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about 530 words

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A HEAVY SHIELD TO BEAR

by Sara Phillips

Sometimes, anger was silent.

Sometimes it festered just below the surface, simmering a few inconveniences shy of violent, cathartic release, a dormant volcano aching to blow. Onlookers could brush past it just as they skated on ice thin enough to crack, and so long as they didn't stumble, they'd be none the wiser to the frigid water waiting to sink vicious fangs into their bones from underfoot.

And sometimes, anger was loud.

Sometimes it was a flame that burned hot enough to cauterize the bleeding gashes left by misery, sealing away all someone's pain and sorrow behind hardened, scarred flesh and blazing wildfires that persisted even in the face of those willing to brave them to offer a lending hand. Like a house of mirrors, it threw its own suffering back at anyone who approached, indiscriminate in its tendencies to inflict the same agony upon all who dared to peer too closely.

Either way, anger was lonely, whether from hiding itself far from others or from actively being the force to drive those others away in the first place. The latter, however, made it far more

difficult to recover from the insistent grip of fury. People couldn't run from that which they didn't think lurked out of sight, but they could flee from that which they knew existed and could harm them, and once they were gone, many chose to stay away. They couldn't be blamed, not really. Not even the ones who escaped unscathed.

Most people didn't fear storms for the rain.

No, it was the threat of lightning that chased them indoors.

Perhaps both should be viewed as equally as unfounded (or not), with the likelihood of falling to lightning being as small as it was. Lightning only struck a single target, after all. It plunged from the heavens with vibrant flair, but at the end of the day, it would anchor itself to a lone tree even in the broadest of forests.

That didn't matter, though. Even if lightning had but a single quarry, everyone heard the thunder that followed. It rattled whole homes, shook bones and hearts, and demanded attention from anyone caught in its radius—attention it got, but from none who knew that the drums of war could sound so similar to the roar of a caged animal.

It was a shield made not of wood nor steel, but of ire and will. It was a wrath that wrapped itself around fragile limbs and open wounds, an armor of resilient fury that sought only to protect that which had once been small and meek, and nothing at all like the untamed tempest that now ravaged the lands in its ever-dissipating wake.

Just a girl.

That's all she'd been.

Now she stood surrounded by destruction, the eye of her own storm. Were she to move, its devastation would only shift with her. How, then, was she to escape its buffeting winds and

white-hot lightning? When she tried, no one saw. When she didn't, the storm only raged on. All she could do was march forward, pushing others away with her electric skies.

The end of a battle, the start of a war.

Thunder clapped—her standing ovation.