

Wet Wings

Katherine watched avidly, chin cradled in her old, arthritic hands, as the chrysalis heaved, and writhed, and finally split up the back. The crinkled, sodden wings of the butterfly emerged first, followed by the bloated body. She breathed a sigh of wonder, as she always did, and the butterfly tried to flap its useless wings in alarm as it caught her movement.

"Silly thing," she chided it affectionately. "You know you can't fly with wet wings!" Then she exerted a little of her magic; just a little, brushing the butterfly with a spark of calm that jumped from her trembling index finger to its quivering antenna.

The butterfly, soothed, went back to its real job, pumping the fluid from its body into the veins of its wings, unfurling them into their full glory. It was not a particularly rare butterfly, certainly not an endangered one; nothing but a common Buckeye, a butterfly so ordinary that no one even commented on seeing them when she was a child. But Katherine had always found the markings exquisite, and she had used this species and the Sulfurs more often than any other to carry her magic.

Magic. That was a word hard to find written anymore. No one approved of magic these days. Strange that in a country that gave the Church of Gaia equal rights with the Catholic Church, that no one believed in magic.

But magic was not "correct." It was not given equally to all, nor could it be given equally to all. And that which could not be made equal, must be destroyed. . . .

"We always knew that there would be repression and a burning time again," she told the butterfly, as its wings unfolded a little more. "But we never thought that the ones behind the repression would come from our own ranks."

Perhaps she should have realized it would happen. So many people had come to her over the years, drawn by the magic in her books, demanding to be taught. Some had the talent and the will; most had only delusions. How they had cursed her when she told them the truth! They had wanted to be like the heroes and heroines of her stories; special, powerful.

She remembered them all; the boy she had told, regretfully, that his "telepathy" was only observation and the ability to read body-language. The girl whose "psychic attacks" had been caused by potassium imbalances. The would-be "bardic mage" who had nothing other than a facility to delude himself. And the many who could not tell a tale, because they would not let themselves see the tales all around them. They were neither powerful nor special, at least not in terms either of the power of magic, nor the magic of storytelling. More often than not, they would go to someone else, demanding to be taught, unwilling to hear the truth.

Eventually, they found someone; in one of the many movements that sprouted on the fringes like parasitic mushrooms. She, like the other mages of her time, had simply shaken her head and sighed for them. But what she had not reckoned on, nor had anyone else, was that these movements had gained strength and a life of their own—and had gone political.

Somehow, although the process had been so gradual she had never noticed when it had become unstoppable, those who cherished their delusions began to legislate some of those delusions. "Politically correct" they called it—and some of the things they had done she had welcomed, seeing them as the harbingers of more freedom, not less.

But they had gone from the reasonable to the unreasoning; from demanding and getting a removal of sexism to a denial of sexuality and the differences that should have been celebrated. From legislating the humane treatment of animals to making the possession of any animal or animal product without licenses and yearly inspections a crime. Fewer people bothered with owning a pet these days—no, not a pet, an "Animal Companion," and one did not "own" it, one "nurtured" it. Not when inspectors had the right to come into your home day or night, make certain that you were giving your Animal Companion all the rights to which it was entitled. And the rarer the animal, the more onerous the conditions. . . .

"That wouldn't suit you, would it, Horace?" she asked the young crow perched over the window. Horace was completely illegal; there was no way she could have gotten a license for him. She lived in an apartment, not on a farm; she could never give him the four-acre "hunting preserve" he required. Never mind that he had come to her, lured by her magic, and that he was free to come and go through her window, hunting and exercising at will. He also came and went with her little spell-packets, providing her with eyes on the world where she could not go, and bringing back the cocoons and chrysalises that she used for her butterfly-magics.

She shook her head, and sighed. They had sucked all the juice of life out of the world, that was what they had done. Outside, the gray overcast day mirrored the gray sameness of the world they had created. There were no bright colors anymore to draw the eye, only pastels. No passion, no fire, nothing to arouse any kind of emotions. They had decreed that everyone must be equal, and no one must be offended, ever. And they had begun the burning and the banning. . . .

She had become alarmed when the burning and banning started; she knew that her own world was doomed when it reached things like "Hansel and Gretel"—banned, not because there was a witch in it, but because the witch was evil, and that might offend witches. She had known that her own work was doomed when a book that had been lauded for its portrayal of a young gay hero was banned because the young gay hero was unhappy and suicidal. She had not even bothered to argue. She simply announced her retirement, and went into seclusion, pouring all her energies into the magic of her butterflies.

From the first moment of spring to the last of autumn, Horace brought her caterpillars and cocoons. When the young butterflies emerged, she gave them each a special burden and sent them out into the world again.

Wonder. Imagination. Joy. Diversity. Some she sent out to wake the gifts of magic in others. Some she sent to wake simple stubborn will.

Discontent. Rebellion. She sowed her seeds, here in this tiny apartment, of what she hoped would be the next revolution. She would not be here to see it—but the day would come, she hoped, when those who were different and special would no longer be willing or content with sameness and equality at the expense of diversity.

Her door-buzzer sounded, jarring her out of her reverie.

She got up, stiffly, and went to the intercom. But the face there was that of her old friend Piet, the "Environmental Engineer" of the apartment building, and he wore an expression of despair.

"Kathy, the Psi-cops are coming for you," he said, quickly, casting a look over his shoulder to see if there was anyone listening. "They made me let them

in—"

The screen darkened abruptly.

Oh Gods— She had been so careful! But—in a way, she had expected it. She had been a world-renowned fantasy writer; she had made no secret of her knowledge of real-world magics. The Psi-cops had not made any spectacular arrests lately. Possibly they were running out of victims; she should have known they would start looking at peoples' pasts.

She glanced around at the apartment reflexively—

No. There was no hope. There were too many things she had that were contraband. The shelves full of books, the feathers and bones she used in her magics, the freezer full of meat that she shared with Horace and his predecessors, the wool blankets—

For that matter, they could arrest her on the basis of her jewelry alone, the fetish-necklaces she carved and made, the medicine-wheels and shields, and the prayer-feathers. She was not Native American; she had no right to make these things even for private use.

And she knew what would happen to her. The Psi-cops would take her away, confiscate all her property, and "re-educate" her.

Drugged, brainwashed, wired and probed. There would be nothing left of her when they finished. They had "re-educated" Jim three years ago, and when he came out, everything, even his magic and his ability to tell a story, was gone. He had not even had the opportunity to gift it to someone else; they had simply crushed it. He had committed suicide less than a week after his release.

She had a few more minutes at most, before they zapped the lock on her door and broke in. She had to save something, anything!

Then her eyes lighted on the butterfly, his wings fully unfurled and waving gently, and she knew what she would do.

First, she freed Horace. He flew off, squawking indignantly at being sent out into the overcast. But there was no other choice; if they found him, they would probably cage him up and send him to a forest preserve somewhere. He did not know how to find food in a wilderness—let him at least stay here in the city, where he knew how to steal food from birdfeeders, and where the best dumpsters were.

Then she cupped her hands around the butterfly, and gathered all of her magic. All of it this time; a great burden for one tiny insect, but there was no choice.

Songs and tales, magic and wonder; power, vision, will, strength— She breathed them into the butterfly's wings, and he trembled as the magic swirled around him, in a vortex of sparkling mist.

Pride. Poetry. Determination. Love. Hope—

She heard them at the door, banging on it, ordering her to open in the name of the Equal State. She ignored them. There was at least a minute or so left.

The gift of words. The gift of difference—

Finally she took her hands away, spent and exhausted, and feeling as empty as an old paper sack. The butterfly waved his wings, and though she could no longer see it, she knew that a drift of sparkling power followed the movements.

There was a whine behind her as the Psi-cops zapped the lock.

She opened the window, coaxed the butterfly onto her hand, and put him outside. An errant ray of sunshine broke through the overcast, gilding him with a glory that mirrored the magic he carried.

"Go," she breathed. "Find someone worthy."

He spread his wings, tested the breeze, and lifted off her hand, to be carried away.

And she turned, full of dignity and empty of all else, to face her enemies.