

“Behind Closed Hearts”

by Dominic Sventor

Adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*

My cough echoes into the cloudy air. A burn melts my throat from the inside out. Besides my crackle-like cough, all that speaks are the crows that caw around a few clothed bodies that lie in the street. I pass by a ninth body just now, but I just keep looking forward. I don't want to bother him or her if he or she is sleeping.

I walk up to a screwed-up-looking pharmacy as a couple and a young girl--all human--peek through wooden planks on a once-working door. They call for me to come in, but I ignore them and continue to walk.

The cold wind slithers across my bare arms and legs. Another cough bursts out of my mouth. Reddish eyes stare me down from various department stores and smaller stores. I bury my head deep in my hoodie enough to let the darkness devour my pale flesh.

After eight blocks, a pharmacy sign glows a sunflower-yellow in the corner of my eye. I walk up to it, but I hear a crash. I peek through a window.

The backside of one guy in a hoodie and jeans stares at me--his bald, bluish head catches my eye. His arms bounce around on a table in front of him.

I head over to the door and move slow. I push the door inward with silence and tip-toe to a tall aisle across from the bald guy. I walk along and skim the various over-the-counter medicines for throat issues. I reach for a box, but a long, scaly arm squeezes my hand, and I yelp.

“Who invited you in, bitch?” His face comes up against mine like a dart. Long, shriveled hair strips dangle from his head as his two blood-red eyes beam into mine.

The bald guy runs up behind me. “What’s wrong, Mavis?” he says with worry. His eyes glow red.

“This chick is trying to steal from us, Jackson,” Mavis says with a spine-tingling cackle; his teeth sharp like a shark’s.

“I--I wasn’t--I swear--I was going to pay!”

Mavis pulls my ponytail back, and his claws rip my scarf and jacket open like a razor. He scissors his way along my body as I try to push him away.

“Mavis--” Jackson says.

“Lying bitch--you have no money! Jackson, shackle ‘er up. We can use a cleaner around here.” Mavis spits at the ground and tosses my scarf to the floor. His foot kicks a bunch of bandage boxes across the tile floor.

“I’m--I’m sorry,” Jackson says. His hands touch my shoulders as if to comfort me.

I push Jackson away. “Don’t!” I say with a growl. I glance at his eyes.

The blood that fills his eyes swirls like lava. They glisten as if tears well up through them. His hands let go of my shoulders, but he keeps them close to make sure I don't escape, I guess.

I return the same look of worry. I shake my head, push Jackson aside, and run to the door. The cough spews out of my mouth, and the sting returns to my throat.

A click sound interrupts my cough. Inches away from the door, I come to a complete stop.

"Touch that door, and I will blow your damn brains out," Mavis says. He points a sniper towards my head.

Jackson pulls me to the hardware aisle. Various tools litter the floor--along with milk stains and shiny chip bags. A pile of moving, yellowish meat rests in the middle of the floor. The smell of hot, old, maggoty tuna burns my nostrils, and I cough once more.

"Clean up on all aisles, bitch!" a cracky voice echoes on the intercom.

Jackson pulls out chains and a padlock from the shelf, and I look at him with concern. I try to push away, but his hand squeezes my arm. His crimson eyes look to me once more, and I look into his. Silence lingers. He puts the chains and lock back on the shelf and grabs a wrench. He plops it into my arms, and I stumble back with its immense weight.

"Go," Jackson says. "Use that to protect yourself, and get out. Run far away as you can to safety. Here; take this with you, too." He slips the box of strep throat medication into my jacket pocket.

I look at him as if he has two heads. Our eyes reconnect, and I can feel the warm blood that swirls in his eyes fill up into mine. I look to the wrench, then the pocket where he inserts the

box. Then, I look at his face. I look beyond his bluish, scaly head and his blood-filled eyes. I can hear my heartbeat ring in my warm ears.

His hard-to-see pupil scans over my face, but he grabs me by the shoulders and guides me to the end of the aisle where the entrance is. A force shoves me into a nearby shelf, and a saw blade slices through my jacket and cuts through my shoulder.

Jackson yells in pain.

I squeeze my shoulder and glance at Jackson.

Mavis wails at him with the butt of the gun. Red blood splatters out of Jackson's mouth and across the floor.

"Fucking backstabber!" Mavis spits at Jackson and slams the gun like a constant whip at Jackson's jaw.

"Run!" Jackson says with a gurgle.

I wobble to my feet and push myself towards the entrance, but I stop and hear a grunt and whimper that pierces my heart. I turn to the boys. My heart races as I swing the wrench at full force towards Mavis' face.

Mavis cries out and swings backward with a spray of blood.

I lean down and pull Jackson by the arm as much as I can, and his hand grips mine.

A crack pops in my ears as Jackson shoots the air, and I wince. I grab Jackson with two hands, and we both stumble to the entrance.

The burn in my throat sizzles like a tickle, but I sniffle it out. I hold onto Jackson's arm with my good shoulder, and his hand squeezes near the wound on my bad one. I cringe from the pain, but it simmers down after I hear Jackson cough with blood.

"Why aren't you like the rest? You're so sweet and kind," I say to Jackson.

"Not all of us are like that. After the experiment, most of us have just become afraid. Then you got assholes like Mavis back there, who've grown beyond spiteful and now wanna see the world burn. If you look around, you'll see what I mean. Most of us are actually nice."

I squeeze Jackson's arm, and he looks at me. I smile for the first time in months.

"Thank you," I say to him.

Jackson's arm pushes me beside him like a blanket. The wind swishes above us in the quiet night.

I wrap my arm around his shoulder, and we walk in a warm hug to protect ourselves from the dead breeze.