

# Bucket List

By C. Jade Wyton

*Maggie is not allowed outside; for her own safety. But with some goading from several of the other orphans she's convinced to break the rules and go play at the river.*

***Contains descriptions of child abuse and drowning. Reader discretion advised.***

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The basement was dark.  
It was always dark.

The windows, painted with layer upon layer of black, hid all but the tiniest rays of the daytime sun. More light crept in from under the basement door than what peeked in from the cracked, chipping paint— And even then, it was so little, it barely made it down two of the old, worn steps before vanishing into the dark.

Maggie wondered if the chips in the window paint were what stars looked like. They looked like the drawings of stars looked, in the books Fern had given her. But she couldn't be sure. Lots of things looked right in the drawings; but a lot of things also looked wrong. Almost silly, sometimes.

Footsteps thumped overhead in the hall and deep voices laughed loudly as the visitors made their way towards the main room, and Maggie covered her mouth— Sure to be extra quiet as they passed her by.

She had heard about it all, from the other orphans.... They would line up side-by-side like their outside shoes on the rack by the front door while the new parents came in to meet them. And the new parents would pick one (or, sometimes two) that they liked best from all the kids and then would take them home with them, to live happily ever after.

Maggie didn't have outside shoes.

Fern said she didn't need them. And she supposed it was true; she'd tried on a pair once and they hadn't fit her well. They'd squashed her toes together, and her talons had ripped the insides up like paper.

She'd gotten in trouble, for that. Even though it was an accident.

A tickle ran along her spine and Maggie wiggled, holding back a laugh as her wings and tail puffed out and she reached for the large glowing beetle that had found its way under her shirt.

*'Ben!'* she whispered with a giggle. *'Stop! We have to be quiet! You're going to get us in trouble again!'*

The beetle let itself be picked up, clicking its mandibles together loudly as it was gently placed on the young girl's knee.

*'Shh,'* Maggie put a finger to her mouth.

Ben clicked again, and bit a fold in her skirt.

It was promptly deposited back in its jar, its dull red light shining through the clumps of foliage and casting shadows on the walls as Maggie flopped into bed.

She rolled to her stomach, resting her chin in her hands as she stared lovingly at the creature.

*'I love you, Ben,'* she said softly. *'You're my best friend in the whole world.'*

Ben didn't reply, and instead started rooting around in its substrate.

Another giggle found its way out of Maggie and she rolled over, pulling her blanket over herself as she did.

She could feel her eyes growing heavy as she stared at the dancing shadows. It was like her own private puppet show; a moving jungle ripe for adventure. Just waiting for her to explore it.

She yawned, and....

Awoke to the creak of the basement door.

The shadows of the dancing twigs vanished as the bright hall light found its way to Maggie, and she had to squeeze her eyes shut tight to stop the bright glare from hurting them.

*'Maggie,'* whispered the familiar voice of the matron. *'Are you asleep, Maggie?'*

Maggie gave a sniff and stretched her whole body—all the way from the tips of her toes to her tail to her ears and fingers—and then squinted up at Fern.

*'Only a little bit,'* she replied quietly. *'Are the visitors gone?'*

*'Yes,'* Fern replied, her voice louder than before— But still soft. *'I'm very proud of you for being so quiet while they were here. I know it's not much fun to have to stay in your room all the time, but you did very well today.'*

*'I'm a good girl,'* Maggie gave a yawn and sat up. *'Right?'*

*'You have your moments,'* Fern gave a smile and, slipping her hands under the girl's arms, hefted Maggie to the floor. *'Come on. It's time for lunch.'*

Maggie took Fern's hand and let herself be led up the stairs into the brightly-lit hall. A few of the other kids lingered here and there— Though when Fern emerged they stood straighter and hurried ahead to the dining room.

Maggie loved the dining room. It had two big windows that faced into the yard, and she could see the birds as they flitted about in the trees; hopping from branch to branch as they sung and chirped.

She wondered what they might sound like, without the glass between them....

She lost the thought as she was lifted off her feet and deposited heavily in a chair. A joyful squeal escaped her— Though she quickly covered her mouth and flicked back her ears as Fern looked down at her.

Then, Fern turned and made for the kitchen— Returning shortly with a cart of food for the orphans.

Maggie couldn't help watching on in awe as Fern called over some of the older orphans to help her serve it. How much work it must be! She was the only adult, after all, looking after so many children. And even though she got the older kids to help, there always seemed to be something else she needed to do....

*'Here,'* Fern placed a plate and two sandwiches in front of Maggie. *'Eat your crust, this time.'*

Maggie sighed and looked dejectedly at her talons. *She didn't like the crusts...* but she nodded anyway. *'Yes, Fern.'*

Fern's hand met the back of Maggie's head and she almost flinched— Then she realised Fern was petting her, not punishing her, and she smiled.

‘Is Blathe coming back soon?’ she asked, feeling her tail give twitch as Fern began to pour her a cup of juice. ‘He said that he was going to fight a dragon, and that he was going to bring me back one of its scales!’

‘He better not bring one of those horrid things here,’ Fern said, firm enough to make Maggie’s smile fall. ‘But, yes. He wrote me, and he’s due here next week.’

‘Next week?!’ Maggie gave a loud gasp, and felt her fur stand on end with excitement. Before she could stop herself, she’d leapt up onto her stool and slammed her hands against the table; knocking her drink to the floor and shattering the cup.

Fern’s palm met her cheek, and she gave a whimper as she was pushed back into her chair.

She pulled her legs up as Fern called out and one of the older orphans hurriedly swept up the glass; the hot white embarrassment in Maggie’s chest mixing with the heavy guilt in her stomach and making her feel sick.

A new cup was placed by her meal, and a new drink was poured. But as the eyes of the the other kids dug into her from all sides she thought that she didn’t feel much like drinking it.

Fern’s hand found its way to her cheek again —gently, this time— and Maggie was pulled forward so the matron could kiss the top of her head.

‘Don’t forget to eat your crusts,’ she said, firmly. ‘Okay? Maggie. Look at me. *Okay?*’

‘Okay,’ Maggie agreed.

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Maggie had forgotten to eat her crusts, and Fern had been upset with her again. She’d yelled at her, and told her to finish her lunch— Saying that lots of other kids in the world were hungry and she was ungrateful for not eating what she was given.

But she hadn’t done it deliberately.... She’d just gotten distracted before she could finish, and then forgotten....

Maggie sighed, and rested her head against the window so she could look out at the other kids in the yard.

It looked like they were having so much fun. But she wasn’t allowed to join them. She was never allowed to join them.

It was for her own safety, she knew that, but she still wished she could go outside.

She remembered being outside, once. The feeling of grass between her toes was the most amazing feeling she’s ever felt.

But it had been almost a year, since then. Way back when Blathe and his party had pulled her from—

From....

She wasn’t sure where from. Some sort of doctor?

She tried to remember, but the memory wouldn’t come back. It was like it was stuck behind a locked door.

A *bad* locked door.

A *very bad* locked door.

She shook her head and opened her book again.

It was almost at the scary part— Her favourite part. Where the giant worm tried to swallow the adventurers whole, but they beat it and saved the village!

Maybe she could fight one of those, one day? And save a whole lot of people.

She'd like to do something so amazing, she thought as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a crinkled piece of notebook paper.

She unfolded it and smiled; it was her list of heroic things she wanted to do. She should add it on— Oh, it was already on the list. Twice!

Just as she saw the second note, it disappeared from her hands and she gave a cry and looked up at the group of boys that stood over her.

'Hey!' she exclaimed. 'That's mine!'

'Mine now,' was the retort. 'Hm. Hero list, huh? Why am I not surprised?'

'Edmund!' Maggie leapt from her seat and made a grab for the paper as the boy crumpled it into a ball. She just missed it as he raised it high above his head. 'Give it back!'

'Nah!' a laugh escaped Edmund and he threw it to one of his friends, who threw it to the other, who threw it back to him; Maggie dancing between them as she tried to catch it. 'Come on, Maggie! You can do it!'

'Give it back—'

Edmund threw the paper ball, hard and far, and Maggie bolted after it as it arced down the hall.

It bounced once.

Twice.

Maggie reached out a hand— And then Edmund kicked it, sending it rolling out the front door and down the veranda steps into the yard.

Maggie skidded to a stop at the threshold, her wings trembling as the boys rushed past her.

She wasn't allowed outside.

But her list....

Edmund picked it up again, and waved it enticingly. 'Come on, Maggie!'

Maggie didn't move.

*She wasn't allowed outside.*

She stepped back.

'What? Scared you won't be Fern's favourite anymore?' Edmund mocked. 'Come on! I'll give it back to you if you come over here!'

Maggie edged back to the door.

'Yeah!'

Slowly... she poked a foot out; placing it gingerly on the veranda.

'Come on!'

She stepped out of the house and felt the soft breeze hit her whiskers, enveloping her in the scent of pine and dirt— Then a bird called out, and her ear twitched to face the tree. It was a beautiful sound. Even more amazing than she'd imagined....

A rock caught her in the shoulder and she flinched, looking back to the jeering boys.

'Come on!' Edmund coerced. 'Down the steps!'

Slowly, Maggie complied. She stepped down one creaking wooden step. Then

another. Then the last.

The gravel path was rough on her talons. Bits of rock poked into her toes and she quickly moved back a pace; the step giving a loud groan under her as she retreated.

‘Aw, come on, Maggie!’ Edmund gave his own groan, and motioned widely with a hand. ‘What’s wrong? Chickening out?’

‘No!’ Maggie shot back, her voice breaking as her tail thrashed back and forth. ‘It’s just— The ground hurts my feet...’

‘Then don’t walk on the path,’ said Edmund. ‘Come over here, to the grass.’

Maggie twitched an ear.

Then, her wings.

Carefully she opened them wide, feeling the wind pass through her feathers.

‘Yeah! Come on!’ Edmund jeered. ‘Fly on over here!’

A step back.

‘Jump!’

And another. Until she was on the veranda again.

‘What are your wings even for?!’ Edmund teased. ‘Get over here!’

A deep breath, and she leapt down the steps. Her wings caught the air underneath her and she felt herself lift for a moment before gravity took hold and she was flung forward, gliding a little too fast across the gravel path and over the grass— Directly towards Edmund and his friends, who scattered as Maggie failed to slow herself and tumbled in the air.

She hit the trunk of the tree head-first and crumpled to the ground in a heap.

For a moment, she felt too stunned to move. She’d just—

She flew!

‘You good?’ Edmund asked carefully, stepping to her side and offering her his hand. ‘That looked like it hurt.’

‘I flew!’ was all Maggie managed to squeak as the boys pulled her to her feet. ‘Did you see?! Did you *see* me?! I *flew*!’

‘Yeah,’ Edmund gave a laugh and brushed the grass off Maggie’s dress. Then, he thrust the crumpled paper ball into her hands and pet her shoulder. ‘Pretty cool.’

‘I flew!’ Maggie repeated. ‘I never flew before!’

‘That’s obvious,’ chuckled one of the boys behind Edmund.

Maggie ignored him, though, as she shuffled excitedly from foot to foot. She could feel the grass rip, churning up the soft dirt underneath as it caught in her talons.

‘Pfft, look at her circling!’ laughed a boy.

‘Like a dog,’ another teased.

Again, Maggie ignored them, and started to playfully scratch at the ground. It felt amazing! She could never do this indoors! She’d ruin the floor and Fern would—

*Fern!*

Maggie’s heart leapt to her throat as her head shot up to look to the orphanage door. It still hung open, the hall inside clean and empty.

Maggie swallowed.

She should go back inside.... Before Fern caught her, and got upset at her

again.

She glanced anxiously between the boys before starting back— Only for Edmund to grab her arm and tug her the other way.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ he jeered as he dragged her through the yard.

‘I— I have to go back inside!’ Maggie exclaimed. ‘Fern’s going to be really mad at me and—’

‘Ooh, *Fern will be mad!*’ Edmund mocked. ‘So what?’

‘*She’ll—*’ Maggie could barely squeak out her reply as she was tugged along. ‘*She’ll hit me!*’

‘And? She hits *me* all the time! It doesn’t hurt *that* much,’ Edmund scoffed as he reached the front gate and finally let go of Maggie— Only to give her a shove. ‘Grow a spine. I thought you wanted to be a *hero!* A real hero wouldn’t be scared of getting hit!’

The air around Maggie filled with snickers as she stumbled, and she felt herself flinch; her wings wrapping around her body as her tail found its way between her legs.

She flinched again as Edmund unlatched the gate and pushed it open, its hinges giving a harsh squeal as they strained to move. The gate only opened about a quarter of the way before making a heavy *clunk* and sticking, and Maggie hid further into her wings as the boys all slipped through, one after the other, and started down the road.

‘Well?’ Edmund chided, casting a look over his shoulder. He snorted when Maggie shook her head. ‘Get over here, you big baby!’

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She hadn’t wanted to follow the boys down to the lake; but they hadn’t given her a choice. When she’d frozen at the gate, her wings trembling, Edmund had slipped back through and grabbed her by the wrist again.

Now she was sitting with her talons in the water, trying to look serious and unhappy as the fish nibbled her toes— Though she knew that the boys had seen her giggling at least once, and that they weren’t going to let her go home anytime soon.

She sighed heavily.

She wasn’t supposed to enjoy this. She was breaking the rules! And she was too good a girl to enjoy breaking the rules... wasn’t she?

But... all the same....

The sounds of the birds in the trees was beautiful. And the grass was soft. And the fishes nipping between her toes tickled a whole lot.

A rock skipped past her, bouncing on the surface of the lake and scattering the fish, and Maggie looked up at Edmund.

‘Edmund?’ Maggie squeaked.

‘What?’

‘Why are you always so mean to me?’

‘I’m mean to all my friends,’ Edmund replied.

‘Oh,’ Maggie looked back down. ‘It’s... just that you always seem extra mean to

me, is all.'

'Yeah? And Fern is extra nice to you,' Edmund retorted. 'You're her favourite. So I'm meaner to you to make it fair.'

'I don't mean to be her favourite,' said Maggie.

'Yeah, but you still are,' Edmund snorted. Then he gave a sniff and pointed down the shore. 'Hey, guys! Check that out!'

Maggie followed Edmund's finger down the lake until she spotted a long, crescent-shaped object sitting at the edge of the water. It looked a lot like drawings of boats that she'd seen in her books— And as the boys ran down the shore and clambered to inspect it, she thought she was sure it was one.

She rose to her feet and trod to the boat much slower than the boys had; and by the time she got to them, they'd already un-moored it and were halfway through pushing it into the lake.

'Wait!' Maggie gasped when she realised what they were doing. 'That's not ours! We shouldn't touch it!'

They ignored her, and clambered into the boat as it floated out onto the water.

'Wait!' Maggie repeated.

'Hurry up and get in!' Edmund called. 'Come on!'

'No!' Maggie replied. 'It's not ours!'

'Who cares!' was the reply. 'Stop being such a baby!'

Maggie's ears pressed back at the insult, and she shuffled from foot to foot as the boys floated out into the lake.

It didn't seem right.

It wasn't theirs to touch.

But it was too late for her to do anything, now, except for pace anxiously at the lake's edge and watch Edmund and his friends in the tiny dinghy.

She wondered if she should call out to them —say something about how what they were doing was wrong— but she wasn't sure it was worth the effort. They'd just call her a baby, again. And probably throw more rocks at her.

The boys let out a cry as one of them playfully rocked the boat, and Maggie felt her heart leap.

It didn't look safe....

The boat rocked again as they all began to clamber around, laughing and jeering at each other.

Then it lifted dangerously on one side and the boy's playful cries cut off as it flipped— And Maggie's heart lurched as she saw it catch Edmund in the side of the head.

She rushed forward into the lake as the rest of the boys surfaced, pausing as the water reached her knees.

She counted.

One, two, three, four— No Edmund.

The others didn't seem to realise anything was wrong as they swam back towards the shoreline, laughing and splashing. But then, one met eyes with Maggie and his smile fell.

'What?' he asked, turning to his mates. 'Hey— Where's Edmund?'

'What?'

The boys began to spin and turn, looking dumbly around the water for their

friend.

‘Edmund?’

He still hadn’t surfaced.

‘Stop messing around, Edmund!’

Maggie felt her stomach drop. He wasn’t messing around. He was— He was—

She caught sight of him, just under the surface of the water by the boat, and leapt into the lake after him.

She swam clumsily over to Edmund and grabbed him, trying to pull him up so he could breathe.

He wasn’t moving, Maggie realised. He was limp, and unconscious, and heavy.

Too heavy for her to move alone.

She could barely keep his head above the water until the others reached her and helped pull Edmund up.

They struggled to the shore together, dragging Edmund onto the grass and dropping him on his side.

‘Edmund!’

‘Get up, Edmund!’

‘This isn’t funny, Edmund!’

Maggie stumbled to Edmund’s side and dropped to her knees. She put a hand to the boy’s head, where dark red trails of blood had started to race down towards his cheek.

He was still warm— But—

She put her hand to his mouth and felt her blood run cold.

‘I— I can’t feel him breathing!’ she managed. ‘He’s not breathing!’

‘*Fern!*’ one of the boys exclaimed, stepping back several paces and turning to bolt. ‘We have to get Fern!’

‘Yeah!’ a chorus of panicked voices agreed and the rest of the boys hurried after the first, leaving Maggie behind with Edmund.

She felt tears welling in her eyes as she watched the group rushing away, and looked back at her friend on the ground.

‘*Edmund?*’ she squeaked. ‘Edmund, you have to breathe!’

Her hand touched his chest, and she tried to recall something she’d read about once.

Resusci—

Resusci-something!

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remember the diagram from the book. She’d studied it for hours! But— But she could barely remember it, now!

She sniffed loudly and fumbled to get Edmund onto his back.

She— She couldn’t just do nothing, though.

*She couldn’t do nothing!*

So she took a deep breath and leant over Edmund. Her mouth met his and she pushed the breath out again, trying to force air into his lungs.

She wasn’t sure it was good enough.

He still wasn’t breathing.

So she tried again.

And when that didn’t work she put her hands on his chest and pressed down.



She was doing it wrong. She *knew* she was doing it wrong! But she couldn't remember the right way!

She felt the tears escape her eyes and roll down her cheeks as she tried breathing into Edmund again.

It didn't help.

She moved back to his chest.

She pressed her hands down, trying to pump her palms into his chest.

Edmund didn't respond.

She pressed harder.

Nothing.

'*Come on, Edmund!*' she sobbed through grit teeth. '*Breathe. Breathe!*'

She pressed down as hard as she could, squeezing her eyes shut tight as her hands trembled with the effort.

She stopped pumping and took in a long, shaky breath.

'*Please, gods,*' she breathed. '*Don't let him die.*'

She felt heat radiate from Edmund's chest and, slowly, opened her eyes.

A warm yellow glow was illuminating from where her hands pushed down.

Her eyes widened.

*What— What was happening?!*

She lifted her hands from Edmund's chest and watched as the glow slowly faded.

*What was that? What had just she just done—*

Edmund gave a sudden jerk and choked up a mouthful of water. Then he rolled to his side to be sick in the grass; a horrible noise escaping from him as he emptied both his stomach and his lungs.

'Edmund!' Maggie cried, throwing her arms around him. 'You're okay!'

The boy gave a wheeze in response, collapsing under Maggie's weight and sputtering as he coughed up more water.

Maggie could feel him trembling, and squeezed him tighter to hold him steady.

By all the gods, *he was alive!*

'Edmund! Maggie!' a familiar panicked voice cried from up the road, and Maggie looked up to see Fern rushing towards them.

She flinched away as Fern fell to her knees and pulled Edmund close; petting him on the back and burying her face into the boy.

'*You're okay!*' Fern breathed into Edmund's hair. '*Oh, thank the gods you're okay! I thought I'd lost you!*'

Edmund gave another crackling cough and Fern hefted him into her arms. She turned to the road just as one of the older orphans came into view. They met Fern halfway and she thrust Edmund into their arms and ordering them away.

'Get him to Dr Angril! Now! *Go!*'

The teen made off with Edmund, disappearing over the rise in the road in moments as Fern looked on.

Then, Fern stumbled sideways against a tree and let out a long, laboured breath.

Maggie watched as the woman stood, trembling against the tree, and she felt her wings give a twitch. Slowly, she stood up and made her way to Fern. She

looked up at her for a long moment, not sure if she'd been noticed.

Then, she swallowed, and reached to take the matron by the hand.

'*Fern?*' she squeaked. 'I'm sorry—'

Fern spun around and her hand met Maggie's cheek. Hard.

The girl stumbled, almost losing her balance completely, and flinched away from the adult.

'Why don't you ever *listen!*' Fern snapped.

'I-I'm sorry!' Maggie cried, retreating as the matron advanced on her.

She was too slow, and Fern's hand found its mark.

'WHY!'

Again.

'CAN'T!'

And again.

'YOU!'

And again.

'LISTEN!'

Maggie tripped, falling over backwards. 'I'm sorry!'

Fern hit her again, before grabbing her by her ear and yanking her painfully to her feet again.

'WHY CAN'T YOU LISTEN!' Fern screeched at the girl. 'THERE'S A REASON YOU DON'T GO OUT! THERE'S A *REASON* YOU STAY INSIDE!'

'*I'm sorry!*'

'I DON'T CARE!' Fern gave Maggie a vicious shake, and Maggie thought she might tear her ear off. 'YOU UNGRATEFUL— DISOBEDIENT— STUPID CHILD! YOU STUPID, STUPID CHILD!'

'I'm— I'm— I'm— S-S-Sorr—' Maggie was cut off as Fern tugged on her again. She gave a cry of pain and Fern released her— But only for a moment before she was scooped into the woman's arms and hurried down the road.

Their surroundings were a blur as Fern carried her home. Maggie barely knew where they were until she was thrown down into her bed and grabbed by the ear again.

'*Here!*' Fern shouted, slamming her other hand against Maggie's bed. 'You stay here! *HERE!*'

Maggie tried to nod, but Fern's grip on her ear was too painful and all she could do was sob.

'*HERE, MAGGIE!*' Fern repeated, her voice cracking. '*HERE!*'

'*I promise!*' Maggie managed. 'I promise! I promise!'

'Here!' Fern said again. It was followed by a laboured breath and Fern released Maggie to turn away and wipe her eyes.

Maggie's heart sank and she folded her ears back as she looked to her toes.

She didn't mean to worry Fern; she'd tried to be a good girl, and stay inside, and stand up to the boys. But it had been hard. Too hard....

She wasn't sure why being good was so difficult.

A heavy weight pressed into the foot of the bed and Maggie looked up to see Fern was now sitting with her face in her hands, droplets of tears escaping through her fingers and finding their way to her mud-smeared apron.

Maggie's tail gave an anxious twitch, and she scratched along her blankets

with her talons before shifting closer to the matron.

‘*Fern?*’ she said quietly. ‘*I’m sorry.*’

Fern gave a loud sniff and then, taking a deep breath, looked up to Maggie. Her eyes widened as she gasped and reached for the girl.

‘Maggie— Oh Maggie, no, *I’m so sorry*—’ Fern pulled the girl close and pressed her apron against Maggie’s snout. ‘Come here. Oh, love. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.’

Maggie tried to flinch away as she felt a hot pressure sting her nose; but Fern held her steady. She felt the woman’s lips meet the top of her head as she was embraced.

‘*I’m sorry,*’ Fern breathed into Maggie’s fur. ‘*I didn’t mean to hurt you.*’

‘I’m okay,’ Maggie mumbled past the apron. She felt Fern’s embrace tighten as she spoke, and tried to wiggle away. ‘Honest!’

Fern let out a deep breath and let Maggie slip away, her arms dropping to her sides as she looked at the girl.

Maggie’s ear twitched when she noticed the patch of blood on Fern’s apron, and she instinctively reached up to touch her nose— And flinched when Fern looked away guiltily.

There was a long moment of quiet.... Then Fern turned back to Maggie.

‘*Maggie?*’ she said gently.

‘Yes, Fern?’

‘I’m proud of you,’ she said. ‘For staying with Edmund. You saved his life, today.’

Maggie felt her chest swell with pride, but then Fern motioned with a hand for her to calm down and she wrapped her wings around herself and held her breath.

‘But you shouldn’t have been in that situation to begin with,’ she continued. ‘You shouldn’t have been at the river. None of you should have.’

‘I know,’ Maggie mumbled, looking at her feet again. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to break the rules. It just... happened. Edmund took my list and then... I don’t know.’

‘Your list?’ gently, Fern placed a hand on Maggie’s back. ‘What list?’

‘My list of things I want to do when I get older,’ Maggie said, fishing into her pockets and pulling out the crumpled sheet of paper. ‘I don’t know what it’s really called— So I call it my hero list.’

‘A bucket list,’ Fern corrected, taking the list and examining it; tracing a finger under the smudged marks of ink as she read its contents.

‘Oh,’ Maggie glanced over Fern’s shoulder and felt her heart sink when she saw the state of the paper. ‘I think I’m going to have to rewrite it...’

‘Maggie, this—’ Fern gave a sigh. ‘*This* was the cause of all the problems, today?’

‘Not *all* the problems—’

‘You don’t need this,’ Fern interrupted, firmly. Then she stuffed the list into her own pocket. ‘It’s best you keep your head here. In the real world. Okay?’

‘But...’ Maggie looked up to the matron and fell quiet. *Fern looked really serious...*

But then Fern’s eyes softened and she leant over to peck a kiss on Maggie’s nose— And Maggie couldn’t help but giggle.

'You know,' Fern said playfully. 'I think I know whose fault today was.'

'Whose?'

'That damned bruiser, Blathe!'

'How is it *Blathe's* fault?' Maggie squeaked in surprise. 'He wasn't even *here!*'

'No, but he's always filling your head up with silly ideas like exploring dungeons and fighting dragons!' Fern replied, taking Maggie's head in her hands and giving it a gentle shake. 'Ahah! There we go! I can hear them rattling around in there!'

Maggie gave a loud giggle and wiggled away from the matron.

The two sat together for another moment, both quietly laughing, before Fern let out a sigh.

'Oh, Maggie.... You're soaked,' she said, reaching over and starting to tug off the girl's dress. 'Let's get you into something dry before you catch a cold.'

'I don't feel cold,' Maggie replied; though she didn't stop the woman from undressing her. 'It's warm today!'

'It can't be comfortable, though,' Fern said as she pulled up her apron and began drying Maggie's fur. 'Sit still.'

It was hard to sit still, Maggie found as she was ruffled up under Fern's apron. The rough fabric tickled her, and she couldn't help but wiggle.

'Hmm, I think that's as dry as I'm going to get you,' said Fern. Then, she stood and made for Maggie's drawers, pulling out a plain white dress. 'Ah! Here we go!'

'That's a nightdress!' Maggie giggled as Fern turned back to her and began slipping the girl into her clothes. 'It's the middle of the day!'

'I know, but I think you might need a rest after such a big fright,' said Fern. 'So be a good girl and take a nap for me, yes? That way I can go to Dr Angril's and make sure Edmund is alright.'

'Okay, I'll go to bed,' Maggie promised. 'But I'm not tired, though.'

'Try for me?'

Maggie gave a nod, and tugged up her blanket so she could clamber under it. She snuggled into the covers, pulling them up to her chin, and giggled when Fern gave her forehead another kiss.

Then she watched the woman make her way up the stairs and pause at the door.

'I'll be back later, Maggie,' she said as she slowly pulled the door shut. '*Get some sleep.*'

A dim red light enveloped the room as the door was closed, and Maggie's eyes trailed to Ben's jar.

She watched the beetle for a moment before closing her eyes and trying to make herself tired— But as she rolled over in an attempt to get comfortable, she felt a pain in her ear where Fern had tugged her and had to sit up to rub it.

It hurt.

So did her nose.

And her cheek.

All the spots Fern had hit her hurt.

She could feel it now, that she had nothing else to think about. The dull aches on her body....

*Fern didn't mean it, she reminded herself. She was just worried.... And had*

*to let it all out somehow.*

And....

Maggie had broken the rules.... One of Fern's *biggest* rules.... Of course Fern was going to be mad at her. She deserved it.

Maggie rubbed her cheek and sighed.

She ached too much too sleep, she realised. So she reached into her bedside draw, fumbling in the dim light, and pulled out a pen and some scrap paper.

She flattened it out as best she could on her bedside table and, with a smile at the little beetle that crawled out of the foliage to watch her, tried to recall what Fern had called it.

Her list....

Her *bucket list*.

—END—

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