

# Short Story Contest

November 2021

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PROMPT: You live in a busy city, where the sound of traffic is constant. One morning you wake up to complete silence . . .

## Stolen Silence

by **Halle Collins**

I don't mind the silence. The silence becomes its own noise.

I don't mind the silence, because now the silence is all I know. The silence is all I can be. I never thought I'd get used to the silence, the opposite of the shouts, the bangs, the incantations screamed in the midst of battle, the desperate chanting to heal the wounded. I never thought I'd get used to being a living ghost.

I don't mind the bloodred stitches that mark everyone's mouths here. I don't mind the thread that runs up and down, connecting the bottom and upper lip, thread that glows red even in the darkness, like the blood that spilled from the flesh it ripped through is still flowing. Like the blood is angry, angry it had been wrapped around the thread. Like the thread is angry it had to seal the lips together.

Actually, I'm still not sure if it is thread. All I know is poking my own is excruciating.

I don't mind this life, not anymore. I've accepted the silence. There's only so long you can fight something that takes away your ability to. There are only so many sewn lips you can look at before you begin to despair for the future of the Citadel.

To their credit, the agents tried. They tried every rune in the book, every spell, every incantation never thought of until they were desperate enough to try it, chanted until their lips bled, just like ours. But they could wipe that blood away.

The agents tried to save their comrades, tried to untie their lips. Some died from the pain. Others went mad. The ones that survived had horrible gashes on their face, scars running up and down their arms like a tentacled creature had burned them. I didn't ask how they got there. I'd seen enough battles to use my imagination to know.

Despite everything the thread is, I don't mind it. I used to, but not anymore. The key is to avoid mirrors.

I don't mind the thread, but I do mind how it leaves me. I used to be the best agent the Citadel ever had. Now I'm stuck shelving books and transcribing runes. Writing the field reports Agents bring back. Writing name upon name until my fingers ache, transcribing every event, then filing them away carefully, like they never happened. That's the worst part of this. Losing the ability to cast is bad enough, but the forms make it worse. A list of the lives lost, memories and experiences and souls and people. Reduced to three runes--name, rank, deceased. I'd always hated that rune the most, but now it is the most familiar thing to me. Almost a friend.

I do mind being here, but not for the reason most think. I run the Archives, overseeing and helping all who come. I can read about spells and my people's history. I can read about the development of runes, how our powers came to be. I can read about the evil that came with the runes, how the monsters came to be. But what good is reading about spells when I can't perform them, what good is learning our history when I can't tell it to anyone? What good is all this knowledge if I cannot use it? What good-

I feel vibrations through my desk. Tapping to get my attention.

"Agent Sinclair," comes a voice. It echoes off the arched walls, bouncing off the dark granite up to the swooping ceiling. I always found it ironic, the quality of acoustics in a building housing soundless beings. I raise my eyebrow in annoyance.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important," the man says, sarcasm dripping from his voice. I keep my eyes trained on my report, one hand streaked with ink. What I would not give to shove a silencing rune in his face. Perhaps that is one advantage to being unable to speak: it helped keep my temper in check. It makes me seem wiser and more mysterious to others. An air of mystery could only add to the High Archivist's presence. Little do they know how close I am to sucker-punching Agent Callahan in the gut, runes or no runes.

"I've brought you a new recruit," he says. Curiosity wins and I look up, expecting to see another bloodred-mouthed Agent beside him, anger and bitterness and hatred in their eyes.

I'm met with the eyes of a child.

There's so much fear in her eyes. Fear of the unknown, fear of her future, of what will become of her when she has no voice. Fear of what she's seen. But it's an empty fear. A hollow fear. Fear of being shoved in here among the archives and left to wither away into oblivion, far from the holy war she was raised for. Poor thing. This life of a warrior is all she's known. It is all she places value in, all she prides herself to be, and all she is not.

She's too young. She should not have had her voice taken from her. But then, I wasn't much older than she was when I came here. It'll take some time, but she'll adjust to this life of silence. We all do.

"Highness Sinclair, this is Apprentiense Althea. She was one of our finest. I'm sure you could find some use for her." Her eyes dim even more when she catches his past tense. I shoot him a glare. Like an asshole, he ignores it.

“How goes your mission reports? Any reports on the location of the Desdemona?” Fear flashes through my body, hot and burning. I slam my hands down on the table as I fly to my feet. The sudden motion combined with the lack of noise makes him smirk.

“What? Did I say something?” he asks, drawing out a question he knows I cannot answer. I just glare at him, trying to manifest a burn rune with my eyes, with the sheer force of a glower. Unfortunately, nothing happens. I start gesturing with my hands towards the girl, but Callahan places his over mine to stop them. I jerk my hands out of his grasp.

“She doesn’t know your language.” Fuming, I make a shooping gesture at him. He rolls his eyes.

“The other Highnesses want to know how your research is going. Have you found anything of use?” I fold my arms. He shrugs

“Just fulfilling my duties. But of course, you would turn in any discoveries you made to the Highnesses immediately. You would never disobey a direct order.” I make no move. He raises his palms in mock apology.

“I’ll tell the Highnesses there’s nothing new to report from your end.” He lowers his voice like he’s sharing a secret. “I have to say, we’re making a lot of progress in my department.” He pauses, as if waiting for a reaction, for me to try to inquire, but I remain motionless.

“Of course, I don’t want to bother our beloved High Archivist with the details. I’ll leave you to your training with Agent Althea.” He cocks his head, and I can see the frustration building in his eyes that he hasn’t gotten any reaction from me since the beginning of our conversation. If you can call this one-sided buffoonery a conversation.

“We really should do this more often. Feel free to come to my office if you ever want to chat.” He leans forward over my desk, eyes gleaming.

“That is, if you can get approval to leave the Library. I don’t know how you tolerate listening to all the Highnesses’ whining and regulations. Shame they rule your life.” White rage flashes in front of my eyes, but then they land on Althea’s wide ones, so confused, so scared, so lost in Callahan’s bluntly treasonous talk. I take a deep breath and make the shooping gesture at him one last time. He’s fuming, but he hides it with a smile as he draws back.

“Good day to you, Highness Sinclair, Agent Althea.” Althea nods to him as he pulls back from my desk. He turns on his heel as I shoot one last glare to his back. His footsteps echo down the hall as he marches to the end, throwing open the door and closing it with a *bang*. I can’t help but roll my eyes at the way it reminds me of a child throwing a tantrum.

The tapping comes again on my desk. I look up and see Althea gesturing. I reach over and rip a page from my book and place a quill in front of me. I gesture for her to use it. Hesitantly, like she's scared I'll bite her if she gets too close, she picks up the quill and scratches down her message. Except, in the same way you couldn't hear me rip the page, you can't hear her write on it.

*Why do they still address us by our ranks?* I almost laugh. She's thrown into this brand new world, stripped of her powers and her voice, and this is her burning question?

*Formality. With Callahan, mockery.* Her lips pucker.

*I never liked him.* In spite of myself, a smile forms on my lips as I take out my quill and scribble a response.

*In that case, we'll get along just fine.* She reads the message, and some of the light comes back into her eyes when she looks up at me. The recognition not of a friend, but an ally. A comrade. Someone to show her how to navigate this new world.

*I'll show you around the Library. We'll find a job suited for you. You'll need to learn our language as well.*

*Our language?* She writes hesitantly.

*You're one of us now. Passing a piece of paper back and forth becomes tiresome quickly.* She nods.

*Can I help you in your research of the Desdemona?* I slam my quill on the table. The motion makes her jump. I take a few breaths before I pick it back up.

*Why would you want to burden yourself with a question that has no answer?*

*Isn't that what you're doing?* I purse my lips.

*You didn't answer my question.*

*You didn't either.* She slides the paper back to me.

*I asked first.* She presses the tip of her quill into her chin before returning it to the paper, using so much pressure the page rips. Enough noiseless force to destroy something.

*I want to be the one that kills it.*

Enough noiseless force to kill something.

Enough noiseless force to end this.

Enough noiseless force to save us.