

Warrior vs. Worrier by Drew Castalia for Lydia Squire, first draft November 17, 2012.

I can't tell you my name because *she'll* just say it's her name too. I'd rather she not have a name than have one myself.

Does that sound mean? I hope not. Because that would mean I'm just like her, and I'm not. See, *I* don't mean to hurt anyone's feelings. I mean, not on purpose anyway, even though I know I've said 'mean' four times already and haven't apologized yet! It's four letters long and not very nice, so better safe than sorry, right? Um. I mean better safe *and* sorry! Crap, I said it again. Oops!

The problem with *her* is that she's so unpleasant. She beat up my friend James after school because she likes to pick fights. Last week, she stole a bunch of wilted carnations from a flower stall and when *she* gets caught, guess who catches the blame? Me, because we look so much alike. My father makes the best honey; *she* knows it's my favorite, so she always licks the jar clean before I can get a taste. See what I mean? I don't know why my parents let her move in. She even hogs the bed at night.

Sometimes, she says mean things about my mother and doesn't apologize. She says my mother doesn't like my father, or that she resents having children, or moving to Norwich. I have to look up some of the words she uses in the dictionary, like "resents." I don't know if they are all true, but I worry that what she says is going to make my mother go back to America, or ruin my friends, or worse.

I have a solution, though. If you have to look that word up, you'll see it means plan, or it can mean a mixture. In this case, it means both (you'll see). *She* can't resist a fight, so I'll give her one. I'm sure if she lost at the thing she is best at, she would leave me alone. How? Well...

My father takes us to the gym every Monday and Wednesday. He runs on a machine, with earbuds in. He runs so hard that I worry he's pretending to run away. While he runs, *she* and I buy energy drinks from the machine and explore. In the basement, we found an empty boxing ring. She always puts on the gloves and the tape, and I don't. I'm worried someone might get hurt.

"Yeah, like *you*," she says, and goes crosseyed. I can't do it back at her, nor can I curl my tongue nor wiggle my ears, so I just look around at all the old posters, unlock the windows and look out at the rain, drink Lucozade, and pretend she's not really there. *This* time, though, it will be different. I'll face her with my chin stuck out, and accept her challenge like a valkyrie, but only on one condition: if I win, she has to run away. "On the other hand," she will make me promise, "if *I* win, you have to give me your iPod." Don't worry, music lovers of good taste. She won't win.

My mother takes pills from a childproof container. Well... I guess this is good sign that I'm not a child anymore. My mother says they help improve her mood, but they really just make her dizzy and she often spends the night lying down. I can't see how that's an improvement, but anyway: I'll put some in my opponent's drink while she's busy strapping on her gloves, and -

DING! DING!

James rings the bell on his bike at me, for now I am trudging down the walk to St. Alban's school. It's my school too; that's just what they call it. I stop him and ask if he wants to help me with my plan. He sneers and pushes off.

"You're a mad one, you know that? I don't want anything to do with you!" I have a witty response about him needing to beat me in a boxing match first, but he pretends not to hear. I guess he's still sore from getting his ass kicked by a girl. He shouldn't be. As far as asses go, his was pretty nice to kick.

DING! DING!

The school bell rings and I'm at my desk. Mr. Dumbkirk sighs and puts a math test in front of me. It's covered in red. I explain that he got them mixed up with *hers*, which he often does, but he's having none of it. He says something nominal in Scottish, which means something related to his name. That's the nicest way I can put it.

DING! DING!

I press the button and the bus glides to a halt in front of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. I'm going to see my favorite person in the world. I say thank you to the driver and get off. Across the street, the flower seller glares at me from behind a barricade of petunias.

Inside, the nurses are much nicer. I refuse a lollipop from one, and she guides me to the right room. I'm already so excited that sugar might knock me out. I open the door, and the first thing I see are the wilted carnations in a vase by the bed. An electronic chime announces my arrival.

DING! DING!

We step into the ring, she and I. The spotlight falls on each of us in turn and the commentator announces us from the gallery...

"WARRIOR versus WORRIER... round one!"

After repeating himself in an American accent, because boxing is very popular there, he starts the match with a shout:

"May the best philosophy win!"

I expect her to come at me swinging, but she hangs back and chugs the rest of her energy drink. The crowd is perfectly quiet. Good, I tell myself. All I have to do is survive until the pills to kick in. She tosses the empty bottle into the bleachers and approaches.

We're circling when, suddenly, I stumble. The floor seems to tilt and blood rushes to my head. I lean back against the ropes, confused and dizzy, but there is no time to

be either. She comes swinging at me furiously. I only narrowly escape the first blow, through sheer worry I suppose, but a far heavier one strikes me in the pit of my stomach: She must have drugged me, too! I should have known!

Panic overtakes me. My pulse throbs in my ears. I make contact with something so hard it could only be *her* head. Lightning, or something like it, lights the ring. Thunder crashes in the vicinity of my temples. The commentator begins talking in German, for they also like boxing in Germany, faster and faster until his mouth comes clean off and begins to float around like a butterfly. The crowd laughs because let's be serious, it is pretty weird, until I realize they're laughing at me for having been so stupid, so foolish, so asinine to be bested at her own game. I feel ashamed. *She* lands another blow to my stomach, and I stagger to the edge of the ring and throw up energy drink. I remember how much I hate throwing up, but let me tell you: there's one thing I hate worse, and that's throwing a fight.

I spin around, lashing out like an Iceni queen at anything that moves: bright shapes, comets, sugar gliders. The commentator's teeth go flying. *She* and I meet, somewhere in the heart of the maelstrom, and I score point after point after point after point before falling through the ground into the abyss.

DING! DING! DING! DING!

The first thing I see when I wake up in the hospital are the wilted carnations. I must be in the same room I visited before. On my other side is dad. He stares at me sternly, with a very flat mouth.

"Well hello there," he says without much surprise. "You scared the hell out of us, honeypot."

"I did?" I begin to worry. That sounds like something *she* would do.

"If it had taken us just a few minutes longer to find you..." his lips quaver, and I realize that the flatness of his mouth is his attempt not to cry. "Can you tell me what happened?"

I tell him about the boxing match and about *her* dirty tricks. "I see," he says with a skeptical sigh. He pulls my iPod out of his pocket and hands it to me significantly. "Well, I guess you won the match." My heart surges. I won! *She* is gone! Now things will be different.

On his way out, dad turns to me and says, "you'll tell me if you remember anything else, won't you?" Dad can always tell when I'm not telling the whole truth, but I have bigger things to worry about right now. I have to fix everything that *she* ruined. I'm going to put it all to rights. I promise.

"I promise, dad."

Another week and I'm back at school. I catch up with James, who's trying to avoid me during lunch hour. He grimaces when I get close. Must be the food.

"I'm worried you're avoiding me," I say.

"You're always worried," he says. "And I've tried to avoid you ever since we met."

I laugh at his joke, since we first met when he ran into me riding a skateboard.

"I just want to say I'm sorry about what happened before, when you got beat up... it won't happen again. Remember my plan? With the pills? It worked."

He looks at me dubiously.

"She's gone. Now it's just you and me."

I feel someone watching me, and I'm worried it's *her*, but I'm relieved to see it's not. It's another girl, much prettier than she is, who sits down next to James.

"Hey softie," the pretty girl says to him. "Who's your new friend?"

"Old friend," I correct her. "I'm eleven."

James pushes his food over to the girl, I wouldn't say 'generously.' "You don't have to *worry* about her," he stresses. "She's the one I told you about."

New girl looks scandalized. "The one who's only half there?" James doesn't even try to hide his assent.

I sit in shocked silence, interrupted when she decides to eat the shredded brussels sprouts. How could this be happening? And with a girl of such poor judgment?

Even though I'm now an experienced boxer, I hold back my anger. I'm not *that* kind of person. Instead, I stand up on shaky legs. "You're an ass," I say gravely. "I used to think you were a nice ass, but you're just an ass."

Then I bawl my eyes out in front of everyone.

Later, despite hiding my head in math class, Mr. Dumbkirk hands back some homework I did in the hospital. There are smiley faces on it. They're in red pen so they must be his.

"Verrry good work, miss!" he says in brogue. "We'll make an accountant out of you yet." Somehow I don't feel better, even though *she's* not getting me bad grades anymore.

The worried feeling sticks with me as I ride the bus home. She was the cause of all my problems, so why haven't they gone away? Why have they just gotten worse?

The bus stops at the hospital, but I don't get off. From my side of the double-decker, I see the flower seller on the street below. He examines several carnations in his stall, picks a slightly wilted batch, and then chucks it into the trash. To my horror, he throws several others after it, perfectly good but for a few spots.

As the bus glides away, I wonder whether I should have been more proud when *she* stole that bouquet last month, even though I was blamed for it. I mean, who gets angry when a girl steals flowers that were going to be thrown away anyway? All the way home, I find myself worrying about the dialectics of life. That's the kind of word *she* used to use. I'm only now beginning to realize what it means.

Walking up the wooded drive to my house, I smell smoke in the air and get excited. Dad is pacifying the bees, which means honey! I have mentioned before how much I like honey, and since *she's* gone I can finally have a jar to myself. My excitement is tempered when I get inside and hear dad and mother fighting in the kitchen. This is nothing new; it usually lasts half an hour, then she'll take her pills and go to bed. But this time they're fighting about me.

"It's the exact same situation with your daughter. You don't recognize what's happening in front of your eyes."

"I told you, the bees aren't dangerous."

"This is the second time I've been stung. And when it comes to our daughter, probably the hundredth." She must be referring to me getting home late.

Dad notices me standing inside the door. He looks upset, but doesn't draw her attention. "This isn't about her," he mutters.

"Right. It's about you," proclaims mother. "You were the one who wanted a daughter. You were the one who wanted to keep bees. But you can't control either of them. You know, there is something seriously wrong with her... stealing and lying and beating up kids at school? You should have stepped in as soon as she started blaming everything she did on an imaginary friend. She hates me and it's no wonder why: I'm the only one who's not afraid to say that she has serious Problems. You, on the other hand, just run away from yours, all the way across the Atlantic."

Dad hangs his head. "I'll figure out something to do about the bees."

Angry at that, I make a lot of noise putting down my rucksack and tramp into the kitchen. Mother looks at me with clasped lips. "I didn't realize you were home," she says.

"I didn't realize you resented us so much," is my retort. "*She* knew you were a bad mother, but I didn't listen."

As if I'd just proven her point, mother looks significantly at dad. He sighs, "calm down, honeypot –"

"No!" I scream at him, all out of tears. "All I wanted was to get rid of her. I thought she was a horrible person." Judging by the look on mother's face, she thinks I'm talking about her. I don't care to clarify. "Everything she did made my life harder, and I worried about it. I worried and worried and worried. But now, worry is all I do, and it's worse than it was before. I miss her. I love her."

With a guilty, maternal sound, mother kneels down and spreads her arms open to receive me. I run straight past her out the door.

An hour later, outside dad's gym, I tug open one of the basement-level windows to the boxing ring. It's still unlocked from one of our exploring sessions. Inside, I'm surprised to find a real boxing match going on. Two big sweaty men hit each other into and out of the spotlight. Spectators cheer and swill beer. One of the nearby spectators looks startled to see a muddy, wet little girl slide through the window onto the bleachers next to him. He stares at me for a second, then hands me a Yorkshire pudding.

We watch the boxers duck and weave and jab. One of them gets knocked down and curls up like a bug. The victor raises his arms in triumph, muscles bulging. My neighbor offers me another bulging pudding, but I decline. The referee blows his whistle and announces the next match. Spectators boo and hiss as *she* steps through the ropes.

"Our next champion is the one known only as 'Warrior!' So far, she reigns undefeated in the seventy to eighty pound weight range. Are there any challengers? Please?"

The spectators grumble. In the corner, a thin man climbs on a scales then steps off, disappointed.

"No one?"

My neighbor looks at me expectantly. "Go on," he whispers.

Everyone in the room goes quiet and looks at me. Even the referee puts his hands together to plead. "*She's* been taking all the prize money uncontested!" he says. "You've got to help us."

"I don't know if I can do it," I say. "You can do it!" they chant.

Reluctantly, I stand up and make my way down the aisle. Excitement builds as I step on the scales. "She weighs exactly the same!" someone cries, and I'm thrown into the ring.

DING! DING!

We circle one another. She's clearly been practicing: dodging and feinting back and forth.

I put my hands up. "I need to tell you something before we start," I say, staying out of reach. "I need to tell you that you were right. You were right about James: he really was a jerk. And you were right about the flowers. And about mother... and I – I guess you were right about me, too. After you ran away, there was no one to stick up for me. Not even dad would..." I trail off. My heart beats faster as she closes in. "Wait, listen! I don't expect you to forgive me for everything, but let's make another

bet. If I win this match, you'll come back home, okay? If you win, you can have anything you want. My iPod, every last drop of honey, anything! Just tell me what you want more than anything else in the world."

With a twisted laugh, she launches herself at me. I flinch and cover my head, expecting a very bad end to a very bad day / life, but instead I feel her arms wrapping around me.

"Illegal clinch!" calls the referee.

She leans her head in next to mine. "I want the same thing you do," she hisses. "I always have."

I understand. Boos fill the room. Yorkshire puddings pepper us, hurled from the stalls. As one, we spin around to face them, back to back, gloves pointed outward to deflect beer cans and newspapers, then, more and more improbably, handheld radio sets, black and white televisions, hoovers, chesterfields, until a mountain of trash surrounds us. With the thunder of a thousand clogs the spectators crest the ridge and flood towards us, the referee playing a gleeful hurdy-gurdy in the background.

"This is gauche," *she* says, and I make a mental note to look up the word later. "Let's get out of here."

We punch our way out of the ring, expert boxers that we are, and up the stairs. We slam the doors behind us and pause to catch our breath. Around the corner steps the gym administrator. She looks at us, puzzled.

"Aren't you who the paramedics came for last time?" she asks. "Who let you in?"

Busted, we run the other direction. Recklessly, *she* tips over a vending machine behind us to block pursuit, and it begins to gush Lucozade like a fire hydrant. Soon, we're wading through the weight room, trying to get to the exit, but we can't. James is waiting for us at the other end on a motorcycle. He revs the engine and glares vengefully.

By now, the green liquid is up to our necks. We're about to drown when dad appears, riding a running machine like a jet ski. "Hop on!" he cries.

We grab hold, pick up the now grateful James, and speed off into the ocean of carbohydrates. We're headed back towards America to start a new civilization when mother swims up to us. She's a mermaid, by the way.

"Stop that at once!" she shouts at dad. Obediently, he switches off the running machine, and we begin to sink. Even though we beg him to turn it on again, he hangs his head as we all sink into the carbonated depths.

The first thing I see when I wake up in the hospital are the carnations. They're fresh as the day they were stolen. On my other side is dad. He stares at me sternly, and I get *deja vu*.

"Well hello there," he says without much surprise. "You scared the hell out of us, honeypot."

"I know."

"If it had taken us just a few minutes longer to find you..." his lips quaver, and I realize that the flatness of his mouth is his attempt not to cry. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I found myself," I say. A bee enters through the open window and settles on the carnations. I smile to reassure him that everything's alright. Dad can tell when I'm not telling the truth, but this time, he smiles too.

THE END