THE METAL GUEST

An alchemist finds a new type of change when a guest arrives at her father's inn.

Word Count: 2977 words

The inn was quieter now, most of the guests and patrons either stumbling home from the bar, or cozying up in their modest rooms. The oil lamps on either side of the bar top emitted a flickering low light against the stained wood. She scrubbed the wine residue from tin cups with a damp towel as she watched two lingering drunken men from behind the bar.

"You there- he needs another," A larger man leaned back in his chair so far that she thought he'd collapse to the floor, but alas he stayed upright.

"Sorry, we're closing up now," Clarke Altan gave a half smile from where she stood. She wasn't a stranger to boisterous men taking up space in her father's inn, and had found her own ways to entertain herself in the eight months since returning from the Guild.

"I wasn't asking, girl." The man rose from his seat, as if his tall stature was supposed to frighten her.

Don't bring unnecessary attention to yourself.

Her father's words echoed in her mind as she glanced down at her gloved fingers. Stupid, cumbersome gloves. Clarke so desperately wanted to be rid of them, her fingers being her most honed weapon she wielded. The brown leather creaked as she flexed her fingertips.

"We're closed." She turned her back to the man and his companion, lighting a match and bringing it to the base of a cylinder filled with a murky substance topped with a metallic powder. The sound of the chair scraping against the wood floor gave her the confirmation she needed; a smile spread across her face as they determined their fate. She counted the man's steps toward her in her mind as she watched the flame cause her concoction to bubble within its glass vessel. He was muttering something behind her, but she couldn't, or rather didn't hear him as her eyes locked on the melting powdered metal before her.

She looked over her shoulder as the man pounded his scarred hands against the bartop.

"Did no one teach you your manners, woman?" His face formed the frown of a man who wasn't used to being told no. A kitchen knife lingered under the tap, most recently used for slicing plums, sap from them still coating the sharp blade. A quick side glance to his companion, he met her stare for a moment before his eyes darted to the floor. Fine, if he didn't do something, she guessed she would.

The man's hands pounded the bartop again, splaying his fingers just right so Clarke, with wicked precision, whirled around and stabbed the knife directly into the back of his palm. She yanked the blade backward, holding it above the heated liquid. One drop of the man's blood turned the mixture to ash. The dust swirled upward as the man was surely jumping over the bartop behind her.

"You bitch!" He screamed, blood seeping from his palm. His meek partner was now on his feet, shouting the man's name. The wood of the bartop creaked as he lurched toward her, reaching for the back of her head. Clarke ducked as her gloved hands palmed the heated glass. She yelped as his bloodied fingers found her long black locks and yanked her backward. He tightly gripped her against his chest, attempting to choke her, but it appeared he was distracted by the pain radiating from his hand

Dust flew in the air as Clarke's smile gleamed. She stomped as hard as she could on the man's foot and put all of her weight into sending him backward. Spilled ale pooled at their feet, causing him to slip and fall to the ground, taking Clarke down with him. His head smacked against the wood floor, but her hair was still entangled in his mess of a hand. She said a silent prayer that there would be hot water for a bath when this was through.

Clarke found herself on top of the man, straddling him as she yanked her hair free. Her mixture almost felt heavy on her gloved fingertips as she looked at the brute on the ground in front of her.

"What is that?" His friend was wide eyed behind him as he stood at the end of the bartop. His hand on the pommel of a dagger Clarke knew he didn't have the sense to use.

She ignored him as she gave a sensual smile to the confused man below her. She brought her face closer to his, inviting him to come closer too. In his moment of pause, she formed her red lips into a pucker, and like blowing out a candle, blew the dust in the man's face.

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She didn't turn around to see the rat scurry out of the fallen man's pant leg.
She also didn't care to answer the friend's questions before he met the same end.

"Alchemist," He'd whispered in fear after she'd sliced the back of his knees and prepared the same mixture as before. The king made them seem like monsters, so she'd give him one. She didn't spend her life learning the craft to be thought of as a low life witch. She was a scientist, a visionary, and able to change whatever she pleased. She set out rat traps before going to sleep that night.

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Her father mentioned three times the next morning that the royal guest was to be arriving soon. She stood in his quarters, holding back a wince as she watched him struggle to get out of bed.

"Father, please, I'll handle it." She placed her hand on his chest, urging him to settle. Clarke looked toward the window, the only source of light in the room, and watched the snow begin to fall.

"Let's hope it doesn't stick, the ground is already covered enough," Her father sighed as he caught his daughter's gaze. She silently asked him the same question that she'd been asking since she'd come home, but her father shook his head.

"The king has made it clear-"

"Yes, yes, I know. Alchemy is illegal, I'm hiding, I get it. I'd like to see him turn lead into silver," Clarke knew she was getting under her father's skin, but she couldn't help it. Her father was wasting away because of these people that had no regard for those who couldn't spend money on the house visits from the physician. The idea of hosting his *lackeys* made her nauseous.

Her train of thought was interrupted by his cough. The alchemist forced herself to stay quiet. She hated that he refused to let her help him. She could change him, save him.

Before she could begin another pleading of her case, the sound of horses resounded from the road below. Clarke noted to herself that maybe her transformative insulation hadn't been as sound-proof as she thought.

"Greet them. Be kind. Show them we're friends of the crown. Gloves stay on." Her father finally let his head slump against his pillow as Clarke nodded.

She flicked her eyes toward the shuttering door of the wooden wagon. Armored soldiers followed a young man. He had a look somewhere between confusion and disinterest on his face as he paced toward the front door, only to pause before he stepped under the awning, looking behind him. He seemed to roll his eyes at the young boy attempting to bring in luggage behind him. The sun shone brightly though not warm enough to melt the snow against his feet. While his comrades were in armor, designated with the royal sigil, he was in a modest pair of pants and thin shirt. Even without the silver that usually accompanied the insufferable royals, she could tell he was important.

A quick glance to her gloves strapped around her wrists, and she took her leave to greet them.

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Her lip began to curl when she heard them talking over each other as she stepped down the stairwell. They were already barking orders at her staff after their *long journey*. She chuckled to herself, knowing that most of them haven't seen anything west of the Capitol. Just boys with swords.

Clarke's loose black curls brushed against her shoulders as she helped the men and inn staff bustled belongings to rooms. She smiled and nodded at their attempted flattery, knowing they likely had wives at home. Once the men were settled, she had a sudden realization that the man she'd seen before was nowhere to be seen.

A tug to her chest brought her out into the freezing cold. The sun was dim as the evening approached and snow flurried through the air.

There he was, sitting on the ground under the rather small awning over the front porch. One soldier sat with him, clearly bitter that he remained in the cold.

"I don't drink." He looked up at her with disinterest.

"Well aren't you chipper," Her eyes flickered with amusement. A soldier that didn't drink, maybe he hadn't seen the horrors of combat that everyone else drank away.

"You might not drink but I'm sure your friend here does," She tapped her gloves against the wooden post beside her.

"I won't be leaving his majesty's side for a drink."

The words took her by surprise. His majesty. He couldn't have been much older than she was, in his early twenties, though his face gave an air of stress beyond his years. She blinked in realization, the crown prince sat before her, looking bitter and cold and overall like he wanted to die. *That could be arranged.*

"My apologies, I hadn't realized our winter guest was his *majesty* himself. Welcome. My name is Clarke Altan. This is my father's inn, he'd greet you himself but is unfortunately quite ill." She couldn't stop her loathing for the royalty to seethe from her teeth, the reason for her father's wasting away. Arbitrary laws.

"Hello Clarke, my name is Sterling, you know the surname I'm sure. Thank you for hosting us. I hope you prosper and whatever the hell else I'm supposed to say in thanks." The prince turned his head, staring out into the forest, signaling Clarke to take her exit. Pompous asshole. She'd kill him.

Still, she found herself reliving his hazel eyes staring up at her as she poured drinks for the rest of the night.

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Scrubbing the floors from the stick of ale was much less enjoyable than clearing the remnants of her favorite pastime, Clarke decided as the night had come to a close. The snow was coming down heavily now, even her magic insulation couldn't keep out the winter winds. Sterling's men proved to be just as insufferable as he was when the cold began to seep in, but they went to their rooms with little fuss.

The men's conversations had piqued her interest while she served them, though. They were all just as confused by their prince as she was. An anti-social man who preferred books to swords, the king's walking shame. She might have liked him if not for his evil lineage.

Just as she was going to finish the last of the dishes, the front door burst open.

The prince was shouting, wearing the same clothes he had on hours earlier, even in the now freezing cold.

“Help me! He’s bleeding. Help. PLEASE,” He turned back out to the forest before she could respond. Her skirt immediately soaked up the pools of water lining the cobblestones as she trudged through the road and into the untouched mud.

She could see him, frantically running ahead of her, until he stopped, his body curved over a shadow on the ground. Sterling’s body was trembling, either from the frozen air or from holding back tears.

Her eyes widened as she came upon the injured body. A boy, no older than seven, whose femur was protruding far enough from his skin that it blended in with the snow around him.

“I’m sorry Father,” The boy was crying, “I’m sorry, I thought I could climb up to see how far we were from Chiloton.” Clarke knew for damn sure the prince was not married, that would have come up at some point in her travels back home, or within her inn’s walls. The prince had a bastard child, and he must have sired him at no older than sixteen.

“You… you have a son,” Clarke blinked, staring at the boy, seemingly dressed as a squire or a simple stable boy. His plain clothes seemed to match his father’s, not an ounce of luxury in the cheap fabric.

“He’s all I have. You have to help him.” Sterling’s grip found Clarke’s shoulder as he stared into her eyes, then gave a look to her ungloved hands. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized she left them behind. The scar of her brand of the Guild seemed to burn as she looked at the both of them. The marking made her an enemy of the crown, the very people that sat in this snow with her. Royal father and son, both looking to her for power that they did not possess, but the alchemist did.

“Go ask your royal healers for help,” She scoffed, pulling her hands behind her, “and hurry while you’re at it.” The child’s face was pale with the loss of blood.

“No one knows of him. Not even my father. My guard is the only one who keeps this secret. Please,” She wished she could revel in the sight of the prince’s pleading eyes, but her chest felt heavy staring at the two of them.

“Your father is the one who’s made me a fugitive,” She breathed. She had never seen the king with her own eyes, but she imagined Sterling to look like him. He stared at her, teeth clenched together to hold back either a shout or tears.

“Has he not made me one too?” His voice trembled, but it didn’t appear like he was talking to Clarke. He was looking up, toward whatever gods may be listening. The forest seemed to quiet then, as if in anticipation.

“I’m not a warrior. I’m not strong. I’m not respected. I’m not even liked. My own people would cheer for my death so as I will never be king,” Sterling’s voice had a bite as it cut through the cold.

“But I live for this. For him. To protect him with every bit of me. Please, help me. I don’t care what laws you break, no doubt you’re the *witch* I was warned about on my way here, anyways.” He gave her a hard look, causing Clarke to hold her tongue for a moment. She considered the strength it takes to admit your lack of it.

“I can’t just fix him,” She finally whispered, “alchemy is the science of change. I’d have to take something and make it into something else.” Clarke looked from father to son, contemplating if she should just put the two out of their misery. The prince had looked dead inside from the moment they approached her inn. Maybe their divine fate brought them here, so she could end them.

She blinked, her confliction building under her skin as she nodded and raced toward the bartop to access her supplies.

She thrummed her naked feeling fingers over the various bottles with cork stoppers behind her bartop, quickly grabbing and measuring various substances to be heated quickly. A smidge more of cobalt would turn the boy to stone, aluminum would give flexibility. An ounce of lead would aid in a swift death. Clarke made her decisions, quickly but accurately pouring contents into the base of the glass. She formed a gentle smile as her blend came to a perfect simmer, and she raced back outside.

"He's unconscious," Sterling's panicked whisper cut through her as she made it back to them. She couldn't have been gone for more than 3 minutes, but the loss of blood was overwhelming. She placed her hand on the boy's throat, feeling the faintest of heartbeats beneath her fingers.

"Quickly. He'll need you," Clarke said with a huff as she set the hot glassware directly in the snow. It hissed with steam as it began to cool. Sterling didn't say anything, didn't even look at Clarke as he held his son. In the waiting for the glass to cool, she found herself gazing back toward the inn. She could almost hear her father's cough from here.

"You know what I need from you, don't you?"

Sterling looked at Clarke with a tenderness as he smirked.

"I never wanted to be king anyway."

Her chest felt tight as she reached for a blade she kept strapped within her boots. With the dull end, she scraped blood off of the boy and added it to the vial. She didn't have to say a word to the prince for him to extend his palm. The only sound in that forest was the sound of the blade slicing into the prince's palm, and then dripping into the glass.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Clarke asked, again not meeting Sterling's eyes, "We can't go back."

He nodded, and she looked back to the inn for a moment, her eyes welling with tears. Something in her felt… changed. As if the prince had the magic of alchemy himself.

"What do you mean, we?" Sterling whispered before looking at Clarke. She didn't meet his stare. Her eyes were locked on the window to her father's room.

She closed her eyes, vial in hand, and slammed the glass as hard as she could to the ground, glass slicing her hand in the process, and then launched it in the air.

The vial burst, sending a rain of silver over them.

She didn't look at them as it soaked her skin, too.