The Muse of Estalia

In a kingdom where color is forbidden and creativity is dangerous, a young woman hiding her magical Spark is rescued by a mysterious Patron, only to discover he is the childhood friend who vanished ten years ago and has returned to ask her to help bring color back to their dying world.

Word Count: 2,988 words

Keely glowered fearfully at the blood red apple resting in her palm. If she weren't frozen in a moment of panic, she would drop it and leave. If she were thinking clearly, she would draw as little attention as possible to this dire situation. Anything other than standing uselessly and staring down at the pome in her outstretched hand.

A few years ago, holding a bright red apple would be a quintessential activity at the Estalia Market. She would have been searching for the absolute boldest colored fruit to bring home to her mother, because Keely knew that the reddest apples made for the tastiest version of her mother's famous brown sugar apple tart. Keely also knew that this particular dessert was always the absolute star of her family's Solstice feast. A feast that was a mere day away. Keely's mother was more excited than usual for this year's Winter Solstice festivities, because for the first time in years, they would have guests. The Sweeneys would be joining them. Mrs. Sweeney with the warmest hugs. Mr. Sweeney, whose laugh seemed to breathe life into a room. Finley Sweeney, the ruggedly handsome eldest son, who was always willing to dive headfirst into any risky adventure. And Aiden Sweeney, the youngest son, quick-witted and pensive. *Her* Aiden.

Their mothers had been the best of friends as children, and it carried throughout their adult lives. Aiden and Keely often whispered that they felt as though the Goddess of Fate had brought their parents together just so that, in turn, they could find one another. After Keely's father was taken by the revenants, Mr. Sweeney stepped up to act as her surrogate father figure.

Their families shared everything from cups of sugar to celebrations of milestones. She and Aiden shared jokes, dreams, and all of their deepest secrets. He was a bright fixture in all of Keely's days until, without a word, the Sweeney family disappeared the night before her tenth birthday. Everything that they owned remained in their home. Clothes in drawers. Books on shelves. The only thing missing was the people who had made it a home. Losing the Sweeneys cracked Keely's heart right down the middle, and she never quite recovered.

She'd finally stopped asking her mother about the Sweeney family after they'd been gone for two years. Keely believed that her mother knew why they left, but whenever she asked, her mother would only reassure Keely that they had not been taken by Lady Séad. On Keely's twelfth birthday, she had woken to a simple note and a small bouquet of lavender, tied with a purple ribbon, on her nightstand. It wasn't sealed or even signed, but she instantly recognized Aiden's slanted script.

Happy Birthday, Keely. I'm sorry that we couldn't plant the lavender.

That was it. Two sentences after two years. He had clearly sneaked in and left it himself, too much of a coward to wake her or speak to her. Keely crawled into Aiden's bedroom window that afternoon, wrapped herself in the blanket that his mother had knit for him the Solstice before they left, and cried. When she was too dehydrated to cry any longer, she folded the blanket, retrieved Aiden's leatherbound journal from its hiding place in a hollowed out copy of *The History of Estalia*, and said one final goodbye.

When Keely's mother told her about the Sweeneys' visit, she had made her swear not to utter a word to anyone else. Keely felt unsettled about the entire thing. Why had they left so many years ago? Why couldn't Keely know about the reason behind it all? Why did it have to be a secret even now? While her mother was excited to see her best friend, Keely was dreading

having to face the boy who had disappeared ten years ago with a chunk of her heart in his grasp.

Keely's life used to be filled with joy, friendship, and all sorts of color. After the Sweeneys left town, times had changed under the leadership of Lady Séad and her imperious Valor Guard. The color in Estalia had been leeched completely by those in ascendency to feed their ever growing thirst for power. Perhaps she hadn't noticed before because Aiden always seemed to outshine the hardships in life. It felt as though her entire world was now gray, except for the bright red apple that she was still grasping shakily.

Keely was certain that this was it, the moment that she was caught. She'd be taken by the Valor Guard to wherever it was that people who possessed the Spark of Creativity were taken. She'd fade away just like the rest of the color in Estalia. She closed her eyes briefly and wondered if she'd get to see her father again. Her eyes snapped open when she heard a clear and resonant voice in the back of her mind.

Set the apple in your basket. Calmly. Grab a few dull apples to cover it.

Keely moved slowly, doing just as her voice of reason had instructed her.

Hand the merchant five silver coins.

Keely reached into the brown leather pouch looped into her belt and counted out five coins while the stocky merchant watched her with a slight air of distrust.

"Happy Solstice," Keely forced out, a little bit too vociferously to feel conversational. She misjudged how close his hand was to hers, and dropped her coins onto the ground. Her eyes widened slightly as the merchant began to grumble.

Oh, fate be fickle, Keely, the voice of reason muttered.

"I'll take a bag of apples please," the voice announced. "And I'll cover hers as well."

Keely turned sharply when she realized that this time the voice was not in her head. The merchant raised an eyebrow at the stranger, and then returned his suspicious eyes to Keely. The voice belonged to a tall, mysterious looking man whose face was shrouded by a charcoal hooded cloak. He inclined his head slightly towards the dropped coins. Keely's cheeks flushed as she knelt to pick up them up.

"In the spirit of Solstice," the stranger tossed an entire pouch of coins to the merchant.

She stood, brushing the dirt from her skirt as she fixed her face into a fierce glare. She was about to voice her distaste for yet another man butting into her business, when the stranger gently placed a gloved hand on her shoulder and thanked the purveyor.

Keely knew that she should shake off this stranger's hold on her, but something in her gut allowed him to guide her away from the drab gray brick walls of the central market. She wished that she could paint them. A vast field of lavender, or a series of clouds shaped like animals would brighten things up so much. She glanced again at the mysterious man, but couldn't make out much of his shrouded face. She quickly averted her eyes back to the cobblestone pathway as they passed by three more members of the Valor Guard. It was mildly infuriating that she was now practically invisible to them, simply because she was being led by a man. Their gaudy red capes perfectly matched the hue of her illicit apple. Grey and red. That was the extent of the colors that were approved of by Lady Séad, but red was widely known as a marker for those who allied with the revenants. This was why Keely avoided the color at all costs. She missed red sometimes when she was painting, but it was never her favorite hue. It

pained her not to be able to bring some green and blue to the city that she called home. Or yellow. A blazing sun could do so much good to the general atmosphere here.

She knew that she couldn't actually color the city. She couldn't even paint outside of the safety of her bedroom. Art, music, anything that brought joy to the people of Estalia was seen as a dangerous tool. The ascendants fed on energy, and they maintained their power by keeping the Estalians drained of all joy. Muses were born with the ability to create beauty out of nothing, to turn the ordinary into the sensational, and to infuse aspirations into the average. An inspired citizen is one who has the ability to challenge their circumstances, and so muses were a liability, always hunted by the Valor Guard.

Once they found their way to the outskirts of the city, Keely found her focus again and jerked away from the stranger.

"I didn't need your help back there," Keely ground out. "Believe it or not, I'm a grown woman who has handled herself through many market trips."

"I believe it," he shrugged. "Doesn't mean I can't help a beautiful girl."

"Woman," she reflexively shot back.

"Yes," she could make out the hint of a grin across his shadowed face. "I can see that now."

Keely couldn't fight the slight blush that had returned, tinting her cheeks. If she could just reach for his hood, perhaps she could get a better look at his eyes. He gently caught her wrist before she could follow through with her thought, offering a playful click of his tongue.

"Why the secrecy?" she raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe I'm not ready to put all of my cards on the table," he shrugged, gently lowering her wrist.

"Too bad," she smirked. "I prefer boldness over coyness."

"I could tell," he replied. "Although…you should probably employ a little more caution yourself."

"And why is that?" Keely shot back.

"Being a muse is dangerous enough, without drawing the attention of the Valor Guard," the man replied evenly.

"Who says I'm a muse?" Keely could feel her voice rise, betraying her nerves. The man just let out a low chuckle and reached towards her basket. She expected him to grab the claret hued apple, but he moved his hand up towards her ear. Keely felt her breath catch as he dragged his finger behind her ear, and showed her a splash of royal blue paint on the tip of his gloved finger.

"It's my job to recognize the Spark," he replied gently. "You should be more careful, muse."

"You're a Patron, aren't you?" she gaped. The Patrons of the Spark were a highly secretive organization, devoted to protecting muses. She didn't think that she had ever met a Patron before. She gazed up at him, trying in vain to see past the shadow of his hood. "And you're here for me, aren't you?"

"I am," he replied peaceably.

"Do I have to come with you?" she asked wearily. "My mother is waiting on these."

"Solstice plans?" he shoved his gloved hands into his pockets, rocking slightly on his heels.

“Yes,” she replied. She couldn’t help but think that he appeared much younger now, in this casual boyish stance. “We’re having some old friends join us.”

“Sounds nice,” he mused. “My best Solstice celebrations were always spent with family and friends that felt like family.”

“Mine too,” Keely replied quietly. “Do you…?”

“What?”

“You don’t want to join my family, do you?” Keely surprised herself by asking.

“Oh,” she could make out the shadow of a small smile. “I appreciate the offer, but I have plans with my family.”

“Of course,” Keely replied quickly. “I hope you and Mrs. Mysterious Hooded Stranger have a lovely Solstice.”

“There is no Mrs. Mysterious Hooded Stranger.” He sounded amused.

“Right,” Keely nodded.

“Does anyone know?” he asked.

“No,” she sighed. “Nobody pays enough attention to me these days for my skills to be noticeable.”

“That seems unlikely,” he frowned.

“Why?”

“From the moment we met,” he shrugged. “I couldn’t help but notice you.”

“Does that line typically work for you?” Keely tilted her head and looked at him curiously.

“Happy Solstice, Keely,” he replied mischievously as he headed down a different path.

She watched him disappear into the distance, mulling over his words. Keely turned to walk the last stretch to reach her family’s cottage, when she stopped in her tracks. How did he know her name? Perhaps it was his job to know things about her if he was to be her Patron.

Keely was lost in thought the rest of the way home. She opened the front door in a daze and walked straight to the kitchen, where she set down the basket of produce.

“Keely,” a warm soprano carried across the room. “Darling, look at you!”

Keely felt instantly at ease as Mrs. Sweeney enveloped her in a hug. Keely melted into her. She had forgotten just how healing her hugs could be. Keely’s eyes began to well with tears.

“Geez ma,” a deep voice carried across the room. “Less than five minutes and you’re already making her cry.”

“Finley! You’re a giant!” Keely laughed as he lifted her off the ground in a brotherly embrace. “Is Mr. Sweeney here?”

“He and your mother are having a chat,” Mrs. Sweeney replied cryptically. “They should be along soon.”

Keely bit her lip nervously. She wasn’t sure she was ready to see Aiden, wherever he was hiding.

“Right,” Keely nodded. “I’m just going to go wash up. Long day at market.”

Keely ducked into her bedroom and pressed her back against the door, eyes closed, breathing raggedly. She allowed herself one minute of deep breaths before she pushed off, opened her eyes, and promptly let out a shriek. The mysterious stranger was on her bed, lounging comfortably and flipping through Aiden’s journal.

“Hey!” Keely tried to swipe the journal back. “That is not yours!”

“Actually,” he sat up, causing the hood to fall back from his face. “It is.”

“Aiden?” Keely whispered. “That was you at the market?”

“Keely,” he took her hand and gently guided her to sit next to him. “It’s so good to see your face.”

“I could say the same thing,” Keely mused. “Why did you pretend to be a stranger earlier? Why could I hear your voice in my head? Why are you back?”

“For you,” he replied to the final question. “You didn’t read my journal, did you?”

“It seemed like an invasion of privacy,” she muttered. “You used to tell me everything. I figured that if you wanted to keep something secret from me, it should probably stay that way.”

“I never wanted to keep any secrets from you.”

“Well, I never wanted you to abandon me.”

He pulled off his gloves and ran a hand roughly through his ruddy hair. “Do you really think that I’d have left you if I had any choice in the matter?”

“I have no idea, Aiden,” she shrugged.

“Keely,” he looked at her pleadingly. “I had to leave. Once it was clear what you were, I was called up by the Patrons. It takes years to train a Patron properly, and it’s rigorous.”

“What do you mean,” Keely shook her head, “What I was?”

“My parents are both Patrons,” he sighed. “Finley is a Patron. My father was your dad’s Patron. They knew you were a muse when you were five.”

“If my father had a Patron,” Keely whispered hoarsely, “then why wasn’t he protected?”

“I wasn’t there,” Aiden stood, beginning to pace. “I was just a kid, but my father told me that it was a failed rebellion. Your father and several other music minded muses were barricaded in the bell tower, trying to use music to bring about enough inspiration to bring down the revenants. They planned it without their Patrons, Keely. They didn’t want to risk more lives than they had to. When it all failed, my parents were worried that there was a target on our backs. They thought leaving was the best way to protect you both.”

“So you’re my Patron?” she said slowly. “And that’s why you were my friend. To protect me.”

“No Keely,” he shook his head. “I’m honored to protect you, because you are my friend. The Patron and Muse bond is complicated…but it is the reason why you can hear me in your head sometimes.”

He glanced at the dried bouquet of lavender, hanging above her bed.

“You kept it?” he murmured.

“I get the gloves now,” Keely said. “I would have recognized your scar immediately.”

“I know,” he smiled.

“I can’t leave my mom alone, Aiden,” she sighed.

“You won’t have to,” he reached for her hand, pulling her up in front of him. “My father is explaining everything to her right now. There is room for you both at the stronghold.”

“What’s waiting for me there?”

“Hope,” he smiled. “Other muses for you to learn from, to hone your art. We’re preparing, Keely. This time when we push back, we won’t fail. Especially if we have you.”

“You seem pretty confident for someone who hasn’t even seen me do anything but accidentally turn an apple red,” Keely sighed.

“Keely,” Aiden placed a warm hand on her shoulder. “I’ve seen everything. I’ve just been forced to stay in the shadows until the time was right.”

“I wish we could just go back in time and get a second chance at something less complicated,” she sighed.

“We can’t go back,” Aiden replied gently. “But I promise that you’re never going to lose me again.”

“Okay,” she looked at him. “After Solstice? I’d hate for those apples to go to waste after all that effort.”

“After Solstice,” Aiden nodded, slipping his hand around hers.

They entered the kitchen together, to find their mothers huddled in the corner teary eyed and deep in discussion. Mr. Sweeney was holding the scarlet apple, gazing at it curiously. Everyone turned to look at the two, glancing at their hands.

“It’s good to have the family back together again,” Keely smiled tentatively. “Should we get the festivities underway?”

“We should,” her mother took the red apple carefully, gazing at it with wonder. “We have so much to celebrate this year.”