

The Capemaker of Comeuppance Alley

by Leigh Gaddy



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Pearl frowned as she ran her gnarled fingers over the shadowy black cloth.

Her hands understood fabric better than her eyes now. Time was when she could spot a dropped stitch across a room. No longer.

“Useless interns...” she muttered, hovering now and then over unacceptable stitches. A few of the interns in the room rolled their eyes at each other, but no one dared say anything aloud.

Pearl was the capemaker of Comeuppance Alley, and she ruled over the shop with a quiet rage. Not a single intern had been chosen to continue onto an apprenticeship in her shop since Pearl had turned seventy. That was four years ago.

There was gossip on campus now. About who would take over when Pearl retired.

She sniffed. *I'm not going to retire. They'll come in — some foggy, gray morning — and find me lying dead over the loom. That'd suit me just fine. Malcontent will just have to find himself a replacement then. Otherwise one bad stitch and he'll fall right out of the sky.*

“Master Capemaker?”

The voice wavered behind Pearl.

She turned grudgingly, putting one shaky hand on a worktable. Malcontent's new assistant. Pearl hated them. Chosen for their looks rather than their brains. Barely knowing what their new employer would require of them. *Why don't they wise up?*

“Malcontent would like to know— he, um— .” The handsome young man was quailing under Pearl's disdainful gaze. “Wh— what is the status of the Valkyrie cape?” he finally blurted.

“You may tell Malcontent that the Valkyrie is coming along as planned. It won't be completed any earlier. Malcontent will have to be *content* to wait.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, ma'am.” He bobbed his head, blonde waves of hair flopping over

thickly-lashed eyes. Pearl turned back to the black roll of fabric.

Underneath Pearl's irritation with the question lay a simmering pride in the answer.

The Valkyrie would be her finest cape. Dreamt, designed, and crafted for Malcontent's next dastardly escapade. His plan required a cape that offered both nimble maneuvering and high endurance for an extended over-water trip.

Malcontent could fly, yes — *blah, blah* — but Pearl's capes transformed his flight from that of a duck to that of a falcon. In this world of Talents, whether superhuman or vague, Pearl's Talent was knitting.

It didn't matter if she made socks or baby blankets or capes, the fabric made by Pearl's hands was extraordinary. She *imbued* it with intelligence.

But the craft demanded excellence. The wrong weave, a stitched turned backward, a gauge too large or too small, and a magical cape would become a death sentence.

Malcontent trusted her to get it right.

This particular roll of black fabric now in her hands was made by an intern. *Whatever her name is*. Twelve feet of Malcontent's standard black. Two capes for regular villain use, nothing special, were supposed to be cut from this roll. *Supposed to be*.

"Who did this one?" she growled. Whispers set off behind her back. *What did she say? Who? Huh? Who made it?* Pearl sighed with irritation, tapped her foot. *She asked who did that roll! Oh!*

"It was Mindy, ma'am."

What a stupid name.

Mindy approached, biting her lower lip and twiddling her fingers.

Pearl turned to look at her, and gently pushed the roll with one hand along the table.

Mindy's arms jerked and pulled back, unsure. *She thinks I want her to take it*, thought Pearl.

Mindy's eyes darted between Pearl and the slowly moving roll, arms half-raised and waiting for a clear instruction. But Pearl kept pushing, pushing, pushing.

Until the roll toppled off the table and into the waiting garbage bin.

Pearl said nothing. She just looked at the intern.

"I'll do better, ma'am."

Pearl nodded.

"I'm leaving. Archie, make sure the daily quota is met. I don't care how long you're all here."

Archie, her foreman, nodded once.

Pearl walked to the door, strapped on her beige trench coat, and walked out into the sunshine.

Malcontent's campus was bustling. This, his headquarters, boasted four blocks of buildings and roads and scurrying henchman. The main office was on the corner of Mayhem and Malice. R&D was over on Vindication Way. Logistics was on Retribution Boulevard. The event center (with free meeting rooms for up and coming young villains) was on Death Approaches Avenue. Costumes was wedged into Comeuppance Alley. The cape shop and the leotard shop. *Those fools*. Pearl nodded at Benji, the Master Leotardist. She snorted and fell slowly into her gray Buick. A faded plastic daisy bobbed and smiled on the dashboard.

Pearl flashed her badge at the guard booth and the gate creaked slowly open. On her way out, she passed the paint-peeled sign that read *The Real McCoy's, Fruit Packing Plant, est. 1977*.

The Buick trundled along.

Pearl loved driving ten miles an hour under the speed limit. It made people so mad. She was less likely to be a victim of road rage, now that she had a head of gray curls, but it was still fun to antagonize people. Her favorite bumper sticker said “Yes, I *could* go slower.”

The other bumper sticker said “I Heart Shih Tzus.”

Twenty minutes later, Pearl turned into the Wagging Tails Doggie Daycare parking lot.

A woman with bouncing black curls, and wearing pink scrubs covered in paw prints, opened the front door. She smiled. “Right on time, Miss Pearl! ShuShu has been waiting for you!”

“Thank you, Roberta. I need my ShuShu.”

The lobby of the doggie daycare was painted an eye-watering lime green. Paw prints stenciled on the cement floor were scuffed and worn by the daily passing of both two-legged and four-legged creatures. The smell of everything-doggie was not entirely masked by the vanilla candles burning on the coral pink reception desk. Potted plants on end tables were dotted here and there. And a giant plastic jug of milk bones waited by the door, next to a stainless steel water dish that was always full and frequently boasted ice cubes.

It was secretly Pearl’s most favorite place in the whole world.

Roberta followed Pearl down the kennel hallway. At no other time of day could Pearl walk so fast or smile so genuinely. The anticipation had been building all day.

For this, the best moment of her day.

Picking up ShuShu from daycare.

“ShuShu, baby, mommy’s coming!” called Pearl. Decades fell off her voice, even if it was raspy and squeaky.

A frantic, high-pitched yipping came from several doors down. The sound was like glass

shattering and falling to grind against a chalkboard, over and over in a maddening repetition. Roberta flinched but kept smiling. She certainly did not want lovely, loyal Miss Pearl to turn around and see her running in the other direction.

ShuShu was in Kennel 7. Her bark was definitely worse than her bite, as she was no bigger than a squirrel. Tiny, with fluffy cream and white fur, and with milky blue eyes that bugged out so far you nearly stooped to catch them before you realized they were firmly attached.

Like her owner, ShuShu was going blind and relied on her other senses.

Her whole tiny body wriggling, ShuShu pressed her face against the kennel door and whimpered.

“Look out, baby, I’m here. Back up, honey.”

Pearl opened the door so slowly and carefully that Roberta shifted her stance once or twice before finally settling on leaning a hand against Kennel 6. The labrador at the back seemed torn between hiding from ShuShu’s noise and getting attention from Roberta.

Pearl scooped ShuShu into her arms and nuzzled their faces together. Happiness radiated off the pair of them and Roberta chuckled as she handed ShuShu’s thin scrap of leash back to Pearl.

“Thank you, Roberta. And thank Melvin and Lola and Louise for me, too.”

“Yes, ma’am, I will.”

Pearl shuffled with ShuShu back to the Buick. She buckled the minuscule dog into a doggie car seat she’d set up in the front passenger seat, and they made their slow way home. Pearl got to add another two tallies on her daily “got honked at” list, with a rare tally on the list titled “the driver flipped me off but then looked remorseful when they saw how old I was.”

Dinnertime was as usual. Pearl steamed a quarter of a sweet potato and shredded two ounces of boiled chicken for ShuShu. For herself there was a deviled egg sandwich with lettuce, and a cup of hot tea.

No matter the weather, cold or hot, Pearl had to have a cup of steaming tea before bed. The hot liquid seemed to moisturize her very body, helping her muscles and bones to move and bend.

Before bedtime, Pearl did yoga while ShuShu curled around her skinny wrists and sagging ankles.

They both went to sleep in Pearl's bed while frogs peeped their music through her open window.

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The next morning, Pearl dropped ShuShu back off at Wagging Tails with much face smushing and promises of swift return.

As she settled herself into the Buick, Pearl felt her capemaker persona fall down onto her shoulders. Her soft smile reversed itself and settled deep into the wrinkles around her mouth and eyes. Thoughts of monthly fabric quotas and knitting patterns and damn fool interns floated through her mind.

She sighed. The fruit basket on *The Real McCoy's* sign came into view.

Her mind drifted to the Valkyrie cape as she flashed her badge to the nameless guard at the booth. The cape was a thing of beauty. So darkly black that it hurt the eyes and baffled depth perception. Pearl's enhanced sense of touch was a gift for this project. She needn't use her eyes at all.

Plus, it gave her an excuse to tell the interns to bugger off.

But the color was nothing to the way the fabric *moved*. It did not flap and flail about, as all other capes did. If you looked closely, you could see the cape move *before* the wearer did.

As if the cape knew ahead of time what the wearer needed.

Like all capes, however, you had to be one hundred percent sure of its construction before you let someone fly off wearing one of them.

Malcontent would not get the Valkyrie until Pearl was sure it wouldn't kill him.

There was no love between Pearl and Malcontent. Just grudging respect and agreement on the best way to deal with the world.

For some reason, Pearl had never been good at making friends.

She assumed it was her general inability to respect anyone, but you never knew.

Pearl had been working for a wretched college theater department when she outed her Talent to society. In her late forties, long past the time when she found spirited college students fun and interesting, Pearl was on the verge of spontaneous combustion.

It was Romeo, of course.

He was the most loathsome student that Pearl had ever had the misfortune to fit for a costume. Unable to help herself, Pearl crafted a special cape Act 1, Scene 5. Just as Romeo raised his arms to croon "*Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright,*" the cape activated and launched Romeo through the roof of the theater.

Malcontent intercepted the police transporter as they were delivering Pearl to prison, after she lost her court case.

It was easy for him to spirit her away.

He did not show her his face, but she knew who he was. Of all the supervillains out there, Pearl did not hold Malcontent in complete contempt. His crimes were the usual ones. Bank and

museum heists, kidnappings, criminal activity on the dark web. A murder here and there. But he didn't burn down rainforests or invest in illegal fishing conglomerates or give money to corrupt oil lobbyists.

Malcontent explained to her that he'd heard of what she could do. Then he handed her the cape he was wearing and asked her what she thought of it.

She told him she'd start on Monday.

And she'd been there ever since.

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Two weeks later, Mindy was fired and a new intern took her place.

And Malcontent was reaching the final stages of the heist which took place before the Valkyrie escapade.

"I heard it's going really well."

"Yeah, Boss should be getting some good grift on this one. Think we'll see any of that?"

A snort. "Nah, not us. We're the lowbies."

Pearl had stopped caring a long time ago about what Malcontent did or why. She cared far more about her own small piece of the project, and lived for design requirements that would stretch her imagination.

The Valkyrie cape was nearly ready.

Pearl had been working with the current prototype for a week now. It had passed every test she could throw at it, and none of the test flyers had crashed into the ocean for this one.

They had rescue boats waiting. Whiners.

She'd asked Malcontent for one final fitting before she put it through the last inspection.

He would never come to her shop, however, so she boxed up the cape and had an intern carry her

sewing bag. At the main office she shooed the girl away, straightened her jacket, and walked up to Malcontent's private quarters.

He stood there on a platform, surrounded by mirrors that showed him every angle, his body sheathed in the Master Leotardist's black spandex. Malcontent was maybe ten years younger than Pearl herself.

She'd never asked.

He was reasonably fit. Enough to make her blush thirty years ago at the first private fitting. Not anymore. His body was her living mannequin.

She opened the large black box slowly, as though she was revealing a sugary confection to her employer. Malcontent offered her the slightest lift in a corner of his mouth. It was all the compliment she'd receive from him.

The black box looked empty.

Pearl reached a hand inside the box and grasped at shadows.

She pulled out a liquid darkness. Fabric flowed and poured around her hands. Pearl wondered if looking at it would confuse her mind and cause her to drop the cape. She could at least *feel* the Valkyrie cape in her hands.

Malcontent turned his back to her and held his arms wide.

Pearl draped the cape over his shoulders. It melted onto his shoulders and hugged his upper back before flaring magnificently away from his hips and flowing down to his feet.

It was *beautiful*.

Pearl knew the cape was perfect right then, but the procedures must be followed. She chuckled as she took final measurements and eyeballed the hemline, looked for stray ends of threads, and noted with glee how the black leotard looked gray against the blackest black of the

cape. *Oh, that'll be fun to lord over Benji.* Malcontent turned this way and that, as Pearl directed.

At a soft coded knock, Malcontent jerked his head and called out for the person to enter.

His head assistant, Alanna, walked into the fitting room and gasped.

“Is that— that is the Valkyrie cape, correct?”

Malcontent nodded and turned a proud gaze onto Pearl, who ignored it.

“That’s all for now, sir,” she said, reaching up to pull the cape from his shoulders.

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Then, finally, it was the day before the Valkyrie escapade.

Pearl had dropped off ShuShu at Wagging Tails. She’d given the staff a stale box of gingersnap cookies, with her usual profusion of thanks. ShuShu had cried while Pearl walked away from her.

It wrenched Pearl’s heart open every time she cried.

Because of this, she arrived at work in a foul mood. Wishing that her life was simply staying at home with her dog and seeing no human, ever.

A note was taped to the shop door. Malcontent had called an all-henchman meeting in the event center at 10 a.m. sharp *or else*.

Pearl was to bring the Valkyrie cape for a formal presentation in front of the entire odious group.

This gave her two hours for final touches and tests.

Pearl gathered her staff and interns together at 8:10 a.m.

“No one is to disturb me while I wrap up the Valkyrie. *No one*. Understood? This is the highest priority today. I don’t care if Malcontent sends one of his brainless assistants with a question or a request or a demand. Tell them I am dying of dystentery in the bathroom if you

must. This must be perfect.”

Her staff nodded and almost ran from her presence.

Pearl hid herself and the Valkyrie away in the prototype workshop.

She spread the cape out on a table.

Electrical cables were attached and the cape was shocked at different voltages. Testing to make sure it would not carry a current and electrocute Malcontent.

She attempted to light the cape on fire with a blowtorch. But the cape simply steamed a foul-smelling vapor and refused to hold a flame.

Water ran off the table, the cape dry.

Lasers refracted into harmless rainbows.

Bullets ricocheted around the room.

Finally, Pearl hung the cape on a hanger and ran her hands along its length. Searching for stray threads and rents in the fabric. Enjoying these last few minutes with the greatest creation of her career.

Raising her eyebrows, Pearl discovered a millimeter of blackest thread poking out from the hemline. She walked back to her sewing basket and pulled out a silver pair of stork-shaped embroidery scissors. The sharpest pair she owned.

She snipped the stray thread, tucked the scissors carefully into her pocket, and folded the cape carefully back into the black presentation box she'd used at Malcontent's private fitting.

Pearl sighed.

The Valkyrie cape was officially — *finally* — done.

She checked her watch. It was time.

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At 10 a.m. sharp, every single henchman was seated in the event center. They chatted to each other. Occasional laughter burst up here and there from the crowd.

Pearl sat, grim-mouthed and impatient, in the front row. No one sat next to her, just the way she preferred seating arrangements.

She checked her watch. 10:07 a.m.

The whispers began at the back of the room.

Where is Malcontent?

He said '10 a.m. or else,' har-har, guess he's in trouble now.

Pearl glanced around, annoyed.

Wait, did you hear? He got into some trouble on the way in this morning.

Yeah, I just heard! A car chase with the cops and he didn't want to lead them here.

Apparently there was a lot of damage in town, real close to here.

Pearl's heart thumped. *Damage in town? Where, exactly?* An cold, choking feeling crept slowly over her heart. She turned her head, straining to hear the chatter now spreading like wildfire through the room.

The patrol car rammed through a gas station! There was a huge explosion.

Phone screens lit up throughout the room. Pulling up social media feeds and breaking news alerts.

The gas station is totally gone and...

"A gas station," whispered Pearl. *There's a station next to Wagging Tails. Oh god.*

But she heard nothing else until, at 10:32 a.m., Malcontent bounded up on stage. He was smiling in triumph. There was a bloody gash over one eyebrow and his eyes were bright and shining.

His staff applauded and laughed.

“Well, well! Here we are. A bit of a kerfuffle on the way in, my apologies. Our town may be short a gas station and a doggie daycare now, but life goes on!”

All the blood drained from Pearl’s face and she swayed in her seat.

Everything felt cold, her pulse drummed in her ears, and her stomach roiled. *ShuShu! No, ShuShu!*

The staff was chattering again, pulling phones back out.

Yep, it’s in the news now. The gas station and some place called Wagging Tails. Complete losses. Two patrol cars, too.

Pain tore through Pearl and she leaned over the black box, gasping for air. *ShuShu. Roberta. My only friends. Oh god, ShuShu!*

After several minutes of protracted agony, Pearl realized Malcontent had stopped speaking and was holding out an arm to her. His face looked puzzled. *He’s calling me up to the stage now.*

Pearl staggered to her feet. She gripped the box like a life raft.

A white-hot burning began deep in Pearl’s chest, expanding outward. *Fury.*

Pearl smiled.

On stage, she opened the box and presented the cape to Malcontent.

The crowd *ooh’d* and *aah’d* as she knew they would.

But she felt nothing.

Malcontent ended the big reveal and handed the cape back to Pearl. Under cover of his charisma, she folded the cape back into the box.

Then, she pulled out the silver embroidery scissors still in her pocket. The crowd was

laughing behind her, their attention back on Malcontent.

Gripping them tightly, Pearl leaned into the shadowy box and slowly, deliberately, *gleefully*, she cut a ragged line in the cape. Scissor-proof, the cape could never be.

“Goodbye, Malcontent,” she whispered, shutting the lid. “Enjoy your final flight.”

The end.