

The Black Smith Girl

By Stephen Ribuffo

In spite of the autumn chill she was sweltering. Darha had been working non-stop in the smith. The Festival of Bounty within the harbor town of Wrotheim was an event everyone took seriously, and the last two weeks of preparation had been—exhaustive, to put it mildly. Darha understood the importance of having a full belly, and how the town's surplus from the ocean was essential to their economy. But, if she heard one more person in a fish costume utter the phrase, "to sea and bounty!" She was going to scream. The clanging of metal, and the roar of the fire was enough to drown out the giddy gibberish outside of her father's smithy. Allowing her to unleash her frustrations without harming anyone.

"Is it safe to come in?"

She almost didn't hear Wilhem over the noise. He was grinning broadly with his hands up, both stained with brightly colored paint. His smock was also a mishmash of color, no doubt helping with the preparations in the town square, and with him was Pul, nervously smiling several paces behind. It was still hard to believe they were friends. The two young men used to hate each other when they were kids; Darha still didn't care much for him. She wiped her forehead with her sleeve, smearing soot and staining her fair skin.

"Just as long as you don't start singing the Bounty's hymn." She breathed.

The young men turned to each other and smiled. Darha raised an eyebrow in suspicion.

"...Cast your lines, and reel your nets. Pull the bounty in. The gods are kind, and daylight still, lingers o'er horizon. For our wives—"

Darha held up her hammer menacingly, and the two began rolling with laughter.

She was scowling. “Did you need something?”

“Nope,” Wilhem said carefully wiping tears from his eyes, “I’m good.”

She rolled her eyes. “So happy I could oblige.”

Pul cleared his throat then and shuffled forward. He held a scrap of parchment in his hand and extended it to the young blacksmith.

“Actually,” he stammered, “my father, the carpenter, sent me to pick up a few things.”

Darha snatched the parchment from his grasp and went over the list.

“I know who your father is Pul,” she said tiredly, “you don’t have to remind me. One hundred nails, huh? Must be building something big.”

“Yeah,” he scoffed, “everyone wants him to build a giant whale for the festival. Don’t understand why he just doesn’t use pegs, they’re cheaper.”

Darha looked at him incredulously. “If it’s as big as you say, wooden pegs wouldn’t support the weight. You’re a carpenter; you should know that.”

Pul began tugging at his ear. “Well, I...what I mean is...well—”

Darha sighed. “Nevermind.”

She went through several drawers, and began grabbing handfuls of nails. She placed them on a scale weighing each batch until she reached the correct amount, and added the price quietly in her head. She noticed Pul limply holding a burlap sack, and snatching it from him she began dispensing the nails into it. She caught an unapproved glare from Wilhem out of the corner of her vision, and then thrust the sack of nails at Pul.

“That’ll be two silver florin.” She stated.

Pul took the sack clumsily and began trying to nervously fumble for two silvers from his purse, finally dumping the entire contents into one palm. Darha threw a despairing look to Wilhem—who stood stone face—while Pul frantically separated the coins in his open palm. After what seemed an eternity, Pul paid Darha for the nails, thanked her, and quickly left with what was left of his dignity. After he was gone Darha smiled smugly to Wilhem, who was shaking his head.

“What?” She asked defensively.

Wilhem sighed. “Darha, you’re my best friend,” he started.

She eyed him suspiciously. “But…”

“But that was totally uncalled for,” he said, “You really need to let it go.”

“Let it go? Are you kidding? He’s a jerk!”

“Are you being serious?” He asked incredulously. “We were what, ten? That was seven years ago, Darha. Stop being so stubborn, because now *you’re* being a bully!”

They stood glaring at each other. Darha didn’t want to admit Wilhem was right. He usually was, and she hated that. She felt embarrassed, but she didn’t want to make it obvious, so she began needlessly tidying up the shelves—which of course only made it more obvious that she was uncomfortable.

She fixed a loose strand of her dark hair. “I am not stubborn.” She said evenly.

Wilhem suppressed a grin. “I guess that’s as close to an apology as I’m going to get.” He said ruefully. “He likes you, you know.”

Darha feigned a laugh. “Uh-huh, right.”

“Come on, you don’t see it?”

Of course, she saw it. She wasn't stupid. It was one reason why she acted like she did; mostly it was because she just couldn't stand him. Granted it was close to almost eight years ago, but she still hadn't forgiven Pul for what he had done to Wilhem, even if they were friends.

Fate must have a sense of humor though, because Wilhem grew almost a head taller than Pul. He was also much better looking, a stark contrast to Pul's portly, and dopey frame. Tall, sandy brown hair, with hazel eyes, broad shoulders and a chiseled chin, no wonder every girl in town would circle around Wilhem like vultures to watch him paint. She hated girls like that, but she couldn't help but feel self-conscious about it. Working in her father's forge was a messy business, and she was almost always covered in soot. She didn't nearly smell as nice as other girls, and after scorching her long hair so many times she decided to cut it short. Which only accentuated her more masculine features. Working the iron had sculpted and toned her body, there was always dirt under her nails, and her hands were callused.

"Wilhem," her tone was soft, "do you think I'm pretty?"

"What," he almost laughed, but caught himself when he saw the look on her face, "you're being serious?"

"Never mind, forget it."

"No." He said.

He made his way around the smithy and leaned against the anvil, still warm from where Darha had been fixing a shovel moments before he had arrived. He appraised her in such a way that Darha was beginning to regret having asked. Not so much because she was embarrassed, but because she felt Wilhem was having fun at her expense.

She fidgeted nervously. “What?”

“I’m thinking.” He said, with a paint stained hand cupped around his chin.

“Wilhem!”

“Okay, okay,” he chuckled. “Darha, you’re as pretty as a sunset, and as magnificent as the sun rise.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

He shook his head, smiling. “Not in the least.”

A pair of heavy boots clicked against the stone floor, and a thick bearded man stepped into the smithy. He was tall, and broad shouldered. Age marked his features, and streaks of gray ran through his long black hair and beard. There was an air of sternness about him, but his iron-gray eyes belied a particular gentleness.

“I’ll second that.” He said in a gruff voice.

“Dad,” Darha smiled, “you’re back early.”

Out of habit Wilhem gave a curt bow. “Good morrow, sir.”

The large man rolled his eyes. “Wilhem, how many times have I asked you to call me by name?”

Wilhem gave the man a slight grin as he chalked the cart’s wheels. “At least a hundred times, Ornick.”

“I’ll help.” Darha said, joining them by her father’s horse drawn cart.

The cart was almost overflowing with raw ore. Usually, he returned from the mine with less than half the cart full. She always worried when her father went to the mines. He never complained openly, but she could tell by his posture that it was taking its toll.

“Actually, little bird,” he said rummaging through one of his pockets, “I have an errand I want you to run.”

She blinked, curious, and then he dropped a quality sized gold nugget in her palm.

“It was a good haul.” He said grinning at her surprised expression.

“What do you want me to get?” She hefted the nugget in the air several times.

“I know you don’t like wearing dresses much anymore, but I’ve seen how you eye that dress in the window of the seamstress’ store. I want you to buy it so you have something to wear to the festival.”

“Dad...”

Ornick held up his hand. “I know what you’re going to say. With all the work we’ve been getting from the festival preparations, and the amount of ore we have we have plenty of coin for food and supplies. You’ve worked hard, and you deserve something nice. Besides, I don’t get to spoil you very often.”

She beamed at the gruff, bearded man, hugging him fiercely and quickly removed her smock to begin cleaning up. In a basin of relatively clean water she scrubbed her hands, and face, getting slightly frustrated when the worst of the soot wouldn’t wash completely off. It had stained her hands and face so badly there were now slightly faded gray spots on her skin. After brushing the worst of the soot, and metal fouling from her hair, she straightened her linen shirt, brushed off her leather trousers, and made sure her dagger was secure on her belt.

“I won’t be long.” She called weaving her way through the crowded street.

“That’s odd,” Wilhem noted.

“What’s that?”

“A moment ago she was acting like she couldn’t stand the festival, and just now she got really excited about it.”

“That’s the problem with you young people,” the gruff man smiled, “you can never make up your minds.”

The dress was still there, and it was a beautiful dress sure enough. A deep, wavering crimson that shone softly, with what appeared to be pearls elegantly woven into patterns around the bust, hips, and thighs. However, it was not the dress she fancied. Despite her rough exterior Darha was incredibly shy, and she wasn’t really much of a conversationalist. But, now she had something to talk about, and she hefted the gold nugget in her hand once more before entering the shop.

The smell of flowers was a welcoming fragrance compared to the smithy, and the floor was clean with the wood polished. Outfits of differing ensembles decorated mannequins, while whole sheets of fabrics hung on spindles, or were neatly folded on shelves. There appeared to be two sections of the shop, one on either side separating the commoner garments from the nobles. Darha made her way through the quiet shop, almost afraid to touch anything. And that’s when she saw her.

She was young, but maybe a year or two older than herself, and she wore a simple lavender dress. Her auburn hair was long and curly, yet neatly maintained. It wasn’t the first time Darha had seen her, but she was just as lovely as she remembered. A knot formed in Darha’s throat as she went to speak.

“Excuse me...” her voice cracked.

The girl turned, and her face beamed at the sight of a customer in the shop. Her eyes were like two sapphire stones, and Darha suddenly felt utterly embarrassed. She was dirty, her hair was a mess and this girl was beautiful.

“Hello, how may I...” she paused as she got closer, looking Darha up and down. In spite of her soot stained face Darha had very fair skin, and she could feel the blood rushing to her face.

“I remember you,” she exclaimed, “you’re the blacksmith’s daughter, right? Darha, was it?”

Darha blinked. “Yes, I didn’t think you would have remembered.”

She shrugged. “I’m pretty good at remembering names. Kind of have to for business, you understand. Do you remember mine?” She said with a shrewd grin.

Darha’s stomach lurched. “Uh, no, sorry.” She admitted.

The redhead extended her hand. “Celeste.”

Darha held her hands up. “Not trying to be rude, but my hands are dirty.”

Celeste rolled her eyes, and took Darha’s hand in a hearty shake. “Nothing that can’t be washed. Besides, most people that come in here are so stuffy, and up tight that things get so boring. It’s nice to see some color every now and then.” She smiled.

“Well, in that case,” Darha said anxiously, “I’ll bring the whole smithy next time.”

It was a horrible joke, and she immediately regretted uttering it. But, Celeste laughed anyway. Whether she was just being polite, or thought it was actually funny Darha wasn’t sure, but she felt a little more at ease.

“So, Darha,” Celeste began, “did you come to barter those clothes, or have you come to buy something?”

“What? No! Not at all, I wouldn’t even think of...”

Celeste was giving her an incredulous look.

“You’re kidding aren’t you?” Darha said, catching on.

The young redhead nodded. “Are you okay? You look a little nervous.”

Darha began fidgeting with her hair, absently noting she could have done a better job combing it. “Sorry, just not used to things being so—nice. The whole blacksmith thing, you understand.” She said adopting Celeste’s tone from earlier.

Celeste blinked, and then began laughing. Part of Darha was afraid Celeste would turn out to be like the vultures that pandered after Wilhem. Another part of her feared the mere sight of her would appall Celeste. However, she was none of those things. She was kind, funny, and down to earth. Or, was she just being that way because Celeste thought she was a customer...no, there was no way she could be sure of that. At least, Darha hoped that was the case.

“Actually,” Darha said, “I wanted to buy a dress. For the festival.”

Celeste smiled. “Have you seen anything you like?”

“I like the one in the window. The red one.”

Celeste’s face seemed to light up, and Darha noted how beautiful she looked when she smiled.

“I was wondering when someone was going to want to look at that one! It would go perfectly with your eyes.” Celeste took Darha’s hand, pulling her in the direction of the crimson dress.

Darha could feel the blood rushing to her face again as Celeste took her hand.

“Has anyone ever told you, you have beautiful eyes?”

“No, not really.”

Celeste smiled over her shoulder. “Well, you have beautiful eyes. Like two bright emeralds.”

She pulled the dress from the mannequin and held it appraisingly towards Darha, mumbling absently to herself. After several moments of doing this Celeste stopped and shook her head.

“This won’t do.”

Darha’s eyes lowered, and then she sighed. “Should have figured.” She shrugged.

“You’re going to have to put it on. Okay, strip.” Celeste said as easily as if she were talking about the weather.

“Wait, what?” Darha exclaimed.

Celeste blinked, and then thumped the side of her head with her palm. “Sorry, I get a little carried away sometimes. I meant back there behind the shade,” she pointed toward the back of the shop, “don’t worry, no one will see you. Except for me.” She added with a wink.

Darha’s face flushed, and Celeste laughed.

Behind the shade, Darha removed her clothes, handing them to Celeste, and then gingerly slipped into the dress. It was a bit tight, but the material was soft. The collar was high around her neck, and the sleeve almost seemed to cut off her circulation. She had

managed to fasten several buttons, but it looked as though they would break. Darha wasn't a big girl, but the years of blacksmithing were showing. She called for Celeste.

Celeste tapped her finger against her chin. "It's a bit tight," she noted.

"Is that bad?"

She smiled softly. "Not unless you want to rip it."

Celeste reached into a pocket of her dress and removed a long piece of string. She walked behind Darha, and unfastened several buttons before stopping.

"Do you mind?" She asked.

Darha swallowed hard and shook her head. "No." She said quietly.

Gingerly, Celeste undid the remaining few buttons and peeled the dress off of Darha's frame to the waist. Darha instantly brought her arms to her chest. As delicate as silk Celeste ran her fingers over Darha's skin extending one arm out, and Darha found it near impossible to resist.

"It's all right," Celeste assured her.

She was so close Darha could feel her breath against her skin, and, in spite of being half naked; she found herself somewhat relaxed. Probably, helped that she couldn't actually see Celeste. Darha wasn't sure she would be able to handle that.

As though she had done it a hundred times, and she probably had, she took measurements with the string against Darha's body. Her touch was gentle and patient, and like a striking flame.

"What are you doing?" Darha asked.

She didn't really care, but she was nervous, so she felt something needed to be said.

Even though she knew it didn't matter.

“You have a very lovely frame,” Celeste said, measuring the space between Darha’s shoulders, “I’ll have to make a few alterations to the dress, so it fits you properly.”

Darha smiled to herself. Celeste could have said the dress was too tight, or that she was too big. Instead, she complimented her. Probably nothing. Darha was sure she did that with all her customers, but it was nice to hear.

“Okay, done,” Celeste said, “are you comfortable turning around?”

“Should I get dressed?”

There was a pause, not a long one, but a substantial one. “If you want to.” She said.

It hung there for a moment, seemingly for an eternity. It was awkward, and scary, but also completely exhilarating. Given their exchange Darha was certain Celeste would be nothing but professional throughout her process. Besides, she complimented her body once already. And despite her shyness, Darha didn’t think her body was all that bad to look at.

It was perhaps some of the worst timing when the shop door swung open, clapping loudly against the wall. A thin weasel faced man, wearing a flamboyantly colored tunic, and hose stomped through the door swearing loudly. Being used to loud noises and swearing Darha merely shrugged it off. Celeste, however, seemed to take it a bit differently. Not only could Darha feel her trembling, but also her fingers were digging into her shoulders.

“Celeste,” the weasel man spat, “where are you?!”

There was a moment of hesitation, and it hung awkwardly the quite air of the shop.

“I’m with a customer, Father.” Celeste breathed after a moment.

Darha noted a difference in Celeste’s voice. It wasn’t vibrant as it had been moments ago; it was meek, and hesitant, completely devoid of the confidence that she seemed to have carried without effort before. Celeste’s father took several calming breaths. They sounded much louder than they normally would have been in the still quite.

“Very well,” he said adopting a much more professional tone, “come and see me when you’re done.”

Footsteps sounded as he walked by, and after the latch of a door leading to the back room clattered shut the tension in Celeste’s body seemed to relax.

Half turning Darha spoke in a low voice, “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Celeste, said softly, “my father’s just a taskmaster is all.”

With a gentle smile she slowly turned Darha around. The confidence in Celeste’s touch had returned. Darha stood naked from the waist up as the young redhead made measurements against her body. It was slightly embarrassing being half naked, but Celeste’s appraisal of her body was polite, and professional. Which put her a little at ease.

Celeste brushed a stray strand of hair from her face, and crossed her arms. “All done. You can get dressed now.”

“That’s it?”

Celeste turned and grabbed Darha’s things. She stood in front of Darha and looked her up and down, suppressing a grin when she noticed a rosy hue fill Darha’s face.

“Not unless you enjoy being naked.”

Handing over her clothes Celeste turned and went about her business until Darha was fully clothed. Darha knew their time was over. Once she paid for the dress that would be it. She toyed with the idea of staying after to talk some more, but knew it would only be awkward. Besides, Celeste's father seemed a trifle short on patience, and she didn't want to get her in trouble.

"I have your measurements," Celeste said as Darha stepped out from behind the shade, "but I'll have to charge extra for the alterations."

Passing the folded dress to Celeste she reached into her pocket producing the gold nugget.

"Will this cover it?" Darha asked, holding the nugget in her open palm.

A little too excitedly Celeste snatched the nugget from Darha's palm. With a shocked expression she hefted the shiny nugget in her hand.

"For this I'll give you a masterpiece!"

The next several days seemed to drag on forever. With most of the major preparations for the festival taken care of all that was left were the tiny details. Details Darha didn't even bother worrying about since they didn't concern her. She did however have plenty of ore to smelt, which was a tedious process. Melt down the ore, remove the impurities, and then cast them into ingots. Simple enough, but there was a reason her father's steel was the best, and it started with preparing the ore.

Aside from a few town folk running here and there the town guard were the only ones occupying the streets. The majority of people were recuperating from the preparations, or busy getting ready for a long night of drinking, dancing, and eating. A

squad of guardsman rattled in unison passed her smithy, stone faced and serious. Their cuirasses were burnished, and their pikes had been polished. They were intimidating, but that's about all they were really good for. Nothing ever really happened in Wrotheim, and this had turned the guard in a rabble of complacent drunkards. Darha didn't complain; Ornick did enough of that for the both of them. Besides, Duke Reignald was their number one customer. He owned the town guard, so it only made sense that his men be equipped with the best.

Darha had never met their duke, but he put gold in their pockets, and that was enough for her. Everyone in Wrotheim had a towering respect for the man, however. If the rumors were true he was handsome, and kind. She had even overheard that he attends the Festival of Bounty every year alongside the commoners. Darha had never seen him, but she always left early, or hide down by the beach away from the crowds. Ever since her mother died the festival just didn't seem all that impressive anymore. Her mother loved it, and looked forward to it every year. She always had the most beautiful dresses, all of which were too big for her. The thought of having Celeste alter them crossed her mind, but altering her mother's clothing didn't sit well with her for some reason.

@stephenribuffo