being your wife. We are done."

His smile completely dropped. He reluctantly let my hands go and started to pace back and forth for quite a while. He suddenly turned back to me. "I don't understand. You met your family, didn't you? You got what you wanted! And you came back, too. Was it not for me?" I started to hear a bit of annoyance in his tone. But then, as if he realized something, he kneeled beside my chair with a smile again. "Portia, Portia, my good Portia. I could buy you a new dress, if that is what you want! Anything, I would give you anything!"

A sudden wave of disgust washed over me. "...I don't want anything from you. Please, just leave me alone. There might be one day that I can forgive you, but not now. I think we both need some time." I stood up and opened the door, "You should leave. Goodbye, for now."

There was a hint of desperation in his eyes. "You can't do this to me!

Do you understand how much of a humiliation this is to me? What will the others say if they know I am abandoned by my own wife?" His face turned red from nervousness, his hands fidgeting. He was truly scared of losing me, but I saw it clearly at that moment: I was but a trophy to him, nothing else. Perhaps this had always been the nature of our relationship, and perhaps it would always be like this. Anger once again rushed to my head.

"Listen closely. I am NOT something that you own. I am not something that you can use to brag about. I am an angel with pride, I am a living being with dignity. I believe I already made myself clear enough. Now leave!" I pushed him out and shut the door by force.

He eventually gave up. I heard him yelling "You will regret it!" before he left. The conversation exhausted me. I sat down beside the table and picked up the teacups dropped onto the floor. My hands were shaking. Deep breath, Portia. I closed my eyes. I didn't know I had the courage to defy him. We were husband and wife for so long, I almost didn't know how to view him otherwise. I might still have had hope for him before, but the final bit of hope wore off today.

Deep down, I truly hoped he could learn to let go. I still wanted to believe that he wasn't a bad person after all. I was sure that the caring husband that I had was not just a facade. He made a mistake, that was true. But that shouldn't define all he was.



I went to the town once a week to get supplies. I saw him a few times in the tavern, drinking by himself. When he noticed me, he would just turn away and pretend that he didn't see me. These awkward encounters lasted for weeks, until the woods were once again covered in golden leaves. One day, I went to the tavern to buy some food for myself. I saw him drinking with

a couple of his friends, singing and cracking jokes. He seemed to be back to his normal self. I did not want to catch his attention, so I quickly walked towards the counter to make my order. As I was waiting, he approached me with two drinks in his hand.

“Hi, Portia.” He handed me a cup, “Here for supplies again?”

I was surprised by his friendly attitude. “Oh hello, and yes. It’s nice to see you in good spirits.” I took the cup and set it aside on the table. I saw his friends watching us and whispering to each other in the back. “Let me guess, you lost a bet so you have to buy me a drink now?”

He laughed and took a sip of his drink. “No, not like that. Don’t mind those idiots. I just wanted to come and say hi.” His eyes shifted to the scenery outside the window, “It’s autumn again. My favorite season.”

I followed his eyes and looked at the falling leaves. Surely the weather brought up a lot of memories. I could almost still feel the refreshing breeze on our wedding day. The golden leaves covered the ground like a carpet, and the fresh smell of pumpkin pies lingering in the air. The scenery looked the same, yet so much had changed.

“It’s a shame that the season goes by so fast.” he muttered.

“Well, it could be a new start for many things as well.” I tried to maintain a positive air. As we were talking, I saw a few people looking in our direction. I moved a bit closer to the window, hoping to clear my mind a little bit.

“It surely can.” His eyes were still fixed on the trees outside.

We stood there in silence for a while. When the tavern keeper handed me my orders, I saw a strange expression on his face. As he walked back to the counters, he started whispering to his wife while still shooting us a sidelong glance.

“It seems like we stirred up quite a lot of gossip.” I mumbled to myself,

“I think I have to go. Thanks for the drink.”

As I was gathering up my things and heading out, he turned to me and smiled, “Enjoy the fall scenery while you still can.”

“Good point. Well, see you around.” I nodded at him and walked away. As I was about to exit the tavern, I noticed that he was still looking in my direction, with a serious look on his face. I blinked at him, confused, but he smiled again and turned to talk with the people around him.

The village was filled with gossip every day, and anyone could be the target. What better topics than a failed marriage could the housewives be talking about during their free time? As every day passed by, more and more people started to look at me with weird eyes. They treated me normally, but as soon as I turned away, their expressions changed, their faces filled with disgust and contempt. I didn't know what I did wrong, I didn't know what they were talking about. Until one day when I was wandering around the town, I saw the old lady next door amongst those townspeople.

I waited for the other people to leave and then approached the old lady. Upon seeing me, she looked around uneasily and pointed in a direction, “Hurry, before anyone sees us.”

She led me into a quiet alleyway. After she finally made sure that we were alone, she turned around and hugged me with a big smile, “Portia! How have you been, my dear?”

“All is well, ma'am.” I was relieved to see her smile, “What is this all about, though? Why couldn't we talk outside?”

“Oh dear...nothing at all! I was just going to ask you about something,” she hesitated for a while and gave me a cautious look, “I heard all kinds of things about you recently, and I mean, I don't believe a word of it! You would never do such a thing, I'm sure...”

I interrupted her before she could continue, "Please hold on a second, ma'am. What did you hear?"

"Oh, well, you see..." She once again looked around and then pulled me closer, "some say you left your husband for another man. Others say you used witchcraft to make him fall in love with you in the first place. How ridiculous, I know! ...But I do want to make sure...you didn't do these horrible things, did you? It's not that I don't believe you, blessed skies! Just to make sure, you know?"

"Of course not! So is that why..." Everything suddenly started to make sense to me.

"Shush, my dear..." The lady anxiously gestured to me to keep my voice down, "Oh, Portia. I believe you, truly. I don't think you are a bad person at all, but the rumors have spread everywhere. You should avoid coming to town at least for now...Hopefully the rumors will quiet down soon."

I sighed, "...thank you for the warning, ma'am. I will be careful."

She patted me on the shoulder and started walking away. Before leaving the alleyway, she suddenly turned back again, "Oh one more thing, dear. Do the old lady a favor and don't tell other people I talked to you today, okay?"

I followed her advice and avoided going to the town for quite some time. I never liked being the center of attention, even worse, the center of gossip. When I was staying at home, I tended to my gardens and cleaned up the foliage around the lake. The glistening water helped me walk through the grief of losing my home, and now it kept me company during the loneliness. When I sat at the pond, I felt the magic weaving into the land around me: a subtle energy that nurtured the lives on the land as well as the power of us angels. It wrapped around my body like a warm embrace. It made me stronger, it reminded me of my roots.



Peaceful days seemed so boring when I was living up on the clouds, but down here, it was almost a luxury. A week went by and I started to notice people wandering nearby. Lost adventures, perhaps. I thought to myself. None of them came too close to the lake, so I didn't pay much attention to them. But one day, when the sun just sank below the horizon, someone knocked on my door. I lifted a corner of my curtain and looked out. I saw him standing there, anxiously waiting for my response.

"What can I do for you? It's quite late, so if it's not an emergency, could you come tomorrow instead?" I asked.

"Portia, please. It is an emergency. Let me in, would you?" I sensed the urgency in his voice, but I couldn't help but feel unsettled about the situa-

tion. What was he doing this late around my house?

Reluctantly, I cracked open the door. "What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

"Oh, I am not. But Portia, my sweet Portia." His distressed face morphed into a crooked smile, "You are ever so trusting, just like the first time we met. That's what I liked about you."

An ominous feeling crawled up my back. I tried to shut the door, but he grabbed the handle and pulled it in the other direction. Before I could say anything, another hand reached in and the door was slammed open by force, almost throwing me onto the floor. In the moonlight I saw him standing there, and he was not alone. Dim torchlights started emerging from the darkness of the woods. My house was surrounded by armed villagers.

"What is this all about!? What do you want from me?" Blood rushed to my face. I pulled myself up from the ground.

He did not answer my question. Instead, he stepped aside and gestured for the people to come closer. A man in a hood stood out from the crowd with a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Hear ye! Hear ye!" He yelled, "Pay attention to the judgment of the blessed sky and our town council. Portia, sky witch from above, your sins will no longer be tolerated, your witchcraft will no longer trick us. Today we gather here to seek justice for our brother who has fallen victim to you. Today you shall be burned!"

The crowd lifted their torches and cheered. I saw familiar faces among them: the guards who greeted me almost every day, friends who congratulated me on our wedding; shopkeepers who called me their "favorite customer". Yet gone was the once so familiar kindness on those faces. Their eyes are now tinted with fiery anticipation and even ecstasy as if they have

just been granted entrance to witness a grand show.

I turned to look at him. He stood there in silence, avoiding catching my eye. "...You!" I wanted to say more, but nothing came out of my mouth.

He glanced at me and then turned around. "Do you regret your decision now?" He lowered his voice and asked. His voice chilled me to my spine. I never knew he could sound like that. "We could have been so happy together, forever. But you left me no choice."



The celestial pond was the first place I visited on the surface. It was always so quiet and sacred. Never did I imagine it could be in such chaos.

The man in front of me was the first person I met on the surface. He showered me with nothing but kindness and love. Never could I imagine the darkness that dwelled within him.

Yet it happened. Again, and again. Stupid girl, stupid, stupid. I thought to myself. You allowed yourself to be deceived again. The council's condemnation rang in my ears. "You let your guard down and made yourself so easily deceived..."

...

I saw him turning around to face the crowd. "Friends and families! We shall have mercy for the witch. It was my fault to fall under her spell. She broke my heart, yes, but I still couldn't bear to see her suffer!"

"You are too kind, brother! Don't let her trick you once again!"

"...yeah! Burn her alive! Let her pay!"

The crowd roared and cheered again. They were blinded by the rumors, I thought to myself, they deserved to know the truth.

"My good men and women. I am not a witch! I was an angel from the cloud, one of the very angels you worshiped! You shall not be deceived by

the rumors, you shall seek the truth!" I shouted with all my strength, my voice echoed in the night. "The man in front of you weaves nothing but lies. He was the one who tricked me, not the other way around. For all the time I've lived in the town, have any of you seen me commit any crime?"

Nothing. I saw nothing on their faces. Some of them were casually plucking the plants from my garden. Some of them were angrily yelling "Lies!" in my face. Some of them looked hesitant, yet they still chose to go along with the others. Indifferent, impatient, these people just wanted to see an entertaining show. None of them cared about my suffering. None of them wanted to know the truth.

Tell me, what will you do in order to survive? And how can I survive in a world full of nonchalance to injustice? I couldn't help but think, how many more people would, or had, fallen victim of similar injustice? If I am defeated here without notice, without a trace, will the others end up like this as well? I didn't have the answer, I didn't know what else I could do, but at that moment, I knew only one thing: I would not allow him to take my life. Strength gathered in my body, magic pulsed in my heart.

"Justice, justice!" The shouting of the crowd rang in my ears.

I will show you justice.

I felt burning heat not from outside of me, but from within. All of a sudden, the noise of the surroundings fell deaf to my ears. Fiery feathers sprouted from my body, the scorching sensation was almost insufferable. The pain tore my skin open, revealing my anger inside. I heard people start to panic, they pushed through each other to get away from me. I felt my arms become wings, spreading luminance and heat into the cold air. I

felt my body changed, my spirit transformed. The wind lifted me up in the air, the orange glow cleansed away the darkness. From the pond, I saw my reflection: A phoenix that was burning with flames.

There I saw him again in the crowd, immense fear on his face. The man who ruined my life, the man who took everything from me over and over again. Now he just stood there, pathetic, small, like a helpless child who feared punishment. How I resented him! How I resented the suffering he brought upon me! Tears rained down from my eyes and spread into a firestorm. The pungent smell of burning wood filled the air. The flames formed a barrier around the pond, cleansing the vice and evil within.

“Justice!” I yelled, “Justice!”

When the first ray of sunlight hit the ground, everything had turned into ashes.



I buried a piece of my feathers beside the pond. The land needed to heal, and so did I. From the soil, that feather sprouted into a sapling. Its branches grew and grew, all the way to the gate of my hometown. It bore fruits both on the surface and the clouds, it became a bridge between the two lands. Their lives went on, their history moved forward, without stopping, without ending.

I was abandoned by time. For hundreds of years, I remained by the pond. Resting, and watching, I observed both the clouds and the surface. Singing, and crying, I wanted to remind the world of the injustice that dwelled within.

One day, I heard a song scattering in the wind:

Beware of the phoenix, she knows your sins!

Beware of the phoenix, born from the fire within.

Once an angel, now the protector of the land,
Wounded, betrayed, yet still chose to be kind.
Praise the phoenix, you shall not be afraid!
In suffering, she will come to your aid...

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ORIGINAL FAIRYTALE

Once upon a time, there was a Woodcutter. He was an **honest**, hardworking but lonely single man who longed for a wife and a family. One day the woodcutter was in the forest working when a deer asked for his help to avoid a hunter. After helping the deer, the deer told him about a group of angels who came down from heaven once a year to bathe in a nearby pond. The deer also told him that if the Woodcutter **took their clothes** they would be **unable to return** to heaven. The Woodcutter followed the Deer's advice and took one of the angel's clothes. Upon meeting each other, they fell in love and lived **happily ever after**.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Fairytales and mythology stories are something that I've always loved throughout my life. As an imaginative (perhaps rebellious even) child, I often questioned the endings of the stories. Why does every princess story end with the two "living happily ever after"? Why does the protagonist make such decisions?

Being an adult now and looking back, I can't help but applaud the sprouting of critical thinking in that little head. Taking inspiration from my childhood imagination and adding a hint of adult perspective, I finished the first story of this book, "Portia". Each chapter is framed by a flower that hints at the flow of the story. The readers will travel with Portia as she experiences Innocence (Daisy), Anticipation (Forsythia), Love (Myrtle), Suspicion (Begonia), Snapdragon (Deception), Rejection (Yellow Carnation), and Rebirth (Lewisia). Throughout the story, Portia is the protagonist of her own story, full of emotions and struggles, instead of a prize won by some random "hardworking, handsome single man longing for a wife".

WENDIE CHEN

STORY SYNOPSIS

✿ JINGWEI

✿ LADY MENGJIANG

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JINGWEI—A STORY ABOUT PROCESSING ANGER AND GRIEF

Original Myth: Jingwei

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Nüwa. She was the youngest daughter of the Flame Thearch. After drowning in the Eastern Sea, the angry spirit of Nüwa turned into a bird called Jingwei. Convinced that the sea was dangerous and should not exist, she regularly carried twigs and stones, trying to fill it up. Her hard work proved to be fruitless after thousands of years. Throughout this process, she witnessed generations of fishermen prospering around the seashore. People worshiped the sea, viewing it not as a danger, but as a blessing bestowing resources to them. Jingwei slowly started to realize that her hatred and anger towards the sea as Nüwa imprisoned herself, preventing her from finding peace. Eventually, she chose to let go of the past and live her life to the fullest as Jingwei.

LADY MENGJIANG—WHEN DRIPPING WATER WEARS OUT THE STONE

Original Myth: Lady Mengjiang

During the Qin Dynasty, the emperor announced that all strong, young men in the country will be taken into pressed service and sent as corvee labor to build the Great Wall. Lady Mengjiang's husband was among one of them. Not long after, Lady Mengjiang learned the bad news of her husband passing away from overexertion. Lady Mengjiang was devastated by the news, but she eventually decided to seek justice for all the people who died from the construction. She encouraged the women in her village who had lost their husbands to join her and journey to the Great Wall. Although her decision faced doubt and disagreement initially, her perseverance moved a lot of people along the way. When she reached the destination, she had women from all around the country with her to support her. They mourned their family members together and cried for the stop of such tyranny. The emperor, moved by their action, decided to adjust the pace of the construction and compensate the families who had lost their loved ones.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Wendie Chen is an artist from Shanghai, China. She is currently a student at the MFA Visual Narrative program at SVA.

Following the typical Asian kid story, Wendie loved art as a kid but followed her family's advice to study "something more useful". After finishing her BA Psychology degree at PSU, Wendie decided that usefulness was overrated and she still wanted to become a crazy artist. Benefiting from her experience in psychology, Wendie likes to explore the impact of emotions in her work. Big emotions, small emotions, the emotions that you hide deep within a corner of your heart, the emotions that you never know you had, the emotions that you have never discovered before, Wendie wants to explore them all!

Follow Wendie's Instagram account to see more cute, weird and emotional stuff: @skinnystar98

WENDIE CHEN



portia is an angel who lost her magical dress while attending a ceremony on the surface. without her dress, she won't be able to fly back to the cloud. a woodcutter helped her when she needed it most and she fell in love with this caring man who saved her life. just as she thinks everything is going well again and she is starting a brand new life here with her love of life, she discovers her husband is the one who took her dress. . .

will she choose to swallow the secret by herself and continue her "perfect" life on the surface? or will she break the truth and abandon everything she has right now?