

RÆLLIC

by

Original Cyn

The sound of hoofbeats rapidly striking the ground. The clanging of metal on metal. There is blood everywhere. Fire rages in spots despite the rain, slanting from the sky. An English knight, face covered by faceplate, efficiently parries an attack and slips the tip of his sword into the exposed seam of unprotected flesh between his opponent's torso armor and hip. Oddly, he directs his horse to the edge of the cliff and pauses at the edge, looking out towards the sea. Through the mists a wooden dragon's head appears, then two others flanking it. At the head of the first ship stands a figure clothed in grey robes. As the ships grow closer, the man notices that despite the wind sweeping across the cliffs, the robes of the figure on the first ship do not move. Abruptly the knight digs his heels into his horse's flanks and wheels his horse around.

"The Norse Witch!" he yells, and thrusts his sword into the air. The gauntlet of his sword hand gleams brightly in the watery light streaming through the grey clouds, heavy with rain. His cry comes too late. The witch appears in front of the knight's horse, a spear in hand. The knight's horse rears on its hind legs and the witch smoothly dodges the horse's flailing hooves. On the horse's downward trajectory, the witch thrusts her spear upwards and the horse collapses. The knight nimbly jumps off of his horse, sword drawn. Figures in black claw their way over the cliff's edge and surround the knight's companions. The witch draws her double-sided sword and removes her hood. She looks to be no more than sixteen years old with her unlined pale skin. Her blonde hair is severely scraped back from her face and secured by a piece of grey leather, accentuating her narrowed ice blue eyes.

"You are no child, witch. I know the truth," says the knight.

"I have been chasing The Gauntlet for centuries. Relinquish it now and I will send you into death's arms quickly." The witch's voice whips through the air, cold and commanding. "If you do not, I will relish slowly rending apart your body and soul, sending you into death's embrace, one piece at a time."

"Your kind cannot even wield it!" The knight crouches into a fighting stance, sword at the ready.

In answer, the witch murmurs, "Tortam", fingers contorting and outlining invisible shapes in the air.

The knight's sword wavers back and forth. He clenches his sword tighter and moves forward unsteadily. The witch strikes first, stabbing at the exposed flesh of the knight's armpit. The knight barely brings his sword down in time to

parry and he steps backward under the witch's onslaught. The witch advances steadily, striking, stabbing and deftly parrying the knight's attempts to gain control of the fight. She feints to the lower left and swings her sword around into an overhead strike. As her sword bears down on him, the knight ducks, but not before the corner of his faceplate is caught by the edge of her sword. The faceplate flies off of the knight's head and over the cliff's edge. The witch then drops into a crouch, balancing on her left leg while her right leg whirls around and sweeps across the knight's legs. He falls, legs dangling over the cliff's edge, hands scrambling in the dirt, searching for purchase. Blood is gushing from his nose, though there is no sign it is broken.

"What have you done to it? Everything is twisted. I cannot see the truth of things. I cannot see! Corruption!," gasps the knight. "No...No... I killed them for truth, I killed them for justice. They were not innocent!"

"Were they not? How can you be so sure? They were merely children. Give me the gauntlet and your mind will be clear once more. You can DIE in peace." The witch raises the sword above her head in a motion that would have cut off the knight's sword hand, but The Gauntlet gleams and sends a pulse of power outward, pushing the knight off of the edge of the cliff.

The witch lets out an inhuman wail, the cliffs shake and rocks avalanche into the sea. She dives over the side of the cliff and is quickly obscured by the mists.

Someone is slapping my face.

"Jessica. Wake up. Get up." says a deep voice.

I groan. My head is throbbing. I reach up and feel the beginnings of a lump forming on my head.

"You dropped your guard again. Now get up."

I blink, staring stupidly at my mentor. His stern look causes his brow to furrow which in turn causes his bushy black eyebrows to touch, kind of like two caterpillars kissing. I giggle. My mentor sighs, and silently points at two bricks shoved up against the wall. I roll over and obediently walk to the bricks, place a fist on each brick and do penance with twenty push-ups. I don't feel the hard bumps of the surface of the brick as much as I did when I first started on this journey a year ago. My knuckles don't bleed anymore since I've built up the callous. Sure, my hands don't look the prettiest, but that doesn't mean I've given up getting manicures! This week my nails are painted hot pink in a faux snake skin pattern.

I completed the push-ups, picked up my wooden practice sword and settled into my fighting stance, feet shoulder length apart and left foot slightly forward of the right foot. Today was what I call "pointy object" day. So far we'd covered long sword, and axe and currently I was practicing with a broad sword. Tomorrow was to be "projectile day". I would be flinging knives and stones at a target and then in the afternoon I'd be shooting a pistol, a rifle and a shotgun. So far I feel like I am a "jack of all trades, master of none", but I have to learn it all. I'll be killed if I don't.

The other piece of my training, and I use the word "training" loosely, are my nighttime missions. The Gauntlet shows me things. At first I didn't believe they were real, but the facts always add up. My first mission still haunts me. The Gauntlet showed me a man sitting in the living room of his house, surrounded by his children, his face glowing with tenderness. Then it showed me images of him brutally murdering some of his children's classmates. I didn't want to believe it was true. I closed my eyes, but The Gauntlet kept showing me images of how he did it and the trail of evidence he had left behind. There were images of a child's shoe in a Wal-Mart parking lot, blood leaking out of a tear in a black garbage bag and clumps of hair with pieces of scalp still attached stuck in a gutter. I had to see for myself, and at each location, I found what The Gauntlet had shown me. I had vomited then. I had retched and retched until my eyes were wet with tears and my stomach had nothing more to give. I had asked The Gauntlet why the man had committed murder and it showed me the delusions of grandeur he had for his children. He wanted them to be recognized as the most beautiful and the most intelligent children at their school. He wanted to be able to hug them tight and exclaim to the other parents, "Yes, these are MY children. I am their father."

And so I hunted him down. I found him on his balcony smoking a cigarette. I tried to sneak up on him, but he was not completely unprepared. He whirled around, baseball bat in hand. When he swung at me I dodged clumsily, still not used to the multiple images The Gauntlet was showing me about where he'd strike next. I blocked his next swing with the Gauntlet and managed to roundhouse kick him to the head, knocking him out. I quickly tied his hands and feet together with a zip tie, left photos of evidence tying him to the murders and called the police. I watched from the shadows as the police hauled him away and thought of his children. I had just taken away their father. What would the children do now? The Gauntlet answered with images of the children's Aunt that lived in the next state over, childless and yearning for children of her own.

It seemed too convenient and it didn't make me feel any better about what I had done. What was that saying again? "Mo money, mo problems?" Well, what about "Mo power, mo problems?"

Which brings me to my next problem, the bitch. Yes, you heard me say it. The bitch, my nemesis, and the bane of my life. Tiffany Baumgartner.

I work at a coffee shop. Yes, admittedly a stereotypical job for a college student, but hey, you can't beat the free coffee for those late night study sessions (or in my case, late night "training sessions") or those 8am classes that I can't seem to ever wake up for. I have the skills to pay my college tuition bills. I can blend a frozen coffee drink while timing the perfect espresso pour while foaming milk all with a smile on my face. Would you like a heart or a leaf drawn in your foam? I can do that. I am a consummate professional. Really.

In walks Ms. Tiffany Baumgartner and my smile wavers a bit as I try to hide the "Oh gosh, this is gonna be annoying" quirk that is taking control of my face.

"I'd like to get a large mocha latte, half soy milk, half almond milk, with twice the amount of mocha and I'd like it scalding hot, so it has to be double cupped with extra foam and whipped cream on top."

Okay, so I know her order by heart. It's annoying as hell to make, but I've got it memorized so I'm able to whip it up in no time flat. She always smiles when I hand her her coffee. My question is, how the hell do her teeth stay so damn white when she drinks so much coffee? Tiffany Baumgartner is well liked on campus. She is an active member of several charities. Her younger brother was diagnosed two years ago with cancer and so of course, she ran and was elected chair of the student cancer society.

"How are you today? Tiffany asked.

"Doing well thanks."

"How many people are working the shift?"

"Five of us."

Tiffany stuffed a five dollar bill in the tip jar. "Y'all have a nice day."

What's my beef with Tiffany, the girl next door? Let's roll it back several months. I was hanging off the side of wall,

another night time training mission. And no, I didn't have a harness on, and no, there were no wall anchors. Total free hand climbing courtesy of the gauntlet. Back then, I had no idea how to free climb a wall. My muscles were screaming and my hands felt like they were on fire. According to the gauntlet I was wearing the wrong shoes for climbing and I couldn't get any toe grips in the crevices of the wall. The gauntlet wanted me to get some fancy climbing shoes covered with a vulcanized rubber layer. I snorted at the gauntlet. Did it think I was made of money? The gauntlet streamed images of my sorely lacking bank account and spreadsheets with stock ticker symbols. It wasn't the first time it had messed with me like this.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" I muttered and cursed as I lost my grip and fell the three feet that I had managed to climb up the wall. Of course it would be easy to use the gauntlet's knowledge to make a lot of money on the stock market and of course there were some days when I was slinging lattes out by the dozen when I was really, really tempted. But I wanted to live a "normal" life, whatever "normal" is supposed to be. My dad had tried to instill in me the value of a hard day's work. A few years back I had come into some money from my grandfather. I got caught up in the whole brand name status illusion. I bought a designer bag for a couple thousand. Stupidly I thought that people were looking at me with jealousy. The next week I bought a five hundred dollar pair of shoes and I strutted through campus with confidence. I started spending money like water on clothes, shoes, bags and an expensive haircut.

I was sitting at a posh restaurant one day, sipping on a glass of chateaufort du pape blanc when the maître'd returned with my debit card and told me it was declined. I felt my face grow hot. I mumbled some excuse that I had been traveling abroad and the credit card company might have put a stop on my card because of the foreign charges. I dug out another almost maxed out card from my purse and handed it to the guy, hoping that I had enough on it to cover the bill. That day was a splash of cold water on my face. I was broke and all I had left was a pile of leather and silk. I had to work hard. I had to pound into my skull the value of each dollar I earned and each dollar I spent. And right now, I had a wall to climb. I paced around the building vigorously shaking my aching hands and arms. I then stopped dead in my tracks. There was a fire escape running up the side of the wall.

"Seriously?" I said to the gauntlet. I sensed something akin to a smirk aimed back at me. "Right, I gotta learn. But it's getting late now and I've got to get on with whatever mission you have for me tonight." I climbed up the fire escape and swung myself onto the roof and stumbled right into an individual with a ski mask.

"What the hell? Who are you?" I asked. I got a foot in my face and I barely caught the lip of the roof as I fell over. It felt like my shoulder was going to come out of its socket. That would be the last time I'd give a heads up to someone wearing a mask. The gauntlet flashed images of me practicing climbing and flashed another smirk at me. Silly me, of course every night session was a lesson that would come in handy in the future. I clumsily climbed over the edge back on to the roof and ended up face-to-face with the masked woman. I felt the tip of a knife at my neck. It was times like these that I wished that I knew how to really wield the gauntlet to its full potential.

"I'd like the gauntlet please." She said.

"You think I'm just going to hand it over?"

"I'm asking politely."

"Sure, I'll just take it off right now and hand it over."

I felt her relax a little. I struck down, knocking the knife from the woman's hand and I kneed her in the kidneys. I waited for the gauntlet's future vision to kick in so that I'd know the woman's next move. Instead the gauntlet flashed an image of the woman taking off her mask. The woman was Tiffany. Shocked, I was unprepared for the leg sweep that knocked me on my back. Tiffany spun me around and tried to put me in a choke hold. I tried accessing the gauntlet again, but it wasn't giving me anything. We were on the ground, she had her legs around me and I was flopping around looking like a fool, barely keeping Tiffany from choking me to death. I was only a few months in with my training with my Master and I was working on instinct. I pushed my body backwards, causing Tiffany to smash her head against the concrete. She grunted, but didn't let up her hold. I couldn't breathe and my vision was getting a bit fuzzy. Nothing was coming to me, so I pretended to pass out. She finally let go and threw me onto the ground. She kicked me one last time in the stomach. It hurt like hell and it took everything I had not to scream. Tiffany unsheathed a sword from her back.

"I asked nicely." She said.

Shit, she's gonna cut off my arm! I thought. Tiffany knelt down next to me and raised up her sword. I smashed my forehead against hers. She rocked backward and I executed an uppercut into the bottom of her jaw. She fell to the ground and I followed up with an axe kick to her wrist. The sword clattered out of her hand and I rolled and grabbed it. She performed a kip-up and pulled two dirks from hidden sheaths

under her jacket and we faced off again.

"Bless your heart, you have no idea what power the gauntlet has. I don't know what the gauntlet sees in you with your pink hair and girl, you need to tone down that makeup. What a waste." Tiffany growled.

"What?" I said. The gauntlet flashed me a quick image of what Tiffany was seeing. Wow, it sure had done a number on me. Tiffany was seeing a tall blond with pink highlights. I had on thick black eyeliner and glittery electric blue eye shadow. I even had a nose ring. Nice touch. I thought. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder I guess." I threw up a "rock on" symbol with my left hand and stuck out my tongue. "Well?" I swung my sword at her and she ducked. "What are you waiting for?"

Tiffany was much better than I was with her daggers. Honestly, I didn't know crap. The master hadn't moved me on to sword training by then. It was embarrassing. She knocked me around, smashing the pommel of one of her daggers into my forehead and the other into my gut. She blocked every single sword thrust and swing. I didn't understand why she didn't just stab me that day. Apparently my master had been watching the whole time and he chased Tiffany off just as she tried to chop my hand off again. I didn't understand why the gauntlet "magically" stopped working every time she came around.

Fast forward to today. I'd had half a dozen other encounters with Tiffany. Each time she did a pretty good job of beating me up and each time my Master had to interfere before she cut off my hand. I opened and closed my hand one finger at a time. I really, really liked my hand. I was also getting tired of frantically calling my co-workers last minute to switch shifts with me. I couldn't just show up at work with a black eye and bruises around my throat. And that's why when I got off this shift, even though I was tired, I was going back for more punishment at the hands of my Master. (note to self, add in practicing in the shower, in the hallways, in the elevator)

What threw me off the most is the fact that whenever I ran into Tiffany other than during my nighttime missions, she was so nice and so gracious. Even creepier was how polite she was at each nighttime encounter. How could someone so nice and seemingly kind want to cut off my hand?

"Which witch is which?"

-unknown-

I stood over a birdbath in the back yard of her grandmother's house and tried to summon a feeling of hate,

or jealousy or something...evil. Apparently the strength of an emotion like hate would sufficiently anchor and amplify my powers, according to my grandmother. I continued to stare at the water in the birdbath. Still...nothing. As usual, this was going to take awhile.

"Tiffany, have you found where she'll be next?" My grandmother called through the window.

"Not yet Grandmother, but I'm close." I smiled at her tightly.

Why won't the pink-haired nuisance just give me the damn gauntlet? I wouldn't be stuck in this situation! The surface of the water started to quiver. I focused intently on it. I have to do this, I have to do this. I thought of my brother, and desperation shot through me, making my fingers tingle. The water rose up into a 3d picture of the interior of the Steinwell museum, its bright colored banners streaming from floor to ceiling, proclaiming the arrival of rare ancient Norse artifacts. I spun the image and took note of the time on the clock in the lobby. 7:30pm. The power left me in a rush. I tried to call it back, but let go quickly as soon as I realized what I was doing.

I couldn't fathom being addicted to anything. I'd always managed to get by on her own steam. A small smile tugged at my lips as I remembered a summer many, many years ago, sitting on the front lawn of at home with my little brother in a cardboard lemonade stand waiting for potential customers to walk by. I remembered being so excited because I was so sure that I had made the best tasting lemonade in the world (lots of sugar was the secret) and that I'd be able to make enough money to buy a bicycle. The memory washed strongly over me and the water in the bird bath trembled again, this time forming a 3d image of my memory. I smiled bitterly, because though that day had been amazing, the day was shadowed with fear. I watched the scene of that day play out. My brother Adam got bored and so I started a tickle war with him. First I tickled his sides, but he managed to wriggle away and retaliated by tickling my under arms. We both fell out of our stools by then and rolled around on the ground. I then got ahold of Adam's foot and he kicked out in a spasm, knocking over the cardboard lemonade stand and all of the lemonade. My brother then ran over to the side of the house and grabbed the hose to try and clean up the sticky mess. It had been a hot day so of course "clean up" had turned into a water war. After much back and forth, we were both soaking wet and agreed to a truce. Adam then stuck out his tongue and ran off into the house, leaving me with the mess of wet cardboard and spots of sticky lemonade still splashed across the driveway. I stood over the lemonade, trying to figure out how to clean the sticky mess when a shadow fell over me. A woman of willowy

stature and iron grey hair swept up in a chignon stood over me, also contemplating the spill. The woman muttered a few words and suddenly the lemonade was gone and I was completely dry. I stared at the woman, eyes wide.

"Child." The woman said in a thick Irish accent. "Would you like to know how to do that?"

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers." I said.

"I'm not a stranger child. I am your grandmother. Let me take a good look at you child."

The woman gently grabbed my chin and stared into my eyes. I remembered feeling a surge of power within me, fighting to get out. The feeling kept building and building until I felt like my skin would burst. Tears started to trickle down my face. The woman let go of my face and the feeling quickly subsided. I ran away from the woman, calling for my mom, but by the time my mom had come running out, the woman had vanished.

"Mom, do I have a grandmother?" I had asked.

"No dear, unfortunately she passed away when I was born." My mom had said sadly.

The images in the water broke apart and scattered into little droplets, pattering back into the bird bath. I sat down on a bench and sighed. The next time I saw the iron-haired woman was when I was 13 and getting off of cheerleading practice. The woman appeared as I was walking down the hallway at school.

"Child. I regret how our last meeting went and I apologize."

I started to run towards the nearest exit.

"Wait!" The woman had said. "Just hear me out!"

The desperation in her voice caused me to hesitate.

"I really am your grandmother. Look, this should prove it."

She reached into her pocket and took out an old black and white photograph and took a few steps towards me. I stared at the photo. A younger version of my "grandmother" stared back at me, a baby in her arms. She was wearing the locket that my mother gave to me when I was five.

"The baby in the picture is your mother. I had to leave shortly after giving birth to her, but I left her my locket

to remember me by. I have been watching over her since then."

Curious, I began to fire questions at her.

"What was the name of my mom's first pet?"

"It was a cat named Sneakers."

"My mom had one scar, where is it and how did she get it?"

"She was making a meyer lemon pie and she cut herself on the lid of a can of condensed milk. The scar is on her left hand, on her palm right below her pinky finger."

Satisfied, I then blurted out, "Why weren't you there when my mother was dying? If you have power, why didn't you help her then?"

Tears flowed down my grandmother's cheeks. "I fell in love with an Ungifted man. The sisters of the coven would not abide by me living a life amongst the Ungifted, especially because your mother did not have the power. For her own safety I had to leave shortly after I gave birth to her. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Having to watch my own child grow up from a distance and then not being able to help her when she was dying..." Her voice faltered as a deep sob ripped through her. "I didn't have enough power to help her. I wish I did, but I lost that power a long time ago. The entire coven sacrificed their greater powers for the future. For your future. The powers we have now amount to nothing more than mere parlor tricks."

"So what do you want with me then?"

"You have it. You have the gift. I knew when you were born that you had it. I wanted you to have a normal childhood. It was the least I could do for your mother after abandoning her. That locket you are wearing, it shields your power. No witch would know you were gifted unless they physically touched you. I've been waiting patiently, but They will find out about you soon. I won't be able to hide you forever. You have to come with me and take your rightful place in the coven."

"And if I don't?"

"Then our sacrifice would have been for nothing. You must come. You need to be trained. The sisters of the coven will welcome you with open arms."

"It sounds like a cult."

"We are a family."

"I have a family. My dad and my brother. You are not my family, I don't even know you."

My grandmother's eyes hardened. "I will come to you twice more in the coming years. You must not refuse me a third time." And with those parting words, she vanished. Quite the useful parlor trick. I was scared. What would she do if I refused her a third time? Would she do something to my dad, or to my brother? How could I protect my family? It was that day that I dropped my pom poms and picked up a sword.

Notes: -16th birthday again she came, 18th birthday again visited, but between 16th and 18th brother got cancer find out later, that all witches of the coven are now underpowered because they lost much of it casting a spell over the gauntlet so that one of their kind would be able to use it, power of the gauntlet is now twisted. A year later she showed up again and again the next year, each time she said no. Then when she turned 13, grandmother threatened her...so she trained martial arts.

-find out later that witches of coven often leave briefly to procreate and wait to see if the resulting child has power...it is the way they grow their ranks, it wasn't a love story of her grandmother falling in love, but also find out grandmother had a harder time than other witches with abandoning her children, find out grandmother is between a rock and a hard place too. In disfavor with the witches for hiding her gifted grandchild for so long, she needs to prove her loyalty to them by "turning" Tiffany and getting Tiffany to become one of the coven. If she does not, she will be confined and tortured. Witches found out that Tiffany was gifted despite the shielding because they tortured the grandmother.

-less than 1 in a 1000 are born with the gift

-witches want the gauntlet with an almost religious fanaticism. They want it to clean up the filth of the world. Witches started out as drawing their power from nature, from good, from new growth and sunshine, etc. One of the witches, in the medieval time foretold of global warming and pollution. The witches would lose much of their power if such a thing happened and so they started a campaign to get gauntlet and prevent/reverse/alleviate global warming. They couldn't get their hands on it and as more and more population/pollution, had to draw on a different power source. One of the witches found that hate was the most potent alternative power source.

-Next scene: Jessica on way to museum private collection storage area, asks why she has to 'check the gauntlet out', couldn't she just hide it in her underwear drawer or something? laughed thinking of being in her coffee shop uniform and making coffee with a gleaming gauntlet on one

hand.

-museum fight: daggers from display, ripping through the banners, rope climb, dodging

-hate can be a powerful truth as well, missing, hate fueling, one went through Jessica's shoulder, she knocked her unconscious and slipped the glove off. Her grandmother filled her in on her heritage. Told her about the legend of the gauntlet. She didn't want anything to do with it. So Tiffany took up weapons and martial arts training to protect herself. She was doing a good job of protecting herself during her eighteenth birthday, but then her brother fell ill. Her grandmother told her that the knowledge the gauntlet had could save her brother's life and so she started to train with her grandmother in the way of the witch._____As story goes on, she sinks deeper into the "dark side", justifying her actions by the fact she had to save her brother.

-then next encounter, she goes further and wounds Jessica...
desperation road to hell paved with good intentions

-gauntlet powers, being able to control them better, super strength and speed against the witch powers

-grandmother used witch power to manipulate her brother's genetics, "infected" him with cancer so could get closer to granddaughter

-at big fight at end, Tiffany finds out it was her grandmother, and actually kills her grandmother and inadvertently kills her brother when trying to wrest the gauntlet back, blames it on Jessica, and the seed is laid for an ongoing rivalry

-Jessica is also betrayed by her master, or so she thinks..