

*Writing Contest Entry*

*I opened the door and there it was.* It lay innocuously among the other odd, broken trinkets scattered across the dirty floorboards far below my vantage point at the top of the stairs. Though covered in its sheet of dark silk, its dull golden glow slipped out from beneath it, contrasting with the shaft of watery moonlight slipping through the cracks. I staggered down the twisting spiral staircase, faltering every time the loose planks of the steps shrieked from my footfalls.

I descended from the last step with a silly hop, as though trying to give myself confidence with my childishness. *Why are you so afraid?* my mind chided. *This isn't a ghost story. What could be down there, a monster?*

And yet... I was beginning to believe that whatever hid under that lustrous cloak was far worse than the creatures born from campfire tales I'd heard so many times.

I find it funny, now, how right I was.

I'd crept across the floor with the stealth of a cat, my light footprints disturbing the blanket of dust. My hands shook as I gripped the edge of the shroud, expecting a coiled, hissing serpent, a heap of cursed treasure, even a tiny mouse taking refuge from the bitter autumn chill- anything but what I actually saw.

What lay beneath the midnight-black sheet was nothing more than a tiny music box. Dainty and intricate, made of the purest gold I'd ever seen, it shone even more brightly-cheerily, even- after it had been unveiled. Despite its simplicity at first glance, it had to have been part of a master craftsman's dream. Carved vines embellished the worn mahogany sides, twisted and overlapping, and in the very center they curled around the form of a beautifully crafted bird. Full, billowing wings, slender frame, head elegantly tipped upward as though greeting the sliver of moon above. A weathered wooden crank stuck out of the side of the box; it looked decidedly out-of-place beside the shiny metal.

Being the cursedly curious girl I was I gave the crank a very slow, hesitant twist. A gentle, warmly sweet tune filled the dust-laden air; something akin to a lullaby. A wave of relief coursed through me so powerfully that I almost laughed aloud. Was I *really* expecting a ghost? What was wrong with me? It was just a music box, a very expensive music box nonetheless, but nothing more. *Nothing more.*

The box is playing right now as I sit with my pen in hand, years later, luminous in the glow of my lantern.

Odd. I don't seem to recall turning that crank.