Gears

By C. Jade Wyton

Olivia is a petty thief living in a den with other, not-so-petty thieves. She is neglected and ignored, though the leader of the gang, Taarhir, reassures her that she's a valued member of the group…. Something that she quickly realises is a lie when they're attacked by renowned adventurer and hero, Farren Oakenheart.

Contains descriptions of child neglect, manipulation, and violence.

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Olivia had done good, today.

At least she thought she had….

The tabaxi had managed to get *eighteen* coin purses in the two hours she'd been out. That was almost twice as many as she'd ever gotten before— But, as usual, everyone else had gotten more. And she was pushed aside as everyone congratulated each other on their hauls.

She tried to get their attention, though.

Sooner or later they *had* to see her, and how good she'd done!

'Alcott! Look what I…' Olivia trained off as the orc walked straight past her; not acknowledging what she'd said. 'Oh… uh, okay…. Oh! Panvu, I— Hm…. Xakery? No. That's okay….'

Folding her ears down in frustration, Olivia stepped away from the group and headed for the warehouse's factory room.

The sound of loud, coal-powered machinery drowned out the cheerful conversation of the other thieves, and Olivia made her way up to the catwalk. She placed her arms on the railing, and her chin on her arms, and looked down to the large metal gears grinding away below her.

It wasn't fair.

It just wasn't fair!

'You shouldn't be back here,' spoke a voice, and Olivia twitched an ear to it…. It was Taarhir; the gang's elven leader.

'So?' Olivia grumbled, not bothering to look over to the man.

'So, you look *down,*' said Taarhir, casually resting his back against the railing next to Olivia. He poked at her ear, causing it to twitch and flick, before letting out a chuckle. 'What are you sulking about now, my dear?'

'I'm not *sulking,*' Olivia sulked.

'You're thirteen; sulking is the only emotion you have.'

Olivia gave a huff, sighing through her nose, before bringing her tail between her legs and twitching her whiskers. 'Why does everyone hate me?'

'Nobody hates you,' Taarhir reassured,

'Pfft, yeah, right,' Olivia huffed, burying her nose deeper into her arms and slumping forward more. 'My *parents* hated me. Naiadia said so.'

'Did she?'

'Yeah, she said that they never even looked for me,' Olivia grumbled.

'Hmm, well, perhaps she's right about your parents,' Taarhir sniffed. 'But nobody *here* hates you. We're your family.'

'Hmp. Liar.'

'Call me a liar all you want,' Taarhir chuckled. 'But remember that we didn't have to take you in. Would people who didn't love you look after you like we have? Hmm?'

'I dunno,' Olivia mumbled, shifting uncomfortably.

'The answer is no, dear,' Taarhir said. 'If we didn't love you, we would have dumped you right back in that same park where your parents left you.'

'I guess...' Olivia sighed. 'It's just hard, cos the others—'

'Don't you pay any mind to the others,' Taarhir interrupted, brushing a long strand of Olivia's hair from her face. 'They're just jealous of you. Not *everyone* gets in my favour so easily.'

'I'm in your favour?' Olivia's ears perked up, at that. 'Really?'

'Of course, dear,' Taarhir grinned. 'You're special. You and those cute little magic hands— Who needs an expert lockpick, when we have your magic? And that little invisibility spell you're working on... just so perfect!'

Olivia giggled as Taarhir flicked the fur on her cheek, and brushed his hand away. 'Everyone else seems to think I'm only good as a distraction for the guards....'

'That's a more useful skill than you'd think,' Taarhir said, petting her on the back. 'Now, if you're done sulking, I can that see you still have your foragings from today.... If I may?'

'Oh!' Olivia stood straight as Taarhir held out a hand, and pulled her heavy messenger bag from her shoulder. 'Yeah, of course. I'm not gonna keep more than my share!'

'That's a good girl,' Taarhir praised, slinging the bag over his own shoulder. 'Now—'

He cut off, suddenly, seeming very alert.

'Taarhir—'

'Shh! Can you hear that?'

Olivia cocked her head, holding up an ear and listening hard over the sounds of the machinery below.

There were.... *Footsteps?*

Coming from....

'Above!' Olivia shouted, just in time to alert Taarhir of the incoming assault as an orc leapt from the catwalk above their own, brandishing a large sword.

Taarhir managed to jump out of the way just in time, dragging Olivia by her shoulder, and the two thieves stumbled dangerously across the platform.

'Taarhir Goldear,' the orc greeted, not-so-pleasantly. 'You have a rather large bounty on your head.'

'Well, if it isn't Farren Oakenheart,' Taarhir growled, drawing his dagger. 'To what do I owe the pleasure?'

Olivia gasped, recalling this man *Farren* from horror stories her comrades had told her— Near-capture experiences, while raiding houses or mugging people

in the streets.

A huge hulking orc man who appeared out of the shadows, as if out of nowhere, and took you down with one swing of his fist!

If Farren gets you, you'll never be seen again!

The warning played in Olivia's ears, and she felt herself trembling as she took a step back.

'Olivia...' Taarhir mumbled, slowly. 'I need your hands to help me.'

Olivia shifted uncomfortably at the coded order.

Taarhir wanted her to use her magic.

But....

'I-I don't know if I have any left—'

'*Try,*' Taarhir growled.

'But I used so much today—'

'Give him winter,' Taarhir ordered, not taking his eyes off Farren as they stared each other down.

Olivia swallowed.

Ray of Frost.

She could *try....*

'Whatever you're planning, do *not,*' Farren warned, eyeing Olivia as she took two steps forward. 'Just come quietly, and nobody has to get hurt.'

'Give him winter,' Taarhir repeated, taking two steps backwards.

'I'll try,' said Olivia, taking a deep breath and slowly —very, very slowly— raising a trembling hand.

'*Kid,*' Farren warned, pointing his sword at Olivia. 'I don't want to hurt you. Stand down.'

Olivia flinched, stepping back a pace and folding down her ears, but not lowering her hand as it began to glow, sparkling with cold blue magic.

It was taking forever to charge her spell....

'Mm, so you're a magic user,' Farren realised with a groan. 'Why don't you fight your *own* battles, Taarhir?'

Taarhir didn't answer. Olivia saw him out of the corner of her eye, backing away one cautious step at a time. 'Olivia,' he mumbled. 'Do it, already.'

'I'm *trying,*' Olivia hissed. 'I told you, I'm *tired....*'

'Stand down,' Farren repeated; though he didn't move as he and Olivia stared each other down. 'Come quietly, and nobody gets hurt.'

'I don't believe you,' Olivia said, swallowing as Taarhir stepped back again. 'I've heard about you. People you catch are never seen again!'

Farren's brow furrowed in confusion, and the tip of his sword faltered downwards. 'Because they're in *jail,*' he said, simply. 'What do you think I do? *Eat* them?'

'I dunno!' Olivia snapped. 'Maybe!'

'*Ugh,* I can't fight you,' Farren stated with a sigh, lowering his sword. 'You're just a kid.'

'I'm *not* a kid!' Olivia snapped, losing her patience and throwing out her spell before it was ready.

It fizzled and crackled with a spray of glittery, snowflake-like sparks that exploded forward in a ray of ice and cold.... But it lost momentum quickly, arcing

downwards and only engulfing Farren's lower half.

Farren let out a shout as his legs were covered in thick ice and he lost his balance— Though he didn't fall. He *couldn't* fall; the ice held his legs firmly in place.

'Dammit, Olivia!' Taarhir snapped, turning and bolting down the catwalk. 'That's not going to hold him!'

'Why wouldn't it?!' Olivia asked, casting a glance back to Taarhir as he ran. 'I got his legs!'

Then, Olivia jumped at the sound of a loud crunch, and turned to see Farren was ripping his ice bonds apart with his bare hands; tearing off chunk after chunk and cracking their entire structure with no effort.

'*FUCK!*' Olivia shrieked, turning and rushing after Taarhir. 'He's not a cop he's a demon!'

Olivia ran fast, driven by fear of the orcish man whose heavy bootsteps sounded from behind her— No, above— No, below— No— She couldn't tell! The sound of the banging and whirling machinery and the beating of her own heart in her ears made it impossible to pinpoint the man's location.

So she ran faster.

And faster.

Until her legs hurt.

And her chest ached.

And her throat stung.

Faster and faster, until she was at Taarhir's side, almost at the other side of the factory—

Farren dropped in front of them, cutting off their exit.

Olivia immediately raised her hand again, instinctively trying to set off a spell— Only to have it fizzle and pop and fail; simply spraying snow like a confetti popper over Farren's face and shoulders.

Farren flinched, brushing the cold white powder out of his hair and eyes before giving Olivia an unimpressed look.

'I-I don't have any more magic!' Olivia gasped, stumbling backward as Farren stepped forward. 'T-Taarhir! D-Do something! He's coming! What do we do?!'

Taarhir looked around, desperately, gritting his teeth as Farren drew his sword.

'I— We—' Taarhir stammered, his eyes wide as he stared at Farren.

'Taarhir! What do we do?!' Olivia repeated.

'We— We— I— You— You…. *You*…' Taarhir stopped moving, then, and Olivia backed into him with a timid squeak. 'You…. *You* do what you always do,' he said, decisively. 'And make a distraction.'

'Wh-What? But h-he—'

'I'm sorry, dear,' Taarhir said, his hands clasping Olivia's shoulders tightly. 'But at least *one* of us has to get out of this alive.'

Before Olivia had time to process what had been said, she was hefted off her feet.

'TAARHIR!' Olivia shrieked as she was thrown from the catwalk.

It was like time slowed down.

She reached out desperately as she was flung sideways, the tips of her fingers

barely brushing the cold metal bar of the railing as she arced over it, just too far away to catch it…. And then gravity took its hold she felt herself falling.

She twisted, trying desperately to grab edge of the catwalk underneath the rails, but it was no use.

Her eyes darted down to the vicious, grinding gears below and she felt them filling with tears.

Then her momentum was cut short, and an agonising pain ripped through her shoulder as she jolted to a stop in mid-air.

She let out a yelp and looked up.

Farren had caught her by the wrist.

He was halfway over the edge of the catwalk; one hand clasp around Olivia's arm, and the other holding the railing as it whined loudly and bowed, barely holding his weight.

And Taarhir was gone.

'I've got you!' Farren gasped. 'I've got you!'

'H-Help me!' Olivia cried. 'Pl-Please don't let go!'

'I won't! Farren promised. 'I have you!'

'He threw me!' Olivia exclaimed, her heart pounding as the realisation hit her. *She couldn't believe it!* 'He threw me off the edge! He— Taarhir threw me!'

Farren grit his teeth as Olivia let out a mournful wail, his chest heaving with effort as he slowly began to pull the girl up.

The railing whined and contorted as the weight beneath it shifted, and Farren let out a curse as his grip on Olivia's wrist grew painfully tight.

Tears escaped her eyes as she looked down at the hungry machine below her.

Its gears ground together like gnashing teeth, and the fire of its engine peeking out through its iron panelling looked like eerie, glowing eyes; all of them staring at her, desperate to taste her flesh.

'Help me!' she cried, squeezing her eyes shut and sobbing. 'Please! Help me!'

Her heart was pounding, and her throat was dry, and the sound of the grinding gears below stung her ears—

The railing holding the pair snapped and fell, falling to the gears and being ground apart with a deafening *crunch*.

Olivia let out a scream as she was jolted again, and looked up to see that Farren had managed to get ahold of the edge of the catwalk; though it was only by the tips of his fingers.

'I have you!' Farren reassured. 'I have you. I won't let you fall!'

Olivia let out a wail, and desperately gripped at Farren's arm with her free hand.

'Help me!' she repeated; feeling her entire body trembling uncontrollably. 'H-Help me!'

'I have you!' Farren told her again, hefting her up. 'It's okay. You're going to be okay!'

'I'm scared!' Olivia cried as she was lifted higher, away from the gears and fire and metal grinding away below.

'I know! I know. But you'll be okay,' Farren said, pulling Olivia as high as he could. 'Grab the edge!' he ordered. 'Reach as high as you can, and grab the edge!'

'I *can't!*' Olivia sobbed, gripping Farren's arm tighter and squeezing her eyes

shut.

'You can!' Farren told her. 'You can do it! You *have* to! Open your eyes, and reach out as far as you can!'

Olivia swallowed, and forced herself to look up.

The catwalk was so far away....

'Grab it!' Farren cried.

Slowly, Olivia reached out with a trembling hand.

It was impossible!

'That's it! That's it! You can do it! You're gonna be okay!'

'I can't reach!'

'You can!'

'I can't! It's too far away!'

'Okay! Okay! I'll swing you closer!' Farren told her. 'Are you ready?'

'*No!*' Olivia sobbed.

'You have to be!' Farren told her. 'On the count of three! One... two... *three!*'

With a great effort, Farren swung Olivia up towards the catwalk— But her fingers barely brushed its metal edge, and she dropped heavily down with another sickening jolt and loud scream.

'I have you!' Farren promised, and Olivia realised that it was true; he hadn't dropped her. 'It's okay! You almost did it! Try again!'

'I can't!'

'You can!' he said, hefting her into position again. 'On three! One, two, *three!*'

Olivia's hand met the cold metal above her and she scrabbled at its edge. But then she slipped; finding herself dangling limply in the orc's grip again.

'Almost!' Farren exclaimed, pulling her up again. 'One! Two! *Three!*'

Olivia's clawed fingers dug into the catwalk, and she managed to keep ahold of it long enough for Farren to release her other arm and hook his hand under her rump.

He pushed her up, until she was able to get both her hands firmly on the metal and pull herself onto the platform.

She collapsed in a panting, sobbing heap, and gripped the arm Farren had grabbed her by.

It hurt! It hurt more than any pain she'd ever felt before!

A loud thump to her side told her Farren had managed to pull himself to safety, but she ignored him as she lay trembling and crying on the cold metal.

It hurt so much....

'Hey, hey, *shh,*' Farren's voice comforted, and she felt the orc leaning over her. 'You're alright. You're safe now.'

To Olivia's surprise, he embraced her; scooping her up into his arms and holding her close to his chest.

'You did so good,' he told her. 'And you were so, *so* brave.... You're going to be okay now. I have you.'

Olivia couldn't stop crying.

She could barely breathe through her sobs.

Her arm hurt so much, and— And—

'He tried to kill me!' Olivia wailed.

'I know,' Farren said, softly.

'Taarhir tried to kill me!'

'I know.'

'He said he loved me!' she sobbed. 'He said I was special! But he tried to kill me!'

'*I'm sorry,*' Farren breathed, pressing a kiss into the top of Olivia's head. '*I'm so sorry. Come here…. Come here.*'

Olivia sniffled as Farren adjusted his grip on her; carefully shifting her arms so she could wrap them around his neck and bury her face into his shoulder.

'There we are,' Farren sighed, struggling to his feet. 'Just hold onto me, now. I have you.'

Olivia did as she was told; squeezing Farren tight and sobbing into him as she was carried back the way she'd come along the catwalk.

It felt like the walk took an eternity; each step of Farren's spanning over a thousand years until he was finally pushing through the factory doors back into the warehouse's main room.

Olivia turned, gazing over the mess that had been made since she'd retreated to the factory….

Her gang were bound tight together with heavy rope (the ones that weren't laying dead on the ground, at least) and standing over them was a short, fluffy goatling woman; her fur singed and blackened like the dark marks on the wall.

Fire damage.

Olivia swallowed, trying to quiet her crying.

None of her gang knew fire magic. It must have been….

'Did you get him?' the goatling asked, turning to look at Farren before she spotted Olivia and her eyes widened in surprise. 'Who is this poor thing?'

'He got away. I almost had him, but…' Farren glanced to Olivia, before placing a hand on the back of her head and squeezing her gently in comfort. 'He put the girl in danger. I couldn't leave her to follow him.'

'Hm…' the goatling gave a tentative hum, and looked up at her companion.

'*She could have died, Sheshalan,*' Farren whispered, angling himself away from Olivia, as if scared she would overhear him.

'You made the right choice,' Sheshalan reassured. 'I've already alerted the authorities, so they should be here soon…. What do we do with her?'

Olivia tensed, closing her eyes.

What *were* they going to do with her?

Was she going to go to jail?

She didn't want to go to jail….

'She's just a kid,' Farren said, running his fingers through Olivia's fur and beginning to massage her ears in comfort. 'We can't give her to the prisons. I don't think she's had much of a choice in being here.'

'Well… then what?' Sheshalan sighed. 'There's no orphanage here. The next one is two cities over!'

'We can't leave her,' Farren argued. 'If we do, she'll just end up in another bad place. Maybe a *worse* place than this.'

'So… what? You want to keep her?'

Olivia's grip around Farren's neck tightened.

'I think that might be the best option for her,' Farren said. 'She deserves a

second chance.'

'Farren—'

'I'll take responsibility for her,' Farren decided firmly, sounding very sure of himself. 'I know our lives aren't easy, Sheshalan, but I think we're the best chance she's got.'

—END—