

Community Service
Inspired by "Monique Weber" by [Joyfool](#)



Part of the fun of painting was knowing that she wasn't supposed to. Monique had seen the latest announcement along with the rest of the town: *Imperial Decree Number Seventy-eight: Henceforth, all spoken, drawn, painted, played, sculpted, or performed art must first receive license from the Licensorial Commission. Enacted on this day, the tenth of Florial, year six.*

So far as Monique Weber was concerned, it only meant that she was going to enjoy *this* painting even more than any other that she'd made.

Of course, planning it was one thing; *executing* it was quite another. It didn't help at all that her mother interfered as soon as she'd started her planning. This was to be expected, in all honesty: Mother was a snoop and Moni was quite particular about The Process for paintings. It was only a matter of time and ill luck--the one she never had enough of and the other far too much--before Mother spotted the drawing.

"What's this?" she asked, "accidentally" rifling through Moni's satchel. Moni had just come in from the market, and was taking off her poncho (the rain hadn't been much but enough that she didn't want to get her wavy-auburn hair wet) when Mother relieved her of the side bag and promptly dove into it.

"What's what?" asked Moni, trying to sound innocent but already knowing what her mother was talking about.

"This!" Mother held up the handful of parchment sheets, each scribbled on with a charcoal stick. "Sketches? You know you can't do that anymore."

"I *can* do them, Mother," said Moni, frustration burning from the tips of her pointed ears down to the tops of her fur-covered feet. "There's no law against *sketching*."

"You know the decree! You know what could happen to you--to the family!"

Mother looked her daughter in the brown eyes, her own slightly watered with the beginnings of worried tears. "I don't want you following in your father's footsteps."

"What's wrong with that?" demanded Moni, snatching the sketches from her mother's hand. "He is a great halfling, one of renown and fame. He's a hero. You've said so yourself."

Mother straightened at the accusation. "I would appreciate it if you didn't throw my own words at me, Monique."

Moni snorted wetly. "Don't throw them *to* me and you won't have to worry about it, will you?"

Mother took in a deep breath, a clear indication that a tirade was coming. Moni cut her off, waving her hand and apologizing. That was enough to calm her, but there was no doubt that Mother would not be pleased with what Monique had planned.

However, when an idea germinated in Monique's head, there was no doubt that it would one day be harvested.

Thus it was that, despite the unreliable weather, Monique Weber set out, on the twenty-sixth day of Florial, to the village square. If she was going to be violating the Seventy-eighth Decree, she may as well do it as clearly and visibly as possible. She was going to speak, draw, paint, play *and* perform her art. (She tried to think of a way of getting sculpting into it, but she had never been particularly good at that; most of her clay projects ended up looking like malformed rocks, and any time she'd tried to carve anything more complicated than a sharpened stick she'd ended up with cut fingers.)

Getting out of the house had been easy--Mother was visiting a neighbor who had just given birth, so she was out of the way. Moni had only needed to pack a box full of her materials--an easel, a canvas, her paints, the sketchbook, and a harmonica (this she put in her pocket)--and march out the front door.

Like most days in Florial, the weather was warm enough that people would be out to enjoy the sunshine, but cool enough to want to avoid the shade. Monique put on some sensible jeans, a blouse over which she wore her favorite pink sweater vest, and a pink bow in her hair. The bow was an added touch, thrown on for a bit of flair as she walked out the door. In her mind, it really completed the outfit.

As she rounded down the path toward the village square, she passed a couple of metal-plated guards. They had dour faces, grim and gray in the springtime light. They watched her with just their eyes, not even bothering to move their heads as she marched by.

Worry dried out her mouth. *Technically*, she hadn't done any of the things she wasn't supposed to do. *Technically*, it was not (yet) illegal to walk down the road toward the square, a box full of art supplies in tow. *Technically*, they didn't have any reason to bother her.

That had never stopped the Licensorial Commission in the past. They had come into Joyville three years before, bringing with them troops with sharp swords and angry scars, dressed in all the finery of the Imperial Court. They had come with a new calendar and new money, new rules and new laws, all of which the people of Joyville had to agree to: It was that or death.

The war, of course, had happened far away, but distance was no barrier to trouble. More than one family had been like Monique's, sending off fathers and brothers, uncles and sons to the great hunger of war. Father had been willing to go to try to protect Joyville from the Empire's grasp; Father--along with a great many others--had failed.

Monique missed him terribly, but every time she thought about her pain and how it was *supposed* to have meant that Joyville wouldn't have to deal with the Empire, the pain turned hard and hot. It wasn't a lot, this type of resistance, but it was something. It was what she could do. It was her own way of being like Father--of fighting back.

Summoning that courage, she continued on, smiling at her neighbors and blithely ignoring the fact that the Licensorial Commission's goons had redirected their steps and now followed her.

When she arrived at the village square, only a handful of people were there. She saw Laffodill, a monocorn girl wearing a beautiful yellow sundress, carrying a basket filled with herbs. Gennifer, a capramon, stood next to her, the short stubs of her burgeoning horns poking through the white tufts of hair. A bearded man--Mr. Baker, who (and this confused Monique when she was younger) was actually a professional cook--enjoyed the sunshine, Whiskers, his pet cat, perched on his head. The only elf in the village, the beautiful Miss Rainshow, stood next to one of the Cobbler twins (Monique could never tell the two apart; she guessed it was Rodger). The ever-inquisitive and often-overbearing Silimon Rodwell, the son of the bailiff, sat in the dirt and tried to build a log cabin out of sticks. Not exactly a mob, but it would have to do.

"Friends and neighbors!" Monique's shout was supposed to stop all conversations, to draw all attention to her. Instead, it was soundly ignored.

Clearing her throat, she tried again, only to similar results. Frustrated, she set her box down and pulled out the wooden stool she'd brought with her. Standing on the stool, she cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, "Hey! Everyone!"

That did it. Six sets of eyes (seven, if she counted Whiskers' multi-colored gaze) turned toward her.

Monique stared at the crowd. The crowd stared back, curious and expectant.

"Um..." Whatever it was she had been going to say fled from her brain as firmly as a herd of deer from a pack of wolves. "Hi."

Mr. Baker began to laugh. "Well, li'l lass, what 'ave ya t' give us naow?" His accent, crisp and rolling--to say nothing of the contagious timbre of his laughter--spread through Monique's body like a warming draught.

She smiled. "I have something I want to show you!" Whipping free the harmonica, she played a quick trill. The tune was familiar--"Where Goes the Road?" was a local favorite that, fortunately for Monique, was in her range--and easy to play. She played the introduction again, then launched into her own, custom-made version of the song.

You've heard it said

*By the live and dead
That we all live alone-ah
But have you heard
The newest word
From the Empire's throne-ah?*

She sucked in a deep breath, because the chorus needed it and because it was the only way she'd be able to hit the high notes.

*He rests his tushy
On his chair's cushy
Because he says a load.
He lies and sighs
And eats the flies
Tell me: Where goes the toad?*

As she sang, she pulled out her easel and canvas, setting them up with practice-born ease. With the charcoal sketch from her pages at hand, she began to sketch one of her drawings on the canvas. The last note faded; she grabbed a brush, her palette, and the green bottle of paint. Without hesitation, she set about painting, her mouth rambling as fast as her hands moved.

"You tell me, friends, what you think of Emperor Toadlips! He squats in his castle and feasts on the remnants of our family's corpses. See? This here--" and she flourished a line by his head which represented the stink coming off His Majesty's corpulent form "--is just one of the many ways that he ruins us all."

The painting went on uninterrupted, with Moni's commentary explaining everything she set down in paint. Murmurs of confusion, shock, scandal, and even disapproval floated around her, but she tuned it out, choosing instead to focus on what she was saying and creating. "I know that good art needs no explanation by the artist, but sometimes words can be as useful as pigment. And this emperor needs to hear this: He's a bully and a coward, a cretin and a louse. He doesn't deserve his place and we don't deserve to be crushed under his rule. They say we cannot speak or sing, paint or play, sculpt or dissent. I say they're wrong. And they always will be!"

She stepped back to regard her work. It was not the best she'd ever done; if anything, it was the messiest slop she'd thrown on the canvas since she was but a tyke. That didn't matter, though; heart hammering in her chest, exultation at her own audacity making up her breath, Monique Weber felt the most *alive* she'd ever felt.

She faced the audience, her smile bright. As she took in the village's expressions--and many more people had gathered since she'd started her work--that smile faded. Only Mr. Baker continued to grin back at her. Everyone else stared with disapproving frowns or shocked mouths.

Monique swallowed. The crowd shifted, then parted as the two guards she'd seen earlier approached.

"Halfling, you are under arrest," said one of the men, the sharp stench of unwashed body accompanying him. "For violating every aspect of Decree Seventy-eight." As he clapped the irons about her wrists, his partner broke the canvas, his hands sullied by the still-wet paint. For a moment, Monique thought that the village might revolt, might resist as well, might overpower the two men from the Licensorial Commission, might take back Joyville and let it be the small village it was before the Empire came in with its impositions and expectations.

That moment faltered and died as the crowd split to let them through.

"Well," she said in a loud, firm voice, "no matter. The art has been made. And no matter what you do with me or to it, the art *has been made*. And no one will forget it!"

As they led her to the jail, Monique Weber's smile returned. It didn't matter if Joyville hadn't listened, hadn't woken up, hadn't taken courage. The point of community service was only to do that: Serve her community.

And Monique felt that she had done that.