

# Like a Rock in the Sea

by Ruby

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"I can't believe I let you talk me into seeing this."

Jenny rolled her eyes affectionately, "I know, I know, Big Girl Cathy is too grownup for fairy tales. Well I got two tickets to a sneak preview and I didn't want to come alone."

"You could have asked that guy you told me about, Joel? Who works in nonfiction -"

"Joel is a great guy and over lunch he invited me to his place this weekend, he really wants his boyfriend to meet me."

Catherine laughed, "Oh Jen, all of the good ones really are taken or -"

"Yeah, yeah, so just pipe down and enjoy the movie, ok?"

Catherine took a sip of her soda and looked around the sparsely populated auditorium. She was glad Jenny had insisted on taking her along. It had been a while since she'd seen a movie, she'd been wrapped up in passing the bar and now as a newly-minted lawyer she was comfortably ensconced in her father's firm. Ensnared, like a ring in a black velvet box. She felt that flutter of uneasiness she increasingly felt when she realized how planned and pampered her life really was. She should be feeling nothing but gratitude, but like the itch from a tag, it was a constant rub that she was walking through her life half asleep. She shook her head, no reason to bring that gloom to a fun night out with a friend.

In the projection booth, Saleem finished loading the reel. Vincent watched him and rubbed his hands together absent-mindedly. He usually only came when Saleem checked the print and there would be at most a couple employees in the theater. But Saleem assured him sneak previews were never packed and no one would wander back to the hallway he used anyway. Vincent probed the contours of his restlessness. It wasn't just the increased amount of people in the theater it was... the hurt that had no name, *The Lonely*. *The Lonely* that sometimes almost seemed to have the shape of a woman but then would dissolve into no form at all, leaving behind only a dull ache like biting into something too cold.

Vincent closed his eyes. Sometimes if he centered himself *The Lonely* would retreat back onto a ledge in his mind. Sometimes. He refused to call it making peace, but he had accepted *The Lonely* was going to be the only mate he'd ever have. And he chided himself for ingratitude. He had friends and family - Saleem standing before him was testament to that. But he wanted something more, someone more. Someone whose breath he could feel as she slept on his chest. Someone he could... make love to by the Mirror Pool, as stars danced in the water. He turned away from that wish - that kind of desire led to dangerous places. And he could find happiness in his share. He hadn't yet, but he wasn't quite yet ready to admit that. He returned his attention to Saleem.

"The film is called *Legend*?"

"Yeah, same director who did *Blade Runner*, and since I knew you liked that one I figured you'd want to see this one too."

Vincent nodded and turned his attention to the small projection booth window. He sometimes let his empathic sense reach out into the audience before a movie, liking the sense of happy anticipation that was returned to him. He let the ribbons of his ability unfurl and flutter over the crowd. Eager curiosity, anxiously deciding if there was still time for a run to the concession stand, and ... Vincent felt his eyes go wide with surprise. A loneliness, an uncertainty he thought had only belonged to himself.

"Cathy you okay?" Jenny looked at Cathy, suddenly raising her fingers to her temple, like a headache was coming on.

"I'm fine Jen, just felt... probably a blast from the AC being turned up too much. It's okay." The theater darkened as the previews began.

Vincent watched the previews with half interest, his mind going back to that sense of loneliness he'd felt. The movie proper began and he let the conscious thought go, deciding to only project a sense of peace. *You are not alone. I know your loneliness. And if I have to believe mine will end so I can believe yours will too.*

The film gathered him up as it always did, letting him lose himself in enchanted forests, with clouds of glitter raining through the branches, and unicorns that reminded him of the ones on the tapestries at home. Home was a place of darkness, held back only by the smallest of lights. The villain's lair was such a place, only he welcomed the darkness and forbade light. Because light would destroy him. Vincent saw himself as the villain, as he always did when the villain was bestial. He knew he was not the knight that slayed the dragon. He was the dragon. The thing that hid in a cave and was spoken about in terrified whispers. The villain loved a human woman and tried to remake her in his image. But he failed, the hero saved the woman and destroyed the villain, by bringing the rays of the sun into his lair, shattering him into a thousand pieces.

Cathy watched the film with interest, it was ridiculous and florid in parts, like a hair metal video had found a few extra million dollars for the movie. But she secretly did still like fairy tales. They reminded her of her mother reading them to her. And then her father, both of them knowing her mother was the one with a gift for this, but neither wanting to hurt the other by saying so. It was their simplicity she missed. Love could save the kingdom, or break the spell. Growing up was learning how little love could do sometimes. Love couldn't make mothers get better from a diagnosis involving the word "metastasized." Love couldn't make a college boyfriend stop grabbing your arm so hard he left bruises. Love was beautiful but love was for poetry and perfume ads.

She admitted to herself she didn't love Tom. Tom was a comfortable habit, a good first marriage. Tom was safe because she knew Tom would hurt her. Tom would look at other women and eventually find his way into their beds. And there would be fights, and then a divorce amenable to both parties, and almost preordained by the iron clad pre nup she knew her father would insist on drawing up. And then she'd be a free woman again, free, free to fall in love in the play acting way of the women who lunched and spent weekends in the country. Her stomach lurched when the woman in the film was seduced by the villain's diamonds and a dress that seemed to dance of its own power. She felt herself called out, but helpless to answer the charge. What else was there for her besides this?

She let her mind wander. Her thoughts pressed into that... something she'd felt at the beginning of the film. Almost a presence, she reached with her mind for it and felt... stillness. As though it's attention was focused solely on the film. She had an impression of deep places ... like canyons? A river? And a message of peace for someone. Her? She felt uneasy, and was probably just imagining things.

She focused her attention back on the film and watched the woman learn some hard lessons about the price of innocence. How innocence was not always a positive virtue, how you could do great harm because you honestly didn't know any better. And sometimes, in order to become a better person, you had to lose your innocence, hard. But it was only after she'd done so that she was able to use things, like cunning and guile, to trick the villain and keep him from killing the unicorn that would have plunged the kingdom into eternal darkness. She saved herself and others by being willing to let go of everything she'd ever known.

The film ended with the wild man from the woods returning her home, while staying where he belonged, in the overgrown, free places away from castles and people. They were a part of each other, but they could not be together. Catherine felt strangely sad as a lovely song began over the end credits.

Vincent stretched out his feet from having stood for so long and listened to the lyrics of the song as it played. The people in the audience began to gather their things and go

*"Is your love strong enough, like a rock in the sea..."*

Vincent rolled the metaphor over in his mind. It could suggest a great rock that broke the surf on the shoreline, refusing to be moved. Something ageless and eternal. But it also suggested a rock being carried along by great swells of the water, and somehow not sinking and being deposited somewhere it had never been. Both called to him, to have faith, that *The Lonely* would be dashed against the rocks one day, or that he was actually floating in a great invisible sea that he didn't realize was taking him exactly where he needed to go. He hugged Saleem and made his way towards the door.

In the theater, Cathy and Jenny filed towards the exit. Cathy hoped Jenny didn't notice how thoughtful she looked; she wasn't in the mood for one of those conversations tonight. They'd have good cups of coffee and split a piece of pie the size of a Buick at some diner instead. She made a note to pop into a record shop to see if they had the single of the song that was playing. It made her feel... it made her feel that maybe love wasn't just for perfume ads. That maybe love that broke spells would find her one day. As silly as that was, she admitted she needed to let herself believe that sometimes.

Jenny swiped two streaks of lip balm and put the tube back in her purse. "I gotta say, the bad guy may have looked like Satan, but give me a couple drinks and we'll see you know?"

Catherine laughed uproariously, Jenny always could make her laugh like that and they exited the theater.

In the booth, Vincent paused at the door. That laughter, it was like the bells in Wong's shop that announced visitors. It was bright and flickered like a band of light that had shattered the villain in the film. But it didn't shatter him. It rested on his vest like a moth, and then it faded away as the woman left.

Vincent placed his hand on his vest where he'd felt the laughter, the dull thump of his heartbeat under his fingers. He would never hear that woman laugh again, but somehow *The Lonely* didn't dig its claws into him over that. He wondered at that on the walk home but let it go as he approached the culvert in the Park.

*"I hope whoever gets to hear that laugh regularly understands the priceless treasure they've been given."*

He smiled ruefully to himself and walked into the waiting dark where light was a welcome friend.

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