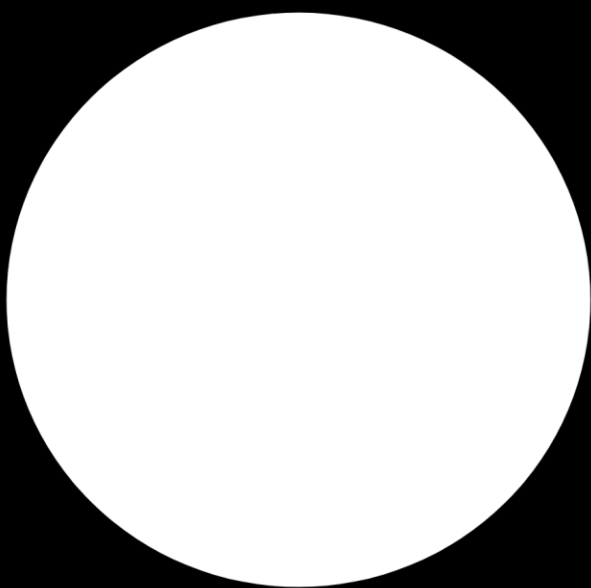


THE STORM

AND THE REVENGE OF RAFFAELLO RIVIERA



JM HENDRIKX

Rafaello's story is the prologue to The Castle, the betrayal of Nathan Glass; the first book in the Darkness and Light series. This is a free download.

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Raffaello Riviera

The Riviera Family was composed of tall women who lounged languidly in taffeta gowns with pinched noses and haughty smiles; and of short men in Cuban heeled boots, with creases between their serious eyes and spinach between their vicious little teeth. The Rivas had the most elegant stolen furniture and the most mouth-watering jewels in every colour and hue. They were amazingly unpopular and extremely unconcerned, for they had magic and magic was everything.

The Riviera family produced stronger magicians with every generation born. So, the pattern of proud yet jealous parents became a familiar ailment that allowed for much wailing and dramatic hand gesturing within the walls of Stonerock castle. The last of the Rivas, the runt of the short males, was Raffaello Riviera. He was born with clenched fists and a look of indignation that never really left him and was distinctly present the day he burned out. For with great magicians their finest hour is always their last. They burn out with intention, give up their life and all of their power in one final explosion of glory.

Raffaello was a furious colicky baby, a biting, scratching, face-kicker of a toddler and a precocious, bulbous-faced teenager. No-one loved him, not even his mother, Cecelia Riviera, who was tall and poised and referred to him in the past tense, as if he was no longer in existence. His father found him irksome and told him so, exactly three days before he, Constantine Riviera, died from choking on an oversized horse chestnut.

The day after that, Raffaello sat between his maiden aunts on a beautiful Louis XV sofa feeling like a wombat between two giraffes. He was

utterly miserable: engulfed in grief and the strong scent from their over-applied face powder. The high pitch of their tinkling laughter above his head and the clinking of fine bone china close to his ears, made him want to sink through the floorboards and disappear forever. They asked him to magic more sugar for their tea. He stood up and stomped out of the tea room in childish rebellion, but they did not notice. He walked all the way to Escaville to find them their sugar, as his heart was so heavy that he could not muster a simple spell.

Raffaello rarely went to Escaville and he always felt panicky and confused when he did, which was how he ended up in the blacksmith's asking for sugar and with the owner laughing at him. He thought he would explode with fury, being laughed at by Angus Savine, a grimy faced, non-castle living man. Instead he burst into tears, his watery, dark brown eyes streaming like a broken pipe.

Angus gave him a hug and then lifted him up with strong arms to sit upon his workbench. The squat young man convulsed with sadness. Angus made him a jam sandwich and gave him a glass of milk. Such kindness was sweet and soothing to Raffaello's soul; yet not as sweet as the apricot jam which made the surface of his tongue dance. He ate it anyway. Kindness had always tasted strange. This was the day that he met Claudia the blacksmith's daughter. She sauntered in cheerfully; intrigued by his presence she said hello, jumped up to sit next to him and smiled a wonderful, welcoming smile. He felt a zinging sensation of warmth rushing through him. He tried to return the smile, but looked as if he had just been asked to show her his teeth. She grinned widely, reached across for his sandwich and took a bite. He felt as if he was slowly dissolving into her golden glow.

Claudia Savine had playful instincts, tousled hair and could skim stones better than anyone else in the world. His first and only friend; she made him laugh and he stopped being angry, she made him feel comfortable and he stopped showing off. Claudia was real magic too, extremely gifted, yet not as skilled as he.

Before Claudia, Raffaello had used his magic mostly to fulfil the boring and complicated requests of his parents or for serious experimentation during the long hours he spent being ignored in the castle. Claudia only knew how to play.

One day they sat on a bench overlooking the canal as Eleanor Raye, the town parfumer walked past in a waft of pine, nutmeg and vanilla. She had black hair plaited down her back and a knitted beret upon her head. Within a blink of an eye the hat was a grey cat, curled up contentedly and purring. Raffaello's mouth dropped open and Claudia grinned. She looked back. Eleanor had not noticed the change, but Claudia saw that Eleanor's hair was different. Black ants had taken its place and now meandered furiously in the perfect cascade of her plait. Eleanor scratched her neck and the cat leapt from her head. By the time it landed it was just a knitted beret and her glossy dark locks had returned. Raffaello grabbed Claudia in an embrace, so that Eleanor would not catch their eye as she looked around in bewilderment. They held their breath and held back their laughter, whilst looking into each other's eyes. When it was safe to look away, when Eleanor had gone, they paused, smiling and then kissed.

Days of idle magic continued. They created waterfalls that thundered and roared to the beat of their favourite songs as they splashed and danced

in the shallows. They concocted pink translucent lizards with candyfloss hair, exploding cantaloupes and a gazelle carousel; as well as trouble for those near them when they were in high spirits. Raffaello particularly enjoyed elevating the barber's shop from the ground. The owner's eyebrows would jump to his hairline and his mouth would open tunnel-wide as he cursed loudly in his native tongue. They would wait and watch him tell the story of what had happened, with his expressive face and large hands, to every customer who came in. Raffaello and Claudia laughed until it hurt with every disbelieving head shake and pat on the back that he received.

Claudia Savine knew she was beautiful. She knew that Essie Fossie's boys had no need for two dozen horse shoes and that Alex Bryanny did not require yet another garden fork for his mother. And so did her father whose kind welcome disappeared when the eager boys came into his blacksmith's shop. He would send Claudia out the back so that he could serve them; his firm hand closed the door behind her with a resounding bang. Through the crack she would watch their faces fall and revel in their disappointment, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Raffaello made songbirds appear at Claudia's window in the morning and different flowers grow around her dressing table mirror each day. Their fragrance would lift her spirits and she would smile and think of him. A necklace of the most intricate and unusual design would appear around her neck each time she thought of him; so she thought of him frequently.

Claudia loved the way handsome men would look so perplexed when they saw her with Raffaello. They would often stop and stare mid

sentence, mid mouthful and midway between a safe place and a lamppost. It was such fun. Raffaello would hold her hand tightly, his brown eyes alive with happiness.

Summer came and she decided to try out love. A game of let's pretend. So that she would know how to do it properly when it was the real thing, and because she knew Raffaello would love her back with all of his heart. One warm evening, without permission, she took her father's boat; whilst Raffaello stole the most cherished of his mother's champagne from the castle cellar. Together they sailed into the night, danced on the deck, shucked oysters, toasted their parents' health, delighted in their misbehaviour, drank the bottles dry and fell asleep under the stars.

When they returned two days later Raffaello felt as free as the silver eagles that flew over Stonerock castle. As a child he had watched them and hated them because they were powerful and beautiful, but now he felt as if he were one of them. He walked home from Escaville, his arms outstretched, the muscles of his face relaxed as his heart soared above him.

Then summer was gone; its warmth and sweet scent had faded silently away. And so too was Claudia Savine who had become decidedly unavailable; and so too was Raffaello's heart. He became distraught, believing that her absence meant his end. Angus Savine said Claudia was at Cavanagans with friends or shopping with her mother or not feeling well again. Angus would hammer the metal with a new found ferocity the more desperate Raffaello became, and Raffaello became more and more desperate. Angus saw the wildness in Raffaello's mind; saw it clearly in every expression, every movement. Angus was unnerved, reminded of the

brutal face of Constantine Riviera. In the calmer moments of his distress Raffaello sat very upright and his sadness transformed into disdain and scorn: the face of his mother, Cecelia Riviera. Raffaello would sit on the pavement outside the shop, listening to the clang of metal on metal and wait for hours, but he would always miss her.

Once he saw her in the market, with a boy he did not know, under the stone archway, wearing a necklace he did not recognise, but before he could get to her she vanished into the crowd. She had seen him and he knew she had, but she did not wait.

The truth was so dark and scary that he could not bear to look at it. One Saturday morning, when Angus told him Claudia was too busy to see him, he put his face uncomfortably close to Angus's and with hot breath shouted, 'Liar!' Their eyes connected in aggression and then in fear because both men knew that something inside Raffaello had just snapped. Silently they stared, for a brief and intense moment, before the world resumed its ways and the anvil struck and the door slammed.

Raffaello's heart seethed with blackness, his temples pounded with rage and he ran; through the town, through the forest, gasping in short sharp breaths. His heart beat like a military drum growing louder; it resonated through his whole body. He reached home, his chest painfully tight. He crashed through the corridors of the castle and flung open heavy cupboard doors searching for his crossbow. When he found it, he grabbed it and charged up the staircase of the East Tower. He ran to the very top breathless as he stood outside in the cool air. Sweat ran down his face, the salt taste now in his mouth, he took aim. One by one he shot down the silver

eagles of the southern forest and their death cries found no mercy in his heart.

So distraught was Raffaello when he entered the great hall, so uncoordinated in his steps, so dishevelled in his attire that his mother looked up from her game of bridge in the far corner of the room and noticed him. As disapproval filled her eyes he took up his crossbow once more: so that he would never again have to feel her ice. His mother's friends put on their gloves, clicked their bags tightly closed and silently fumed that they would need to find a new bridge partner by next Wednesday week.

And so Raffaello, only child, last of the Rivas, was alone in the castle with furniture to marvel at, gems that dazzled and a heart that felt as if it were bleeding on to the floor. He paced the corridors, his mouth paper dry, his body shaking. Perhaps it was his mother's stare or the turbulence in the cauldron of his heart that defined what he, as the greatest living magician of his time, did next. He thought of every grievance, minor or major, that had occurred throughout his life: from the baker who had once sold him stale bread, to the circus bears who had scared him as a child, to Claudia Savine and all of her family. Even the elder Savines, the best code breakers in the land, who could shatter or dismantle the most impenetrable of curses and enchantments, would not be able to stop his magic. He knew he was strong enough.

His revenge was to be a storm. He would banish from the island and place in perpetual winter all those who had ever wronged him. He refined his magic, smiling softly, as he paced the corridors of the castle; an adult version of the precocious child he once was. He wrung his hands as his

mind twisted and turned. His whispers muffled and indecipherable travelled the castle like freed ghosts. His passion with all its fire and intensity would go into his last ever spell, from which he wanted to burn out and end his pain.

At dusk he returned to the top of the East Tower, where the winds raced. He breathed in the sea air, focused on the darkening sky. Slowly the unlucky ones appeared; blown in from all directions. Forced through the air, some fought, some surrendered, but all were gathered up and delivered into the spiralling tumult of the storm as it raged above the sea. He was about to place Claudia in the centre. Her brightness clouded over, her hair lashed her face, all colour drained from her as she watched the people below her. Then she looked at him. He saw her fear and he loved her and for a second he weakened. That second caused the flaw.

To quell the light, blackness rose in his heart. There was a blinding flash as he turned their eyes an icy topaz blue, so that they would always be marked. Marked as the accursed people of the Winter Storm. With its work done the storm raced out to sea, where it would only rest in the deepest most hostile winters. In places where the cold cut into your bones, the sun existed mostly as memory and every part of your being ached with despair and regret. A storm that would move them on to new territory should the harshness of the environment ever abate.

Hawks circled Stonerock castle now that the eagles were gone. They looked down where Raffaello lay collapsed. He heard the crash of the waves, felt the cold stone floor against his face, the weight of his damp clothes, the taste of the sea. He did not open his eyes. He knew he had failed to burn out, that it was morning and he was still alive. His lips parted

and his body juddered as he cried quietly without tears. He went to shout in anger, but only a feeble voice arose. In frustration he banged his forehead repeatedly on the floor. He knew what remained was a tiny ember; a memory of a warm day on the deck of a boat, hands entwined, feet in the water and time seeming to stand still. Love. Crack. He split open his skull. The pain's intensity was needed to start the fire, to remedy the flaw, to ensure they never returned. He needed to end it all, to burn out.

The dragon of his wrath grew before him; it became real, living, breathing, muscular and strong. Its breath warmed the floor on which he lay. This was the Firebrand, his creation, his legacy, his dragon; programmed to destroy the people of the Winter Storm, should they ever set foot on these shores again. The dragon's eyes held a determination grown from sorrow and its veins pulsed with the rage that had so tormented Raffaello.

The dragon roared and Raffaello felt heat on his face, steam rising. He opened his eyes. In his last moments he saw the Firebrand, alight in its magnificence, skin glowing hot like a blacksmith's iron, as the burning stone seared his tearless cheek.