

1-1-2006

## Ashes to Ashes

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### Recommended Citation

Dier, Amanda (2006) "Ashes to Ashes," *Digressions Literary Magazine*: Vol. 3 , Article 26.  
Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/digressions/vol3/iss1/26>

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## Ashes to Ashes

Amanda Dier

“Cin.”

It’s my name and my profession, and nothing is simple anymore.

“Hey, Beauty. Yo, Rose. Hi, ‘Punzel.”

When you’re a princess, life is easy. When you’re a whore, things are a little different.

I meet my friends at the local AA and we take our seats. Even though we technically aren’t alcoholics—well, four of us aren’t addicted to anything, we still enjoy the relative serenity that the meetings bring. It gives us a chance to pretend that we’re something we aren’t—innocent girls. And the chances to socialize, but this time... two of our members are missing.

“Where’s Tink?” I whisper to ‘Punzel, and she shakes her head mutely. “Clinic,” she whispers back.

Again? That’s got to be the third time this month. Rapunzel gives me a sorrowful glance, then jerks her head towards the door. We both rise and make our way out of the crowded room quietly, leaving Beauty and Briar Rose in their seats to watching the man on stage gesture violently and rant about his wife. They observe quietly as he segues into a self-depraving one-sided conversation with the audience and begins to berate himself for letting her sink so far as to cheat on him with his brother. If you didn’t know any better, you could swear that they were both paying attention, even though the blue and green eyes are unfocused, and it looks like Briar Rose is slightly high.

When we both get outside, we start to walk down the dirty, cracked sidewalk, away from the storefront that serves as both home for the AA meetings and scant shelter from the bitter cold.

“Where is she?” I repeat quietly. Rapunzel stops walking, and she just looks at me with those honey brown eyes, and I have to pretend that I don’t know.

“Tayle Clinic. Snowy’s with her.” I watch the reflections in the shards of glass poking out of the edges of the sill. I watch Rapunzel’s long golden braid swing back and forth as she shakes her head numbly. I watch my battered, too-tight, faux-velvet corset strain and release with each breath I take. I watch

my short pleather skirt move slightly in the icy breeze that whips past. It’s all I wear nowadays, despite the chilly air and the leering glances, and my body’s protestations that it needs warmth. Her blue eyes are dull as they meet mine in the broken glass of the storefront window.

“She’s got consumption, Cinderella. She’s got consumption and Doc doesn’t think that she has very long.”

“I knew,” I tell her, even though I had only had suspicions.

“What did he give her?”

“Heroin,” she says, naming a highly addictive drug. Also a highly expensive drug.

“Big H?!” I hiss. “She’ll get addicted!”

‘Punzel regards me bleakly, and Beauty and Briar Rose step out of the meeting, and there’s no more time to say anything. I know what she means if Doc is giving her an opiate now. Tinkerbelle, the only fairy left—the only fairy to ever become a whore—is dying.

\* \* \*

Tinkerbelle is the oldest in our little group; twenty five if you can believe it. She’s tiny, winged, and beautiful, with a pert face and a spunky attitude that kept the rest of us going. We thought she could never die. Fairies never die unless you stop believing in them. Or if they stop believing in themselves. I guess they aren’t immune to consumption, either.

When you walk into the clinic, the first thing you would notice is the screaming, and the moaning, and the stink of rotting flesh still attached to a human and feces and sweat and urine permeating everything. The first thing we notice is Tinkerbelle, on a cot in the corner with Snowy faithfully by her side. I think Snowy’s sick too, but she’s not saying anything. She’s staying quiet, like Tink.

The four of us half-run through the cots of dying poor to her side, still dressed in our street outfits but not caring, even though the glances we get are lewd and the glares disgusted. Soft cheers come from the men around us as we dash by, then they subside into coughing or more moans. We reach the fairy with the bright green hair and kneel at her side, begging her not to die.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, voice hoarse from coughing up blood all day. “It’s not my choice.” The battered blanket trembles over her tattered green dress as she coughs again in

another racking spasm, which sends us all a little closer to the breaking point.

Rapunzel and I can only stay for a few minutes; Johann and Charming gave us a few minutes to see her—and a deadline. Briar Rose and Beauty are ‘self-employed,’ and can afford to stay with Tink and Snowy for a little bit, since they fulfilled their personal ‘quotas’ before the AA meeting. I can only think that they’re going to go hungry for a few nights before they bounce back from this ‘vacation.’ Beauty apparently did fairly well, and even brought some three-day old broth and week-old bread that she bought from a mysterious vendor who she only named as ‘Beast.’ Tink can barely get the broth down, and gives Snowy half of the bread, which she devours hungrily. A cough from the door tells me that my deadline is up. And when we all hug, color briefly comes back into Tink’s face, and she smiles.

I make for the door before I can completely break down, and when I look back she’s smiling at me again; that sweet, fey smile that makes her so attractive to men looking for something exotic. She’s attractive to many; not in the least Snowy, but apparently she never appealed to Peter Pan. Peter fell in love with another, and Tink was so depressed that even after Wendy left, she left the island that she had called home all of her life. Tyme wasn’t the best place, but it was the farthest from Neverland that she could get. And then she found us. And for a while she had friends. And now she’s dying. Life seems really unfair sometimes.

The dwarf Doctor who was named—predictably enough—Doc nods at me, and I walk out of the doors, past Charming, back into the streets of my home city. Johns populate the street, and it’s not long before there’s one leading me to an alleyway, ready to drop his pants at any second, and as he pushes me against the cold brick wall, I curse the fact that the kingdom Heir is a female, and the cruel fate that befalls Tink; befalls all of us. When he finishes, he hands me my money and leaves the alley, glancing furtively to either side, then a few minutes later I leave, hastily shoving my honestly-gotten gains into the flat purse I keep down my corset. Then it’s time to look for another john; another source of money to keep me alive for just a little longer. Just a little.

Later, I wearily climb my way up the broken stairs leading to

the second-floor ‘apartment’ that Pimp Charming and I share with Rapunzel and Johann, her pimp.

When I first came to the apartment, I was disgusted, but a part of me saw it as a haven; the floor was crawling with bugs, and it looked as though it had a hundred years of dirt ground into it; but it was also my haven from the solicitors, who were trying to sell me into indentured servitude when my step-mother fled town with her daughters, leaving the house in serious debt. It’s both my hell and my heaven.

I can only pray that Madame Smoka and her daughters are in a worse situation than I am; the woman deserves it for betraying the promises she made to Father to take care of me. I also wish that my friends and I lived together; out of the six of us, Rapunzel, Beauty and I are the only ones with semi-secure lodgings.

Beauty and Briar Rose live across town, each in a separate area, the first in a tiny attic above a bookstore, and the second in a place with no spinning-wheels. Briar Rose has an unexplainable phobia of spinning wheels, and the mere mention of one can induce a panic attack. I’d hate to see what touching one would do to her.

Snowy lives in an alley—her ‘home’ is near her beat—on the corner of Drayme and Gomothe, in a pile of broken bricks and rotting boards. She’ll sleep better next to Tink anyway, I tell myself, even as the familiar feeling of guilt surges through me. I pull out my key and open the door to find ‘Punzel alone on her egg-carton mattress on the floor of the single room, and Charming and Johann are nowhere in sight.

As I lock the door behind me, I hear a sob coming from Rapunzel, and then take a closer look at her huddled form. She’s covered with bruises, and it’s obvious that she’s had a rough night from her johns. Normally it’s Briar Rose who caters to the sadists, but I guess... not tonight. Not tonight, when our friend is dying. Not tonight, when brutal men looking for a woman to savage walk the streets of Tyme, and not tonight, when pimps won’t give their whores a rest to see to a dying woman. Not tonight.

Charming comes in early, as usual, flops down on his cot in the corner and is asleep almost instantly, drunken snores almost certainly making sleep hard for the neighbors, if they aren’t drunk themselves. We’re used to it. Johann doesn’t

doesn't come back at all, and Rapunzel is finally asleep, though small, unconscious whimpers escape her whenever she moves and a bruise comes into contact with the hard, flea-ridden floor through the less-padded parts of her pallet. I lay down on my own pallet, trying to make myself sleep, but I can't; not when I think of Tink lying cold and dying in the clinic; not when I think of all the horrors of the street; not when I think of the possibility that Snowy has consumption, and will die soon after Tink, and that soon we'll all die from disease. We'll never grow old together; we'll never have children and watch them go off to school with each other; we'll never gather around a card table and play Bridge or Mah Jong together and gossip about the workings of the neighborhood.

We simply won't grow old; we'll never get old enough to grow old, because sooner or later, we'll all succumb to one disease or another, or overdose on a drug, or just get killed in a street brawl. We never will grow old, and it's a twisted sort of Neverland here.

Tink ran away from the child's version of Neverland, and that was better than what we have here. Here the whores never age, or they age too quickly—and Hook can never be defeated with simple words, a sword, and belief that only a child could muster; only with money, or the eternal solitude of death. In truth, Hook is everywhere, no matter what we do, no matter where we go. He lurks in the johns; in the tainted money they give us. He lurks in the 'Escorts;' in the knowing sneers from the higher level prostitutes who style themselves as Kept Ladies of the Town. He lurks in the shadows that harry our steps home, and in the nightmares that plague our sanity at night. He is everywhere, and we can never escape. There is no crocodile to eat him at the last moment; no Peter Pan to rescue us; no faith, no trust, no pixie dust to save us. The pixie dust is dying with Tinkerbelle, and the faith dies with her. We still have trust, but how long can that truly last, when Briar Rose drugs herself every night, and insists that she's clean; when Beauty can only find solace in the bottom of a bottle?

How long can trust last on a street as cold as this? How long can it last in this dirty, timeless city where the whores could have been princesses had it not been for gender, and where

the fairies die from diseases they're immune to?

The girl who slaved over a hot stove morning and night for the first fifteen years of her life, then ran away from Grimm to become a whore, hoping for a better life, will continue living in this hellhole of a city, watching friends die, hoping for a better life, and sometimes, just sometimes, wishing that the Princess was a Prince.

Wishes are worthless; there are no happy endings.

\* \* \*

I wake up the next afternoon with a grimace on my face. The clock on the wall says that it's one-o'clock in the afternoon. I need to start moving; Charming will be back soon; sober and demanding the rent and a blowjob. Rapunzel is already gone, and it looks like Johann never came back last night. I dare not hope that we were lucky enough for him to have gotten caught in a gang fight. After I finish cleaning up in the small bathroom—the one commodity I am thankful for; there's never a shortage of hot water—and put on my makeup and change into tattered black tights, a miniskirt that's more like a strip of fabric, stiletto-heels that make it impossible to run, and a too-tight corset that's been cut away in the front to show the tattoo of a golden slipper between and above my breasts, I leave, locking the door behind me.

I pass Rapunzel's beat on Nev next to the Valev motel, a rent-by-the-hour place, seeing her walk casually into an alley next to it with a good-looking man of about forty years. He's wearing a blue shirt, black pants, and has silver hair. He looks vaguely familiar to me, and I search my brain trying to figure out where I've seen him before. Then it hits me like a messenger-coach with fresh horses—he's the Minister of Finance for the city, and there have been rumors flying that he's infected with AIDS. I watch helplessly as he leads her into the alley and leans back against a wall as she tugs his pants down. Filled with dread, I walk away, hoping to find a shelter that's giving out free soup before I have to start actively hunting for johns.

Eventually I stop looking, and dusk falls over the city early. Barkeeps begin to light up the oil-lamps outside that illuminate the signs showing a beer mug and whatever else the establishment features. Some of the more prominent ones, like Kevn Brie's—one of my haunts when I'm not working—have

magicians that fill tubes with mage-fire to set outside to attract patrons. The glowing tubes are pretty; some of them are arranged in patterns that resemble beer mugs, some of them merely curve and swoop to show the name of the bar in script. A few of the really rich bars have magicians constantly lighting and unlighting their tubes, so the pictures formed by the tubes seem to be moving.

As I pass Kevn Brie's, Alinor steps outside and lays a hand on the empty tubes decorating the stone wall above the low windows. We've spent a few nights together—he's one of my more tender 'lovers,' and he's always gentle about what he does—if we don't have enough money for the rent; he's generous in what he pays. Sometimes he's good for a free meal, too, but I'm only willing to hit him up on it if I'm really desperate. He waves to me and I wave back, temporarily forgetting about 'Punzel. One of these nights I'm going to give him a free night with no strings attached. He's been a good friend, these past few years that I've been in this city; when we're together, it's not always for the sex or the money. He chants something under his breath, and bright blue floods from his fingertips into the tube, filling it to the end, and he moves on to the next one. I continue walking, and eventually find myself uptown, in the richer districts. When constables begin eying me suspiciously, I realize that I've gone too far; sooner or later one will approach me and discover my nightjob, and I'll either get thrown in the stocks if I'm lucky, or thrown in jail if I'm not. I turn around and begin walking back the way I came, throwing furtive glances back over my shoulder at the constables to make sure they aren't following me.

I need to pass a large theatre on my way back in order to get back to my beat faster, and I inwardly curse my choice of routes when I discover that the theatre is opening for the night, and has some royal patronage.

The Minister of Finance passes me with a sneer, and I form my lips into an 'O' and move my head back and forth at him before mouthing "AIDS" at him. The sneer drops from his face, and he hurries on into the theatre, avoiding my gaze. I'm watching him disappear through the doors when someone bumps into me, knocking me onto the cobblestone streets. An "Oh!" sounds above my head, and I look up to see someone bending over me, face twisted into an expression of

concern. Her black hair is piled atop her head in some foreign style, and her eyes are lined with kohl to give it an exotic look. The gown adorning her slim form is sleek and deep purple, gathered in sweeping folds, and the bodice has real diamonds and sapphires sewn into the neckline. Her eyebrows are high and precisely shaped, drawn together above wide eyes. High, aristocratic cheekbones curve down to a pointed chin, giving her a fey look, and it's that look which jolts me back to reality—my own and the reality of who—and what—she is.

"Are you alright, Miss?" she asks, and my eyes widen. This woman—this girl was the Princess of the kingdom, bending over a common whore. In some countries, it is death to touch Royalty. I scramble away, hands shaking, but she's in front of me again like a bolt of mage-fire. "Miss—are you alright?" she asks. She actually sounds concerned about me.

A man appears behind her and places a hand on her shoulder. "Is this woman—ah—bothering you, Princess?" he asks. It's obvious what he's inferring—that I was soliciting the Princess.

"No," she mutters, somehow seeming more human. "I'm fine, Ronald. I just wanted to see if she was okay after I knocked her down."

"She's a commoner, Milady. You shouldn't be talking to her." My ears burn with mingled anger and shame. To him, I'm not really there—I'm just a thing.

"No, Ronald. Miss, please. I'm not going to hurt you. Are you okay?"

Speechless that she even took notice of me, I nod, eyes wide. "That's good. I'm sorry for knocking you down. I—ah." She seems to lose all capacity for speech now, fingers straying to finger a pouch hidden in the sash tied about her slender waist.

I stare into her violet eyes, still struck dumb, but now people are turning to look at the three of us; her standing in front of me, hand still extended; Ronald, casting surreptitious glances at the crowd; and me, still half-crouched and dressed in my tattered clothing, obviously a whore. Whispers begin to float through the air, and the Princess turns to stare at our audience, slowly moving in my direction. In a flash of movement, she snatches the little bag out of her sash and presses it into

my hands, cupping her own around mine for just a second, then letting go, but not before I feel the hard shifting of coins. She places her surprisingly strong hands on my shoulders and pulls me close.

“Go home,” she mutters into my ear as the smell of sandalwood and roses overwhelms me. “Get off the damn street, if only for tonight. Please. I don’t want to see someone like you get hurt. You’re so young...” She pulls back, and then I remember the stories about the heritage of the country’s rulers; how they always have some sort of supernatural power, and how the rarest power among them is that of the ability to know and affect the mind and heart; and the stories about this particular Princess having that particular power. She releases me and I stumble back, nearly knocking over a beldame in a black dress.

“Go,” the Princess mouths at me.

I turn and run, clutching the little pouch to my chest and flee through the crowd even as guards approach us, ready to kill me should I try to harm the Princess. I dodge them when they reach for me, and glance back once—see the relief in her eyes—and keep running.

The stilettos make it hard to run—I avoid the guards and reach the part of town that I know best, still clutching that little bag to my heaving breast. Eventually I have to stop, and I do so near the Tayle clinic, panting in a doorway across the street, eyeing the little hospital with misgiving. Tink is in there, though. I have to see her. Resolutely, I march across the street and through the door, passing the nurse at the front with a nod, and proceed to eel my way through the cots and folded blankets to my friend’s side. Snow White is there, too. Somehow she’s managed to get a cot and is half on her own, half curled around Tink. She looks up at me sleepily as I approach.

“Allo,” she murmurs. “Why’re you panting? Someone chase you?”

“No,” I mutter, then glance furtively around the full room.

“Well, yes.” I tell her the whole story, during which she becomes much more awake and wide-eyed.

“You actually spoke to the Princess?” she squeaks, and her blue eyes widen even more.

“She was... nice...” I say, still shaken by the encounter.

“What’s in the bag? Did you open it?”

“No, not yet,” I admit.

“Open it!” she urges. “What did she give you?”

I open the bag and spill the contents at the foot of the bed. Snowy and I stare as gold piece after gold piece tumble onto the blanket.

“There must be at least twenty Crowns there!” she breathes, and I hastily scoop them back into the bag as she angles the blanket to hide the glint of gold from the beggars and thieves in the room.

I am left speechless. Why would a Princess give a whore gold? Why would a Princess give even a moment’s notice to a whore? In Grimm, the reigning family runs the country dry and kills peasants for sport. This Princess... is something special.

I thrust my purse with all the money I have into Snowy’s hand. “Give this to the doctor and see if he can find something for Tink.” Then I shove the Princess’s little bag down the front of my corset, turn on my heel, and leave the clinic with Snow White staring wordlessly after me.

\* \* \*

I see them huddled outside the familiar storefront of the AA meeting. Briar Rose has a cigarette dangling loosely from her lips as she listens avidly to the story Beauty is telling of a newcomer to the women of the night; a woman who is a swan by day and a woman crowned with feathers by night. I lean against a lamp-post and listen; tonight is going to be busy. Maybe I can find the swan-woman and bring her back with me to the apartment. Johann was caught in a gang-fight, much to my surprise, and now it’s just me, ‘Punzel and Charming in the apartment, and he hasn’t been around much. Tink is still dying, and now Snowy is, too. The gold is hidden away for a rainy day, and I only think of the Princess when I’m in a safe place; I don’t want the memory to be tarnished by my surroundings. She was too pure for that. Footsteps sound on the pavement, and a young woman approaches; a girl, almost. A long, simple gown hides her curves, and simple slippers cover her feet. Her neck is long and supple. A crown of feathers sits proudly atop her head, and she looks at us with wide, frightened eyes; almost like a

bird.

I look down at her and smile gently, extending a hand to her shoulder.

“I’m Jeannette,” she says softly.

“Cin.”