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LADY OF THE GHOST WILLOW

by Richard Parks

The remnants of my saké cask, like my sleep, had not lasted the night. Having no further means to drown my nightmares, I rose, dressed, and went out into the streets of the Capital. The night was at its darkest, lost like me in the time between dusk and dawn, when ghosts and demons came out of hiding and walked freely about the city. I had no care for that possibility, save that I could have used the distraction.

So when the shining figure with the appearance of a lady approached me, I was more curious than worried.

I stood at the highest point on Shijo Bridge. It was a good spot to view the moon, if there had been a moon to view at that hour. It was a decent tactical location in case of trouble, with only two directions to defend. She came out of the darkness and stood on the eastern end of the bridge in the direction of the place where cremations were done, beyond the city walls and the clustered temples specializing in funerals.

She was not a ghost, though someone less experienced in these matters could easily mistake her for one. The glow around her was very faint but easy to see, and there was a slight

flutter in her step that gave her away. Not a ghost. A *shikigami*, a magical creature with little more reality than the scraps of paper used to create her and no independent will save that of her master, whoever that might be. Still, the person who created her had done a superb job.

I had seen *shikigami* that seemed little more than poorly manipulated puppets, but this one could easily pass for human. From the number of layers of her kimono down to the precise cut of her hair, she appeared exactly as one would expect of a well-born attendant to a noble family. Not that such a one would ever be abroad this time of night, and certainly not on foot and alone.

I turned my gaze back over the water, though I kept her image in the corner of my eye. “What do you want?”

She bowed to me then. “I am sent with a message for Yamada no Goji. I serve Fujiwara no Kinmei.”

The name was familiar. A high-ranking deputy to the Minister of the Right, if I recalled correctly. I had heard Prince Kanemore speak of him, and never disparagingly. Which was remarkable, considering His Highness’s general opinion of the Fujiwara. My curiosity was piqued.

“I am Yamada. How did you or your master know I would be here?”

She bowed again. "We did not. I was on my way to your lodgings when I found you here instead."

That was plausible, since a Fujiwara compound was located in one of the southeastern wards not far from Gion. "I will hear you."

"May I approach? I do not wish to share my Master's business with others."

"Very well, but not too close."

The last was simple caution. While this particular *shikigami* might resemble a delicate young woman, I had dealt with such before and knew better. She could very well have been an assassin, and such a charming one would have very little trouble reaching her intended victim under normal circumstances, but my instincts told me that this was not the case. I trusted my instincts...up to a point.

She approached to within ten feet and bowed again. I looked over her shoulder. "You have a companion."

The *shikigami* frowned. "I came alone."

"I don't think this person bothered to ask permission."

She followed my gaze. A rough-looking *samaru* was approaching behind her, his hand on the hilt of his sword. I sighed. It was ever thus when more than one or two of the provincial lords and their retinues were in the Capital on business. Many of them kept well-disciplined attendants, but not

all. And many of those were not above a bit of nocturnal enrichment or forced pleasure, at opportunity. The *shikigami* and I must have appeared to represent both potentials. My long dagger was well concealed but within easy reach. I only hoped the ruffian was no more skilled than he appeared.

He spoke to the messenger, though his eyes were on me. “Woman, behave yourself and nothing too unpleasant will happen to you. I must deal with your friend first.”

The *shikigami* smiled at me as the man pushed past her. “Please, my lord. Allow me.”

If this *shikigami* was anything like those I’d tangled with before, the *samaru* was in more trouble than he knew. I grunted assent and the *samuru*’s eyes grew wide as he felt himself gripped from behind by the apparently frail woman. In another moment he cleared the bridge railing like a drunken crane who’d forgotten how to fly. I counted to three before I heard the splash. The *shikigami* held the *samaru*’s sword in her hands.

“What shall I do with this?”

I glanced at the sword. “A poor quality blade,” I said. “He may keep it.”

Soon there was another, smaller splash. The messenger then turned back to me and spoke as if nothing unusual had happened at all.

“My master wishes your assistance in a rather delicate matter. He believes a friend of his has been cursed. His own arts have proved ineffective, and even the priests have been confounded. My master does not know where else to turn. Will you speak to him?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, “I believe I will.”

* * *

My surmise about the location of Fujiwara no Kinmei proved accurate. According to the *shikigami*, he currently held sole possession of the mansion in the southeastern ward, as his uncle Fujiwara no Shintaro was away on a diplomatic assignment to the north.

She brought me to the north gate where I stated my business to the old man who kept watch there. I heard a faint rustle beside me and the messenger was gone. All I saw was a piece of folded paper that quickly blew away down the street on a freshening breeze.

The servant escorted me into the compound. He barely spoke at all and made no comment on the disappearance of my companion. I imagined that such sights were not unknown to him.

Lord Kinmei was waiting for me in the main wing of the house. At this hour there was no one else stirring, no doubt part of his intention in sending such a late summons. We had

never met before, so we took a moment to study each other. I could only imagine how I must have appeared to him, in my threadbare robes and ungroomed state. For his part he was elegantly but simply dressed. I judged him perhaps thirty years old, handsome, but little else seemed there to read. He offered me saké, which I refused, though it pained me to do so. Considering my reputation, I expected him to be surprised, but if so he didn't show it. He beckoned me to an empty cushion and sat down himself.

"Forgive my late summons, but under the circumstances it seemed best. I trust my servant told you my purpose?"

"In general terms, my lord, but not many specifics. You have a friend who is cursed?"

The man sighed. "I call it that for want of a better word. I would say 'haunted,' but that is impossible."

"How so?"

"As you may know, I am a man of some influence. My friend in turn is a man of good family and some wealth. He has had priests and monks alike place spirit wards at all points of access to his home, and I myself have brought in exorcists of great skill to watch over him. Yet despite both our efforts, a spirit has been seen walking his compound at night, apparently with impunity."

"What sort of spirit?"

“A female, as best anyone can tell. At first glance she appears totally unremarkable, yet the witnesses who have encountered her up close swear that she has no face. They see only a blank white mask where the face should be.”

“And there are no exorcists on duty when this happens?”

He smiled then. “You must not think me so negligent of my friend’s health, Lord Yamada. Twice the spirit has been trapped and banished to whence it came, yet it always returns again on another night as if nothing had happened. After each visit my friend’s condition worsens. I have sutras being read at half the temples in the Capital. Nothing seems to help.”

That was indeed puzzling. My friend Kenji, though lacking in most other attributes of a priest, was one of the finest exorcists I knew, and I had never known a spirit that he had exorcized fail to *remain* exorcised. I had no doubt those engaged by Lord Kinmei were of equal or greater skill. Besides, any competent priest could create a barrier that would be proof against spirits of the dead or even minor demons. Still, I found myself wishing that Kenji was not currently on a pilgrimage to Mount Hiea. His bursts of actual piety were infrequent but seldom convenient for all that.

“Lord Kinmei, before we go any further, I must ask you a question: why did you send a *shikigami* to fetch me? Have you no other servants?”

He smiled again. "Many. But none I would send into the streets of the Capital at this demon-infested hour."

"Also, this way, clearly yet without saying a word, you demonstrated that you are not without skill in supernatural matters. So I would understand that your need must indeed be great to seek me out."

Lord Kinmei bowed slightly. "It's true that I am not without my resources, Lord Yamada. Chinese magic is a slightly disreputable pursuit for one such as I, of course, but useful. Yet you can also see that my...intervention, in this matter, must remain at a discreet level. You have quite a reputation, Lord Yamada."

"For saké?"

A bit blunt on my part, but I preferred honesty in these sort of dealings, to the degree that was possible. It prevented many a misunderstanding later.

"That as well," Kinmei admitted, "but also for discretion. The saké I do not care about, save that it not interfere with your services."

"It will not. Now, then, is it my aid or my advice you seek?"

"Both. For which I am quite willing to pay two casks of rice from the first harvest of my western farms, plus five bolts of blue silk and one bar of gold to the weight of twenty Chinese coins."

I kept my face blank with an effort. Such would pay off all my current debts plus support me comfortably for an entire year. More, if I were sensible, though of course I would not be.

“Your terms are acceptable. I will require a written introduction to your friend, along with his co-operation. You can start by telling me his name.”

“You’ll understand that I could not say until we had agreed, but he is Minamoto no Akio. He is a member of the Emperor’s guard, though at present he is on leave for his health. All is easily arranged. He will listen to my wishes in this. Do you have any thoughts on the problem at this point?”

The victim was unknown to me, but I felt sure I could find out more from Prince Kanemore if need compelled. That would not be necessary, if Kinmei was being as honest with me as he seemed to be. “A few. But first I must ask you an indelicate question: to your knowledge, is your friend prone to intemperate love affairs?”

Kinmei smiled again, though I felt that he almost laughed. “Akio has never been prone to intemperance of any kind, Lord Yamada. He is quite likely the most serious, dutiful man I have ever met. He has only one...attachment, that I am aware of.”

“Do you know her name? Where the lady might be found?”

Kinmei sighed. “I’m sorry, but such is Lord Akio’s discretion that I barely know of her *existence*. Why do you ask?”

“Because of the nature of the attacks. Now, one possibility is that the ghost enters his compound by avoiding the barriers.”

“Certainly, but how? The priests are quite diligent, I assure you.”

“By the simple expedient of already being *within* his compound. If the grave is located on the premises, even an exorcist would not send her far.”

From the expression on Kinmei's face it was obvious that the possibility had never occurred to him. “Far-fetched,” he said at last, “but certainly possible. That must be considered.”

“The other possibility is that we're not dealing with a ghost in the normal sense at all, which is why I asked about his love affairs, meaning no disrespect. Our creature could be an *ikiryo*.”

He frowned. “*Ikiryo*? You mean the vengeful spirit of a living person?”

I was not surprised that he had heard of such things, but again it was clear the possibility had not occurred to him before now. No wonder. Such instances were extremely rare, and the most famous one of all never actually happened, unless the lady known as Murasaki Shikibu's account of a feckless prince's life was more true than was commonly believed.

“Even so,” he said. “I consider that even less likely than finding a grave on the grounds.”

“Jealousy and anger are powerful emotions and can arise even in the best of people. Like the Lady of the Sixth Ward herself, whoever is doing this might not even be aware of it.” I made the reference to the *Genji Monogatari* in the full confidence that he would understand it, nor was I disappointed.

“The Lady of the Sixth Ward wrought great harm to the Shining Prince’s loved ones all unawares. So. We must consider all possibilities, not only for Akio’s sake but the future happiness of our two families. Suzume especially.”

I frowned. “Your pardon, Lord Kinmei, but I don’t know who you mean.”

“Fujiwara no Suzume. My younger sister, Lord Yamada. Once Akio has recovered his health, he and Suzume are to be married.”

It occurred to me that, if Lady Suzume had been the “attachment” to which Lord Kinmei referred, he would know more of the matter than he was telling. Again, my instincts spoke against that. Which left the matter of Lord Akio’s lover a question that would need answering.

* * *

It took a little while for the introductions and arrangements to be made, so by the time I arrived at Akio’s family compound on the sixth avenue south of Gion, his condition had worsened and he was unable to receive visitors. He had been

placed in the east wing of the mansion, and I could plainly hear the drones of the priests reciting sutras. No expense had been spared, though so far to no good affect.

As evening fell again, I toured the grounds in the company of an aged senior priest named Nobu. I told him of my suspicions, and he considered them in silence for several moments.

“A burial in a place meant for the living would be most unusual,” he said. “One that would occur only in circumstances that were themselves...unusual.”

I smiled then. I was beginning to like the old priest. “We must speak frankly to one another,” I said. “You mean either a burial from ancient times...or a murder.”

“Lord Akio’s family have long been patrons of my temple. I would not accuse this great and noble house of such a thing,” Nobu said.

“Now would I. It’s possible the grave exists without their knowledge. So it would be in their interest that we find it and remove it, if such a grave does in fact exist.”

In some ways Nobu reminded me of Kenji, at least in the sense that I always had when watching a master at work. In a very short span of time I saw that Lord Kinmei’s confidence had not been misplaced. Nobu worked the area of the compound with the tools of his profession, and I with mine. He counted the beads on his prayer necklace while keeping up a

steady chant as he paced the length and breadth of the grounds like a water-diviner. For my part I kept a close watch for rising miasmas and the blink of corpse lights. When we met back near the front gate, we had both come to the same conclusion.

Nobu sighed. "Nothing, Lord Yamada. I can find no grave here."

"I agree. Which is a shame, really. A grave would have been easier to deal with."

"A proper cremation. A proper funeral ritual and reburial with respect. Even someone torn from this world by violence could be appeased on that score," he said. "Pity."

"So that leaves us with the second possibility that I mentioned."

"My wager," the old priest said, "would have been on the grave. Lord Yamada, I've known young Akio all his life. It simply makes no sense to me that anyone would harbor this level of ill-feeling towards him, consciously or not. He's as decent a man as I've ever known."

"Someone clearly does...and that someone is here!"

I spotted the faintly glowing figure only a moment before Nobu did. I sprinted toward the veranda of the east wing, with the priest, for all his years, barely three paces behind me.

The ghost was exactly as had been described. It was dressed in flowing white robes, as for a funeral, though it was

hard to make out any specific details of the garb. Its long, unconfined black hair twisted and flowed in the freshening breeze as if it were a separate thing with its own will, framing a face of no features. No eyes, nose, mouth, just a white emptiness that was more chilling than the most ferocious devil-mask.

I put myself between the thing and the house with no clear idea of what I was going to do, even as it was almost upon me. I had amulets for protection against ordinary spirits, but I wasn't sure they would serve here.

I never got the chance to find out, for in another moment Nobu was beside me. I expected him to begin the rite of exorcism, but instead he produced a strip of paper and slapped it directly onto the creature's empty face. In another moment it had vanished, and only then did Nobu sink slowly to the ground, his chest heaving.

"Are you all right?" I asked. I started to help him up, but he waved me off.

"I think I will live, Lord Yamada, but one of my age should not run so much. Give me a moment."

I waited until Nobu's breathing—and my own—had returned to something closer to normal, then I helped him to stand again. "What did you use on that thing?"

"A seal more appropriate for a powerful *kami* rather than a simple ghost. Which, if you are correct, this thing is not. After

seeing the result, I'm inclined to agree. Do you think I destroyed it?"

So my suspicions were confirmed. A powerful spirit but a ghost of the living, not the dead. *Ikiryo*. I shook my head. "A friend of mine once helped me contain a shapeshifter's power with something similar, but more likely you banished it temporarily, much like the previous exorcisms. I believe it will return."

"I can replace the wards on Akio's room with these," he said. "I have just enough left. But he can't stay in that room forever. I'll send to Enryaku Temple tonight for more seals, but I'm not sure how long these will last. The wards are strongest when first used. Their power fades over time."

"If I can find the source of the *ikiryo*, that will be a moot point," I said. "And to do that, I have to learn more about who Lord Akio's unseen enemy might be. I may need to search his private quarters."

Nobu hesitated. "Lord Kinmei trusts you and thus so must I, but I would be remiss in my duties to the family if I allowed you to rifle through Akio's belongings without supervision."

I had no argument with that condition. I waited while he changed the defenses of Lord Akio's sick room. When he returned he looked relieved.

“Lord Akio is sleeping peacefully. Whatever the creature meant to do, I believe it was thwarted tonight.”

“Then let us hope I find something that will help keep it away permanently.”

I allowed Nobu to escort me to the young master’s private rooms and remain with me as I searched. I opened and closed several chests, but most contained extra clothes and such and were of little interest. In truth, very little that was obvious to me on first inspection was of interest. I stopped, considering what I might have missed.

“It might help if you told me what sort of thing you’re looking for,” Nobu said.

I sighed. “The only way I could tell you would be if I’d already found it.”

I took another long look around the room. Like a tiny insect crawling on my arm, a thing scarcely noticed save for the itch, something was bothering me. Something was...missing.

“Your master is of the royal court and yet not literate?”

Nobu scowled. “Illiterate? Nonsense! Even the Emperor has remarked on Akio’s skill as a poet.”

“Then where is his writing table?”

Nobu’s scowl deepened, then suddenly cleared away. “Oh! It was brought to his sick room. I think its presence was meant to comfort him.”

“I need to see it, but I do not wish to disturb the young man’s sleep.”

“We should be able to bring it out for you. Come with me.”

Akio’s quarters were in the west wing of the mansion. We made our way through the corridor, into the main house, then out into the east wing. There were few servants about, mostly women, and they moved silently on their own errands with barely a glance at us. As we grew closer to the sick room, the chanting of the monks grew louder, though the sound remained somewhat muted in order to not awaken Akio.

Nobu left me where three priests sat in prayer, and a female attendant slid the screen aside for him to enter the room. In a few moments he returned, bearing the writing table.

It was of fine make, lacquered and painted with scenes of mountains and rivers and set at the perfect height for a kneeling man to use. There was a small chest attached for his inkstones and brushes and a separate drawer for paper. All was in good condition and in order, though it was also clear that the table and its implements had seen heavy use.

There were also several cubbyholes containing scrolls. Nobu looked unhappy but said nothing as I pulled each out in turn and examined it. Drafts of poems, mostly completed. I read a few and silently agreed with Nobu’s opinion—Lord Akio clearly was a talented poet and could no doubt hold his own or

better at court, where nearly all written communication of importance was in poetic form. I soon found a common reference in several completed poems and a few drafts. I showed them to Nobu.

“Lord Akio uses the expression ‘Lady of the Ghost Willow’ more than once. There’s also a few references to a ‘Lady of the Morning Iris.’ Do you know who he meant?” I asked, but Nobu just shrugged.

“I’m afraid the references have no meaning to me,” he said.

“The poems I showed you *are* Lord Akio’s work, are they not?”

“Of course. Why do you ask?”

I held a piece of paper which, as the wrinkles and creases clearly showed, had been folded into a thin strip and tied into a knot. “To be certain.” I showed him the bit of writing on that paper. “Is this your master’s calligraphy?”

Nobu was looking decidedly uncomfortable. “No. I don’t recognize the hand, though I think I’ve seen it before. What is it?”

“A letter...or rather, a poem.”

“Lord Yamada, this is all really improper. These poems are private correspondence.”

“I agree. Yet I’m afraid that this is my main virtue, for the missions I’ve undertaken: I’m willing to be improper as the need arises. And in this case, the need is that I read these private communications on the chance that they will tell me something that can help Lord Akio.”

Nobu’s scowl deepened, but he did not object further. I flattened out the paper as much as possible and read what was written there:

The humbled swordsman

Once proud, a blade cut his sleeve

Now wet with the dew.

The *tanka* was written in a delicate, refined script and was incomplete. Normally the one who received such a poem would write two lines to complete the form and return it to the sender. I had no way of knowing if the poem had been intended for Akio or whether he had replied.

I had little talent for poetry, but my instruction in the classic metaphors was probably no less extensive than Akio’s. The poem was both an entreaty and a question; that much was clear. But what was the answer? One who might be able to tell me was beyond speech now and might be for some time, if not forever. I wondered if there was anyone aside from Akio who might know.

“Lord Akio is safe for the moment,” I said. “I must leave now and get a little sleep before I return to Lord Kinmei’s house tomorrow. Please return this table to its rightful place.”

Nobu looked at me. “Tomorrow? But it’s my understanding that Lord Kinmei left for Enrakyu Temple to pray for Lord Akio’s health this very morning. He won’t be back until the day after. And even then he plans to stay here, rather than at his own home. He wishes to be present if...when, his friend awakens.”

“Perfect, since it is Fujiwara no Suzume I need to speak with.”

“His sister? May I ask why?”

“Because it’s possible that she knows more about this matter than her brother does.”

* * *

It was mid-morning before Fujiwara no Suzume was ready to receive me. I was ushered into the main reception hall. There was a low dais on which a translucent curtain of silk had been hung. Lady Suzume knelt on a cushion behind that curtain, with two female attendants flanking her at a discreet distance. I could see the outlines of her small form but few details. It would have taken a far more intimate connection than the one I had to be allowed to see her face.

“My brother left instructions to the household that we refuse no reasonable request from you,” she said without preamble. “What do you wish of me, Lord Yamada?”

Straight to the point. I know she was trying to be rude, but at the moment such directness served my needs admirably.

“Please forgive my intrusion, but there are some questions I need to ask you, for Lord Akio’s sake.”

“Akio? What can I tell you that would be of help?”

Was that actual concern in her voice? I had to admit that it at least sounded that way. “I understand that you were promised to Lord Akio.”

“I am still promised to Lord Akio,” she replied, with some of the coldness I had originally felt returning to her voice. “And if it be the will of Heaven that promise will be honored. Akio’s father and my uncle have both approved the match.”

“Is that your will as well?”

There was a long silence. Thanks to the curtain I couldn’t tell if she was shocked or merely trying not to laugh.

“What has that to do with the matter, Lord Yamada? You know the law as well as I.”

“Of course, my lady. But that was not my question.”

There was an even longer silence, then she turned to her two attendants. “You are both to withdraw to just beyond the doorway. Keep us in sight, as is proper, but no more.”

They both bowed and obeyed, though without a great deal of enthusiasm. When they were clearly out of earshot, Lady Suzume beckoned me closer. She then pulled the two halves of the curtain apart, only a little, but it was enough that I could finally see the woman kneeling behind the curtain, and the sight was very familiar. Easily explained: her resemblance to her brother was quite striking. She was, in her own way, as beautiful as he was handsome. She also seemed to be his model for the *shikigami* who had served as his messenger earlier.

“I had to see your face, Lord Yamada. Forgive me, but some matters cannot be judged by words alone through a veil.”

I had of course seen the veil as a hindrance to myself, but now I understood that hindrance worked both ways. “I am honored.”

“Not by my own inclination. Your reputation is unsavory at best, but I want you to understand that I will do anything I can to be of service to Lord Akio. Anything, and that includes answering your rather impertinent question, Lord Yamada—yes, it is my will. Akio and my brother grew up together and were inseparable, and so Lord Akio in turn was like an older brother to me. My affection for him has only increased over the years. He is the kindest, gentlest man I have ever known.”

“So you are...content, to be Lord Akio’s wife?”

She did laugh then, demurely covering her mouth with her fan. “‘Content’? Lord Yamada, I have lived in *terror* of some of the marriages my family contemplated for me. Yet when my uncle gave me the news that I was for Akio instead, I counted myself thrice blessed! He is a good man, a friend, and will treat me well. I cannot believe the gods would be so cruel as to offer me such happiness and then snatch it from me before I have even touched it.”

I, on the other hand, had no trouble at all believing that they would do such, and worse besides. I had seen it, and not from nearly as far a distance as I would have liked. Which was another reason I did not want to follow my current path but did not see much in the way of alternatives. I did note that Lady Suzume never said that she loved him, but perhaps in her view that was entirely beside the point.

“Forgive me, Lady Suzume, but you do know that he has other attachments?”

For the space of a dozen heartbeats, there was almost absolute silence. “What of it?” she asked, finally, and I could not imagine the snows of Hokkaido containing any more chill than the one in her voice.

“So you did know.”

“Of course I knew! It was my business to know. What I do not know is why you’re asking me this.”

“Again I must beg your indulgence, but I did ask for a reason.”

She closed the curtain again. “I am not curious about that reason. If there is more to the matter, I suggest you consult the so-called ‘Lady of the Ghost Willow’ for yourself.”

So she even knew her rival’s poetic euphemism. I should have been surprised, but I was not. “No one seems to know who she is.”

I thought she was going to laugh, call me an idiot, or both. “I assume you’ve seen Lord Akio’s poems, or you wouldn’t be asking me about this woman. I believe he also refers to her as ‘Morning Iris.’ Put it together, Lord Yamada.”

I frowned. Morning Iris? Ghost willow? For a moment I just stared at her. Then I almost called *myself* an idiot. “The tree called the ghost willow is ‘yanagi,’ and it’s also a family name. Iris is ‘ayame,’ a flower and also a woman’s name. ‘Lady of the Ghost Willow.’ I’m looking for a woman named Yanagi no Ayame.”

I couldn’t see her smile, but I knew it was there. “So you’re not a complete fool. That’s good to know, since you seem to be our only hope for Lord Akio’s deliverance. You *will* find a way to save him, Lord Yamada. I hope there is no misunderstanding between us on this.”

At that point I did not think there was. "Everything I do now is in the service of Lord Akio's deliverance, Lady Suzume."

"Then I humbly suggest you stop wasting my lord's time. The woman you seek lives in the Fifth Ward. If you need answers, she's more likely to possess them than I."

* * *

The Yanagi family compound had seen better days. The walls had been patched in several places; the gate swung uneasily on rusty hinges. Yet the patching was of fine workmanship, and if the hinges were rusted the gate itself had been recently repaired.

An old woman, whom I soon learned was the only retainer remaining, closed the gate behind us and led me through the dilapidated garden. A very old willow, the sort with long, trailing limbs and known commonly known as a 'ghost willow,' had pride of place there, such that it was, doubtless due to its family association. Such trees were often the haunts of yokai and ghosts, and considered unlucky. When I saw the state of the Lady of the Morning Iris's home, I was inclined to agree.

Whatever lowly condition the family had come to, etiquette itself had not been abandoned. I was led to an audience with Yanagi no Ayame that, at least so far as the procedures and forms were concerned, was little different than the one earlier with Lady Suzume. Only this time, the curtains were not

opened. Yet their threadbare state did give me a glimpses of the woman on the opposite side of the veil from time to time.

She was about Suzume's age or perhaps a bit younger. Her kimono and green Chinese overjacket were of fine quality, and if the kimono was a little worn, the overjacket was obviously new. Ayame herself was a lovely, delicate woman, though with little of the serenity of Lady Suzume.

"Thank you for receiving me. I am Lord Yamada."

Yanagi no Ayame was worried, and she didn't bother to conceal it. "I apologize for our current surroundings, Lord Yamada, but as you see, maintenance has been impossible until recently."

"That is of no consequence. Thank you for receiving me under these circumstances."

"Your messenger barely preceded you within the hour, so I must ask you: is there any further news of Lord Akio?"

"He yet lives, but his health is grave. Surely you knew of this before my messenger arrived?"

"I only knew...." Her voice trailed off. "That is...."

I didn't want to embarrass her, but I didn't have the time to dance around the matter all evening. Nor, I was certain, did Lord Akio. "You only knew that he had not visited or written to you in the last several days, yes?"

“Yes,” she said, so softly I barely heard her. “In my loneliness I was afraid he had forgotten me.”

Attachments among the nobility tended to follow set protocols: in the case of a formal alliance, the man would visit his love openly, and any children produced would be immediately acknowledged. If there was no formal understanding, the visits would of course be more discreet, whatever the outcome, including children. I was fairly certain that Lord Akio’s relationship with the “Lady of the Ghost Willow” fell into the informal second category, whatever their feelings toward each other might be.

“I realize it is both painful and indelicate to speak of such things, so I must ask your forgiveness in advance. I have Lord Akio’s welfare at heart.”

“As do I, Lord Yamada. He has been very kind to me in my troubles, and if I can be of service to him now, I will. But I don’t know what I can tell you that may be of help.”

“Perhaps we may discover something together. Now then: you say you did not know of Lord Akio’s condition. Did you also not know that he is engaged to Lady Fujiwara no Suzume?”

She sighed. “That I did know. He told me himself some weeks ago.”

That got my attention. “If I may ask, what was his purpose in telling you?”

She frowned slightly. “It may surprise you, Lord Yamada, considering the differences in circumstances between me and my lord, but we had...*have* few secrets between us. He told me of his father’s decision because he thought I had the right to know.”

I was beginning to wonder how the *ikiryo* was managing to harm Lord Akio in the first place. The more I heard of the man, the more I expected him to be surrounded by the divine protective glow of saintly purity. I dismissed the thought as unworthy, and wondered if I was beginning to feel jealous of him.

“I could understand one being angry at such news,” was all I said.

Through one of the rips in the curtain, I clearly saw Ayame frown. “Why should I be angry? It is a good match; I know he has always been fond of Lady Suzume and her brother. He often spoke of them. They’ve been friends since they were children.”

“And you had no ambitions of one day occupying the place that Lady Suzume will soon take by his side?”

Ayame was silent for several heartbeats. “That was always impossible,” she finally said, her voice barely audible.

“I can see how your current circumstances would be a hindrance, but are you certain? Did Akio never speak to his family on your behalf?”

Silence again. Then, “Lord Yamada, you misunderstand. When I refer to ‘my circumstances,’ it is not my obvious poverty that is the obstacle. It is the fact that my father and brother were both carried off by a demon of disease when I was fifteen. I have no other brothers or male cousins.”

As with Lady Suzume, again I felt like a complete fool. Under both law and custom, Ayame was unable to speak for herself in these matters. Only her father or any surviving male relative of age could grant her permission to marry. And there was none.

“You are the last of your family, aren’t you?”

“Do not think me despairing, Lord Yamada. I may yet have children, so in some fashion the Yanagi Clan may survive. But I can never formally marry. When the time came, I couldn’t even offer myself to Lord Akio freely. I had to beg him to force me, so that I would not offend my father’s spirit by usurping his prerogative.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, though the word seemed like nothing.

“I do not need your pity, Lord Yamada. I need for you to understand me. If Lord Akio did not marry Suzume, he would marry another. If the gods will that this be the end of our love,

then it will be so. But I do not think that will be the case. Perhaps that hope is an illusion, but I will cling to it. Now. Is there anything else?"

"No, Lady Ayame."

"Then this audience is at an end."

* * *

On the evening of the third day I found Nobu pacing the perimeter of the mansion, his prayer beads in hand. "I'm glad you've returned," he said. "I think we'll need all the aid we can find."

"Did the creature return last night?"

"Yes, but the seals held. It didn't get in. But I warned you that the seals were losing potency, and my messengers have not yet returned from Enryaku Temple. If they don't come after tonight we'll be back to bare exorcism."

"You have no seals at all?"

He grunted. "Only two that I still trust, but that's not enough to secure the chamber where Lord Akio is being tended."

I breathed a silent prayer of thanks to whoever might be listening. "Two may be just enough. Has Lord Kinmei returned?"

“Yes, though he was weary from his journey. I believe he is asleep in Lord Akio’s chambers, since they were not otherwise in use. Shall I awaken him?”

“No, but I would like to check on him. First give me one of the wards, just in case I meet the creature before you do. You take the other and keep watch. I’ll be back shortly.”

There was an attendant at the door. I ordered him to go join the guard around the room where Lord Akio was confined, and when he was gone I slipped inside the room where Lord Kinmei was sleeping. I tarried there for a few moments but was careful not to awaken him, and then I left as quietly as I could and returned to where Nobu and the others kept watch outside Lord Akio’s sick room. On my way back I saw the ghostly figure floating across the ground in the courtyard.

“The *ikiryo* is coming,” I said.

In an instant Nobu had the spirit ward in his hand. “You saw it? Where?”

“Close by. Be prepared.”

The *ikiryo* manifested just beyond the veranda, in manner and appearance exactly the same as I had seen it two nights before. It floated toward Lord Akio’s sick room as if it didn’t even notice us. I wondered if perhaps that was indeed the case. I leaned close to Nobu.

“Once the seal is placed, be prepared to move quickly.”

He started to ask me something, doubtless to inquire what I was talking about, but there was no time. He stepped into the spirit's path and placed his last remaining ward.

“Hsssss....”

I have no idea how the creature hissed like a cat with no visible mouth, but then I halfway expected the thing to be stronger than before. Nonetheless, Nobu's spirit seal performed its duties admirably, and the creature began to fade. I turned to the other priests and attendants nearby as I took a torch out of the hands of one startled servant. “Stay here. Make sure no one approaches Lord Akio until we return. Master Nobu, follow me!”

I saw the confusion on the old man's face but he didn't hesitate. I sprinted down the corridor, across the main wing and back into the west wing of the mansion with Nobu close behind.

“Is Lord Kinmei...in danger as well?” he managed to gasp.

“Extremely so!”

There was a bewildered attendant at the door to Lord Akio's quarters where Lord Kinmei was sleeping. I sent him off to join the guard around Lord Akio's sick room.

“Why did you send him away?” Nobu asked as I slid the door aside.

“So he wouldn't see this,” I said.

Lord Kinmei lay on his bedding right where I'd left him, still fast asleep, only now the *ikiryo* hovered above him, its no-face mere inches from his face. Nobu grabbed his prayer beads and immediately began a rite of exorcism, but I stopped him.

"If you value Lord Kinmei's life, wait," I said.

Nobu stared at me, uncomprehending, but there wasn't time for questions. I darted forward and slapped Lord Kinmei awake.

"What—?"

He started to scramble to his feet but I held him down. "Look, Lord Kinmei. Look at it."

Despite his obvious fear, he did as I commanded, and comprehension finally came. "Is this...?"

"Yes, my lord. It is."

"I-I swear I didn't know. I didn't mean...."

"I know."

I reached forward and plucked Nobu's last remaining spirit seal, the one he'd given me earlier, from Lord Kinmei's chest where I'd left it after I saw the *ikiryo* emerge from him only few minutes before. With the barrier dissolved, the *ikiryo* returned to its rightful place inside Lord Kinmei as the man began to weep.

* * *

I joined the guard surrounding Lord Akio until Nobu returned to fetch me later in the evening. “He’s ready to receive you now.”

“How is he?”

“Devastated, as one might expect. He wants to become a monk.”

“Do you think that’s a wise decision?”

He smiled. “As a rule? Yes. But he’s in no condition to be making that choice now. Besides, his father requires heirs to the clan line and would never allow it. He’s in negotiations for an arranged marriage even as we speak.”

“Hmmm.”

Nobu smiled. “Lord Yamada, I have been a spiritual counselor to both families for a long time. Do you think I didn’t know of Lord Kinmei’s inclinations? This does not change the fact that he is a loyal son and will do what is expected of him. But the *ikiryo*? That I did not know, or even suspect, but at least I understand now why you halted my exorcism.”

I sighed. “I’ve often asked you to trust me during this time, but now it seems that I must trust you, Master Nobu. You are quite correct. With the ‘grave’ of the spirit blocked, an exorcism might have worked too well, and Lord Kinmei would have lost that part of himself forever. I’ve seen that happen once before,

and I'd call the result an improvement. But in this case? I think we would have done irreparable harm."

"Perhaps we already have. Is this really necessary?"

"‘A poisoned wound never heals.’ Lord Akio will recover. Now we must make sure Lord Kinmei does the same."

Lord Kinmei was waiting for us in Akio's quarters. Upon first glance, I'd say "devastated" was an understatement. At that moment Lord Kinmei had to be the most miserable human being I'd ever seen, and that included my own reflection. There were cushions there on the floor by the bedding, and he motioned for Nobu and me to sit.

"I will never forgive myself, Lord Yamada," he said without preamble. "When I think of what I almost did....but I didn't know. How did you?"

"In order to answer that, I must ask you a question or two yet. Are you prepared?"

He took a long breath and then indicated assent. I recited the unfinished poem I'd found in Lord Akio's writing table. "That was yours, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Lord Yamada."

"The allusion to the cut sleeve was obvious, a reference to shared love between men that has been used in poetry since ancient times. But Lord Akio did not return your affections, did he?"

There were tears in Lord Kinmei's eyes. "Lord Akio has great regard for me, as one might a brother. My feelings for him were...are, deeper. No, Lord Yamada, he did not share those feelings."

"There is much I don't understand," Nobu said, "but I realize now that the attacks began only after Akio's engagement to Suzume was formalized. Why was she not attacked instead?"

I smiled then. "Obviously, because Lord Akio's upcoming marriage was an accident of timing, not the cause. Would you agree, Lord Kinmei?"

He looked at the floor. "I had no reason to resent my sister. If Akio had truly returned my affections, the technicality of a wife would not prevent our relationship, just as it does not for other men and women whose affections are elsewhere, whatever their inclinations."

I nodded. "In truth, even after the poem, I tended to suspect that Suzume might be the real culprit. The appearance of the spirit was...ambiguous, and the death of the groom is one sure way to prevent an undesired marriage."

Kinmei sighed. "May I ask how Suzume convinced you of her innocence?"

"At the end of our audience she told me to find a way to save Lord Akio," I said.

Now Nobu scowled. “You believed her? Just because of a plea?”

I almost laughed. “Plea? No, Master Nobu—it was a *command*. With, I might add, implied consequences for failure.”

Kinmei managed a weak smile. “Even as a child, Suzume was never easily nor lightly thwarted.”

I bowed. “Thus your sister thoroughly squelched any suspicion that the match was undesirable in her eyes. With that fact established, the nature of the ghost itself argued against her involvement. If the *ikiryo* had awakened within Lady Suzume, it would certainly have gone after the Lady of the Ghost Willow, not Lord Akio.”

“You found her?” Nobu asked. “Then how did you know that *she* was not the culprit?”

“Suzume’s innocence argued for that of Lord Akio’s lover as well. An *ikiryo* is a very special sort of assassin, conjured in a moment of great emotional upheaval, which by then I was certain that Suzume only experienced *after* the first attacks, not before. The Lady of the Ghost Willow knew about the marriage arrangement long before Lord Akio was attacked, which likewise removed the heat of passion as an issue. I’m afraid, Lord Kinmei, that left only you.”

“I want to die,” he said.

Nobu glared at me, but I just smiled again. “Why? For saving Lord Akio’s life?”

Lord Kinmei stared at me as if I’d slapped him. “For...? I almost killed him!”

I shook my head. “No, my lord. Your resentments, your jealousy, those powerful emotions that sometimes get out of our control almost killed him. But you? That part that is and always remains Fujiwara no Kinmei felt nothing but love and concern for your friend. You almost certainly prevented his death as if you’d shielded him with your own body.”

Tears were streaming down his face now. “How? How did I do this?”

“You summoned *me*. With all due respect to Master Nobu and his associates, if you had not done so, Lord Akio would likely be dead now.”

“That is no more than simple truth,” Nobu said ruefully.

Lord Kinmei would not meet my gaze. “You are kind,” he said.

I shook my head. “No, my lord, I am not. As Master Nobu just pointed out, I have told you the truth, no more and no less. If there is any kindness here, you must find it for yourself.”

“But what must I do now? Akio remains in danger so long as I live!”

Nobu bowed. “With respect, I rather doubt that.”

I nodded. “Again, Master Nobu speaks truly. An *ikiryo* feeds on repressed resentments, unacknowledged emotions. That was why I sealed you off, so it could not return to you without your full awareness. Now you *know*, and that changes everything. I do not believe the creature will return. If you can make peace with yourself now, I guarantee it will not.”

“I will speak to your father,” Nobu said. “I’m sure he will approve a time of retreat at Enryaku Temple. You will not be taking the tonsure, mind, but you can rest and recover and, most of all, satisfy yourself that there is no danger. If anything were to happen, we would be prepared.”

“What do you think, Lord Yamada?” Kinmei asked.

I grunted. “I think you should listen to a man who understands spiritual matters better than I do, and that man is sitting beside me.”

I took my leave of Nobu and Lord Kinmei then. My duties were at an end, but for someone like Master Nobu, they had just begun. I rather thought he had a more difficult mission than mine, but then perhaps his rewards were, eventually, greater.

It wasn’t very late. I looked up into clear evening sky, and then smiled and headed toward Shijo Bridge while there was still time. Lord Kinmei was a man of his word, and I had no

doubt that my payment would arrive soon, and then there would be saké.

Right now, there was a lovely moon.

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Richard Parks lives in Mississippi with his wife and a varying number of cats. He collects Japanese woodblock prints but otherwise has no hobbies as he is, sadly, temporally challenged. His fiction has appeared in Asimov's SF, Realms of Fantasy, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, Fantasy Magazine, Weird Tales, and numerous anthologies including Year's Best Fantasy and Fantasy: The Best of the Year. His third story collection, On the Banks of the River of Heaven, is due out from Prime Books on Nov. 16, 2010.

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THE CURSE OF CHIMÈRE

by Tony Pi

5th of Prairial, Year 120 of the Graalon Revolution

I was late for a film premiere at *Le Théâtre Pégase* and a block away in an alembic cab, when the doors to that grand hall burst open. Ladies and gentlemen in eveningwear spilled forth, running for dear life. A man in a rumpled tailcoat dashed in front of us, forcing my driver to brake hard. I barely braced myself in time against the jolt as we screeched to a stop centimetres away from the hapless fellow.

“Goddesses!” The driver blared his horn at the man, who scampered off with the other patrons fleeing the cinema. “Which flicker’s this, Professor?”

“*The Lioness in Summer*,” I told him.

What had gone wrong inside? Tonight’s premiere was supposed to be the final but finest of Chimère’s trilogy of silent colour films. Katarin Bertho’s invitation had said this film was a pulse-pounding adaptation of the legend of Queen Aliénor and her conniving daughters, but I had not expected this level of terror. I checked my fob-watch: only a half-hour into the presentation. What could have panicked them so?

I climbed out of the cab with walking stick in hand, braving the chaos. I offered the driver a crisp twenty-*graal* note, more than double his hiring fee. “My good man, bring the police, post-haste! And if Sergeant Carmouche is on duty, tell him Tremaine Voss sent you.”

The driver saluted me with the folded bill. “Certainly, Professor!” He engaged the engine and sped off, leaving behind a cloud of alchemical stink.

The marquee, backlit by magnesian flame-jars, billeted three new silent flickers:

CHIMÈRE STUDIOS PRESENTS

IN BRILLIANT COLOURS

A GOAT IN VALHALLA - 3 PRAIRIAL 8 PM

SERPENT OF THE NILE - 4 PRL. 8 PM

THE LIONESSE IN SUMMER - 5 PRL. 8 PM

Each film was based on a creature that comprised the mythical chimera: a clever marketing ploy by Katarin for her studio’s first productions in full-colour. This night should have been a triumph, yet this disastrous turn of events could bring ruin to her company.

I donned my new spectacles and looked for Katarin among the terror-stricken crowd, but there was no sight of her. If only I had found the accursed things earlier, I might have arrived at the *ciné* on time and helped stem this panic. I headed for the

building, praying that no one had been trampled in the commotion, least of all my friend.

The opulent cinema foyer was empty but for two people descending the grand staircase. The exquisite woman was Laure Harbin, a starlet who had captivated audiences last year as Helen of Troy, and was the star of these new colour films. The older man helping her was Bernard Marec, a Chimère designer in his early sixties, whose waxed moustache had a life of its own. We had worked together before on one of Katarin's earlier films on Aigyptian alchemy.

"Wrong way, Voss!" Marec shouted.

"What happened? Where's Madame Bertho?"

Marec wiped his brow with his sleeve. "Madame's tending to the others in the gallery. She's not bleeding from the eyes, Goddesses be praised."

Bleeding eyes? "Show me, Marec."

"No! Forgive me, Voss, but my eyes are my life. May Lady Fortune protect you." He escorted the dazed Harbin towards the exit. For a man with arthritis, he moved with alarming speed.

I dashed upstairs and flung open the doors to the auditorium gallery. I shielded my eyes, not knowing what to expect. "Katarin!"

"Tremaine? Here!" Her voice was straight ahead.

I decided I had to look if I were to help her. Once my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could discern unmoving shapes that might have been people in scattered seats, thickest near the balcony's edge. But instead of music from the pneumatic harmonium, all I could hear was the sound of clicking gears from the projection booth.

On the silver screen, a larger-than-life Laure Harbin garbed in gay medieval costume was admiring her own reflection in a hall of mirrors. This new colour technology showcased aspects of her beauty that black-and-white could never have captured, like the startling shades of her reddish-blond hair. She caressed her own lips, oblivious to the golden lioness darting across the room behind her.

An orange-against-black intertitle explained the scene:

*The Ruby Knight's kiss still haunts
Princess Sabelline, as do his odes
to her beauty. So enrapt is she with
their scheme to steal her mother's throne,
she does not see Queen Aliénor in
the skin of her Lionheart curse.*

How in the world could such a lovely scene as this have caused a stampede?

Katarin was near the balcony rail.

I walked down the aisle, passing frozen spectators whose eyes were riveted to the screen and weeping blood. I shuddered at the thought that the affliction might strike me as well.

Katarin was tending to two unmoving figures in the front row. I recognised the Mayor immediately by his bold mutton-chops, and beside him, the actor Franchot Aucoin, whose lecherous exploits were as legendary off-screen as on. Both men were bleeding as though their eyes had been gouged out and pressed back in.

“I’ve sent for the police,” I said, in part to calm her and in part to distract myself from that horrific thought. “We’ll find a way to help everyone here.”

“Should we move them, Tremaine?”

“Best that we don’t.” I checked the Mayor’s pulse: faint, like his breathing. A new tear of blood rolled down his cheek.

“Are you suffering any symptoms?”

She daubed the Mayor’s forehead with a handkerchief. “Don’t worry about me.”

“I admire your selflessness, Katarin, but the more we know, the faster we might find a cure.” I glanced down at the Stalls level. Again, a scattering of paralysed spectators.

Katarin thought. “Two nights ago, when *A Goat in Valhalla* premiered, I felt as though *I* was the one being watched.

Tonight it was the same unease but stronger, and I'm having difficulty breathing."

I had only just returned to Ys late last night, and had missed the previous two screenings. "Yesterday evening as well?"

Katarin shook her head. "I was here to introduce *Serpent of the Nile*, but Laure and I left to discuss her next role over dinner."

I stroked my chin. "Was the Mayor present for all three films? And Aucoin?"

"They were. Aucoin loves watching himself on-screen, but I never understood that particular allure, personally." Her eyes widened. "You mean, if you watch all three films...."

I nodded. "We have the beginnings of a diagnosis. But it could also be the theatre or a saboteur." Four months ago, the breakthrough in colour film alchemy renewed the rivalry between Chimère and their overseas counterpart, Mandragora Studios. It wouldn't be the first bout of sabotage instigated by Mandragora. "Did you have the same projectionist for all three galas?"

"Philippe? But he's such a sweet boy! I can't see him as a saboteur."

I laid a hand on her shoulder gently. "It's only a theory. Stay here with the Mayor, and shout if you need me." She ex-

pected courage and confidence from me given my past exploits, and I would let her see what she needed, my pounding heart not withstanding.

Katarin nodded.

I exited the auditorium and knocked on the booth door. No answer. As a precaution, I drew the cane sword hidden in my walking stick, then slowly opened the door.

A young man lay on the floor beside the clockwork projector, unmoving in the flickering shadows. I produced a foxfire-amber for a source of steady light and knelt to examine him.

There was an unnatural pallor to his skin, and his wide eyes were caked with dried blood.

The boy was dead.

No one should die so young. “May you find peace with Aeternitas,” I whispered, and gently closed his eyes.

The door creaked open.

I stood and quickened into an *en garde* position, ready for anything. But I needn't have: the strapping policeman who entered was my friend and past pupil, Sergeant Georges Carmouche. Though he still had the same moustache, his hair—which I had once compared to a mop of straw—had been cropped short, and a holstered palmcannon replaced the sabre normally on his belt.

“Carmouche, you’ve no idea how pleased I am to see you!”
I sheathed my sword.

“When I heard it was you, Professor, I reckoned you had the situation well in hand.”

“Not in time to prevent this young man’s death.”

“Poor lad.” Carmouche checked Philippe for himself. “I’d like to move the victims, but I won’t if you think they might suffer as a result.”

“Your caution’s wise, Carmouche—one wrong move and I suspect they might all die. If the film caused the curse, would terminating the projection help them or do more harm?”

Carmouche considered the problem. “Wouldn’t the projectionist see a film more than once, to adjust focus and the like? It could be similar to a poison, and this man died from exposure to a higher dose.”

“Well-reasoned, Carmouche!” I had been helping him hone his skills at deductive reasoning before I left on sabbatical from the museum, and was glad to see our lessons had borne fruit. “Off it is.”

I held my breath and tapped a pin on the projector with my cane’s lion-head pommel. The reels clicked to a halt. Harbin’s still image stayed on the screen until I shuttered the magnesian flame-chamber, plunging the auditorium briefly

into darkness before officers produced their own foxfire-ambers for spot illumination.

We rejoined Katarin. “There’s no easy way to tell you this....” I broke the news of Philippe’s death and held her as she wept.

She and I had met a few years ago during the infamous *Sphinx of Ys* affair, becoming friends thereafter. When she left acting to manage Chimère Studios she hired me as a consultant, on account of my doctorate in Aigyptian archaeology and magic. I cared about her deeply, but we lived very different lives. I was a widower with a son about the same age as she, and she was a rising star trying to escape her troubled past. I had vowed I would never ask for more than her friendship, but in moments like these, I almost regretted my decision.

Carmouche shouted instructions to his men, who began unfolding stretchers for the victims. A team entered the booth to deal with Philippe’s body.

I gave Katarin my handkerchief and went to examine the Mayor and Aucoin again. They were growing colder to the touch. “You must keep them warm,” I told the men, though I did not know if my advice would save the afflicted.

Katarin helped the officers with the Mayor and was about to leave the theatre with them, but Carmouche held her back.

“Madame Bertho, I must insist you remain here at *Le Pégase*. There are questions only you can answer.”

Katarin grudgingly agreed.

I said nothing. I did not like Carmouche turning his attention to Katarin, but he was right. She likely had the clues we needed to solve this mystery. Blame would fall on her if all these men died. As her friend, I had to defend her reputation.

One of the officers came up to Carmouche. “Any other instructions, Inspector?”

I raised an eyebrow. *Inspector?*

“See to the theatre lights, please, Sergeant Joncour,” said Carmouche.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’d been promoted, dear boy?” I shook his hand. “Congratulations!”

Carmouche smiled. “It happened only two days ago. Thank you for all your help.”

“I wish we had time to properly celebrate, *Inspector*, but there remains much to piece together if we are to help those who fell ill.”

A few steps away, Katarin all but slumped into a theatre seat, most unlike the vibrant woman she was. I had never seen her so weak before, but then she had viewed two of the films.

Oh, Katarin! “We’ll stop this, I promise,” I told her.

Please, I thought, let my words be truth.

* * *

Crawling on my hands and knees, I studied the ornate hieroglyphs adorning the leg of a balcony seat, the same design on all the chairs. I could translate most of the inscriptions except for the shadowed cartouche near the base.

“More light, please, Carmouche,” I said.

Carmouche knelt and held the foxfire-amber closer.

I pushed my spectacles higher on my nose. The indecipherable lines resolved into sharp symbols under the added magical illumination. “Perfect. Thank you.” I pushed to my feet. “It’s an ancient incantation from the Tartessos Papyrus, but a benevolent one meant to cure digestive pains.”

Katarin, who was watching from an adjacent row, frowned. “Then the theatre’s not at fault?” She considered her auditorium again, from the marble atlantes supporting the balcony to the dome of golden alchemical symbols. We had examined them all, but nothing among them carried markings that might cast a curse.

“That’s my conclusion, yes.” I steadied myself with a hand on a chair back and reclaimed my walking stick and my amber. “Your designers should have consulted me. I give quite a bone-chilling lecture on the dangers of copying magical symbols haphazardly, or so my students tell me.” I had faced enough ancient ghosts and curses to know first hand.

“I would have, if you hadn’t been in Lyonesse. What about a saboteur?”

“It remains a possibility.”

“But *the shape of a missing fossil can be deduced by the pieces we already have*,” Carmouche said, quoting what I had taught him. “The projectionist’s death strongly suggests that the films are at fault.”

I smiled, remembering the nights at the museum when Carmouche would help me reconstruct *archaeosphinx* skeletons while I explained how archaeological methods could be applied to detection.

“But our actors turned in the best performances of their careers,” Katarin said. “The locales were breathtaking and the footage dazzling. When we screened a few scenes for our investors, oh, how they wept, cheered, and laughed! I beg you, Inspector, investigate the possibility of sabotage by Mandragora Studios.”

“Do you have any proof, Madame?” Carmouche asked.

“No, but Mandragora released their own colour film a month ago: *The Thirteenth Labour of Heracles*. Everyone could tell they rushed it out. My sources tell me they dread Chimère trumping them again.”

“Katarin, I understand your reluctance to blame the movies, but Carmouche is right: Philippe’s death points toward the films. Maybe arcane symbols are embedded in the footage.

“Or spirits from beyond were captured on film. It’s happened once before. When I was young, I sailed with the preternaturalist Henry Kitto to the Distant Orient in search of merlion fossils.” I thought back to an incident during those golden days on black sand beaches and evenings of bonfires and shadow-plays. “Professor Kitto accidentally captured two phantom tigers in a photograph, which brought the expedition a slew of bad luck. It took months to figure out what had happened and freed the trapped spirits.”

Carmouche snapped his fingers. “Wait! *Sometimes a quizzing glass will magnify details the eye overlooked*,” he said, quoting another of my teachings.

“You want to go over the theatre with a magnifying glass?” I asked.

“No. We overlooked the *lens*,” Carmouche said. “All three films were projected through the same lens.”

I understood. Camera lenses were ground from crystal, a natural receptacle for containing and concentrating magical energies. I ran through the scenario: “Suppose a saboteur etched a mystical symbol on the lens. When the symbol gets

projected onto the screen might curse everyone watching! But wouldn't people see it?"

"Not necessarily," Katarin said. "Flaws in the glass don't always show up when light passes through a lens. Some distortions are subtle enough to escape notice."

Carmouche nodded. "No one would realise the faint variations in light on screen were actually a curse."

We hurried to the projection booth and examined the main crystal lens. Alas, it was flawless. The projector hadn't been tampered with, as far as we could tell.

Carmouche started rewinding the film reel. "What if we watched these flickers elsewhere, using a different projector? If the curse begins to affect us...."

"...then we can rule out both the theatre and this lens as the culprits," I said, finishing his thought. "May we use the screening room at your studio, Katarin?"

"We don't know all the risks," Katarin protested. "What if you're paralysed like the others?"

"Paralysis should happen only if I watch all three films. Didn't you watch only two? Two should be enough to establish any hidden patterns. If necessary, Carmouche can watch the final film to confirm."

"It's too dangerous." She held out her pale hands. "It eats at my strength even now."

I clasped her right hand in mine. “Which is why I must do this for you, Katarin.”

* * *

Carmouche’s new alembic carriage spewed sweeter fumes than the cab I arrived in. We sped up the Promenade, heading away from the Seawall towards the docklands where the studio was. Katarin, in the front with Carmouche, gripped her seat with both hands, whereas I sat in the back with Sergeant Joncour, deep in thought.

“Madame, who worked on all three films?” Carmouche asked.

“Cast or crew?”

“Both.”

“With three tight production schedules, we had to deploy all our staff evenly amongst all three films,” Katarin said. “Only two cast members were involved in all three: Laure Harbin and Franchot Aucoin.”

“Is that everyone?”

Katarin’s cheeks pinkened. “And myself, Inspector...I had a cameo in each. But I’d hardly curse my own productions, would I?”

“Maybe not *intentionally*,” Carmouche said. We turned west onto Old Ramp Road, heading for sea-level. “Madame, you seem eager to blame Mandragora, which makes me wonder

if you're deflecting attention away from your own employees. Is there, perhaps, something you aren't telling us?"

Katarin hesitated.

"By Lady Truth, Katarin, lives are at stake," I begged.

At last, she answered us. "Early in the filming of *Serpent of the Nile*, Laure's costume came apart during the seduction scene, and the camera caught her accidental exposure on film. The assistant blamed Bernard Marec for taking liberties with practicality in his wild designs. I gave her *carte blanche* to fix the costume, which she did, and we reshot the scene. However, we discovered later that the embarrassing footage had mysteriously disappeared."

"Franchot Aucoin?" Carmouche guessed.

Katarin nodded. "Aucoin stole the clip. I only found out last night when poor Laure burst out in tears at dinner. Aucoin's been using the footage to have his way with her for months. If she refused, he would ruin her career."

"That scoundrel!" I cried.

Carmouche sighed. "She should have come to the police."

"And risk a scandal? Not Laure!" Katarin insisted. "I comforted her and told her to keep a brave face, while I look for a way to get that footage back."

The carillons around the city sounded the Hour of Tranquillitas as our horseless carriage crested the slope.

“Could Miss Harbin be taking matters into her own hands, to hurt Aucoin?” I suggested. “What if she avoided the second movie on purpose, using you as her alibi?”

Katarin shook her head. “Harm so many others, just to strike back at one man? I don’t believe it.”

“Who’s Bernard Marec?” Carmouche asked.

“Our foremost designer, who’s been with the company since it started,” Katarin replied. “I put him in charge of all aspects of design for *Serpent of the Nile*.”

It meshed with my memories of Marec, who struck me as a creative man who loved his work. When I worked with Marec on the set for the Aigyptian alchemy film, at Katarin’s request, he often pushed for flashy, anachronistic designs while I aimed for historical authenticity. We’d joke as we fought over the research materials in the museum library, him teasing me about my lame leg and I him about his crippling arthritis.

We pulled up to the gates of Chimère Studios and exited the horseless. I mentioned my encounter with him and Miss Harbin at *Le Pégase*. “Maybe he’s working with Harbin?”

“But Marec was only involved in one film,” Katarin said. “What would be his motive?”

“We can speculate endlessly about motives, but the answers will come from the films themselves,” Carmouche said. “Sergeant Joncour, take the horseless and post guards around

Aucoin. Then find Bernard Marec and Laure Harbin. I'll have questions for them both when we're done here."

Joncour drove away.

Katarin led us to the screening room at Chimère, a thirty-seat theatre split by a narrow aisle, with a state-of-the-art clockwork projector hulking at the far end. Carmouche gave me a hand mounting the first reel, *A Goat in Valhalla*.

"Ever see a film in colour before, Tremaine?" Katarin asked.

"Not beyond what I saw at *Le Pégase*." Although Mandragora's *Thirteenth Labour* had been released in Lyonesse, between my work on the Leolithic Wonders exhibit and my guest lectures on *archoleon* extinction, I had no time to indulge in the *ciné* as I once had.

"Then be astonished or terrorized, but above all, be careful," she said.

"Shout if you need us," Carmouche added.

"And call me if she worsens, Carmouche." I took off my tailcoat and draped it around Katarin's shoulders.

"Don't forget these." Katarin took my spectacles from the coat's inner pocket and carefully fit the pair onto my face before she closed the door.

The lights dimmed, shrouding the room in deepening shadow.

Had I chosen the right course of action? Or would I doom myself by watching these films?

I took a deep breath, gave the wind-up key one final turn, and pulled a pin, setting the reels a-spin.

The studio's production logo projected onto the screen: a chimera mascot rearing into a *rampant dexter* stance. But instead of familiar gray-tones, the chimera's fur rippled gold, its goat and lion tongues flashed pink between its teeth, and the scales of the viper tail glistened jungle-green. I gripped my seat in awe as the beast-heads mimicked roar, bleat, and hiss—all in frustrating silence. If only the alchemists could master sound!

A Goat in Valhalla starred Franchot Aucoin in his most famous role as 'The Goat', a licentious Hyperborean skald. Aucoin was a genius at physical comedy, proving Chimère's strategy of capitalising on the successes of *A Goat at the World Tree* and *A Goat Among Giants* was sound: Aucoin would bring in legions of fans in this infamous role.

I watched the bawdy comedy play out. The Goat's slapstick pursuit of the Valkyries was inspired, and the clever script even made colours crucial to the plot. But I couldn't relax and simply enjoy the flicker, and searched each scene for runes and spirits.

Something *was* sapping my vitality, bit by bit, but it was so subtle that anyone not expecting it would dismiss it as tired-

ness from sitting still too long. I couldn't think of any spells or charms to counter it, and that worried me.

In the second act, the Goat arrived at a Silver Door covered with runes, but the shots never lingered long enough for me to decipher them. I made a note to ask Katarin if I could examine the props.

Laure Harbin appeared in the next scene, in the role of the youngest Valkyrie. Though I was struck by how well colour brought out her true beauty, now that I knew about her and Aucoin it was difficult to watch them interact on screen.

Katarin made her cameo as another Valkyrie after the final battle. In a touching scene where she collected the soul of the Goat's faithful companion, she convinced me she belonged in front of the camera. But I could not oust from my mind the fact that a Valkyrie was the spirit of a slain warrior, and that Katarin played on-screen one of the dead.

I called Katarin and Carmouche back to hear my analysis. "No ghosts in the film that I could see, but I'd like to examine any props with runes on them."

Katarin nodded. "Everything's kept in Warehouse Three. Would you like to rest before we continue, Tremaine?"

"No. I won't let this curse get the best of me."

"I'll stay for this film and keep you company," Carmouche said. "Two sets of eyes are better than one."

Katarin left the room while Carmouche and I prepared the next reel: *Serpent of the Nile*.

“Just between you and me, Professor, do you think Madame Bertho resents Laure Harbin for taking her place in the limelight?” Carmouche asked quietly.

“Carmouche! She wouldn’t.”

“I have to consider every possibility. Maybe she doesn’t *consciously* wish Miss Harbin harm, but her repressed envy might be fuel for the curse.”

“Let’s eliminate all other possibilities first,” I said.

The chimera mascot sequence again began the film, and it was Carmouche’s turn to be amazed by the brilliant colours. “Astounding!”

Laure Harbin played the lead in *Serpent of the Nile*, and her performance as the vengeful daughter of a murdered Aigyptian pharaoh captivated me from the start. Aucoin played a minor role as a jolly slave, providing comic relief in this otherwise sombre tragedy. Unlike the previous film, they never appeared in the same scene.

As the film played, my slight discomfort welled into a nameless dread; my body ached as though a year of my life had been ripped through my skin. I gasped for air, fearful that I had condemned myself to an early death.

Halfway through, when Harbin danced for the usurper's son in a *most* revealing costume, my cheeks flushed. I tried to focus on the hieroglyphs and sphinx statues in the background instead. During the bathing scene, Katarin appeared briefly as one of the handmaidens. But tantalizing glimpses aside, I was still on the hunt for the source of the curse, as was Carmouche. I didn't expect to find Hyperborean runes in a flicker set in Aigypyt, but films were rarely perfect recreations of a specific time period.

Even though the film ended on a powerful note, I was relieved it was over. Carmouche weathered the film better than I did, though he kept rubbing his left shoulder as though it was sore.

Katarin returned. "Anything?"

"A few anachronisms here and there, and two hieroglyphs I'd like to revisit, but none of the same runes from the first film," I said. "Though I must say, Katarin, there *were* gross historical inaccuracies with Miss Harbin's costume."

"Ah, but no one will forget how well she wore it," Katarin said, a tinge of envy in her voice. Was Carmouche right? "It'll immortalize her...*if* anyone ever sees the film again."

"Only *The Lioness in Summer* left." Carmouche stroked his moustache. "Whatever it is, it should be in the first half-hour, to trigger the panic."

I nodded. “It certainly narrows down where we look next.”

Then, the answer hit me like a one-tonne golem. One thing did appear in all three films...or more precisely, *before* them. I’d grown so used to it at the *ciné* that I forgot all about it.

“The studio mascot!” I struggled to my feet. “You filmed a new opening with a new chimera, didn’t you, Katarin?”

“We had to...the old sequence was in black-and-white, and the animated clay model simply couldn’t convey realistic colours.” Her eyes widened. “Goddesses, Bernard Marec was responsible for it!”

“How did he do it?” I asked.

“Taxidermy, with hidden gears inside, I think.”

Marec had built the studio mascot using animals that were once alive. The thought sent shivers through my body.

“Necromancy. It’s three animal corpses stitched together to mimic a beast of magic. There’s power in that.” I took a deep breath. “The chimera cursed the opening sequence, which is why it took effect so early in the third movie.”

Katarin understood. “That’s why the pre-screened scenes weren’t dangerous—the mascot clip was spliced in later! And Philippe would’ve seen that chimera more than anyone else. Framing, focusing, threading the film—”

“Maybe the chimera’s bleeding us.” I thought about the victims’ bloody eyes. “Ever hear of shadow-plays? Silk screen,

puppets and their shadows? They're a form of entertainment as popular in the Orient as films, but older and more ritualistic, involving prayers and offerings of food to the spirit. The first shadow cast in a shadow-play was always that of the World Tree, blessing the performance to come, and the same image closed the show."

"But instead of a World Tree blessing, the chimera cursed the films?" Carmouche asked.

"Exactly. The longer you watch a cursed film, the more lifeforce you lose. Philippe would have taken many wounds after seeing the chimera many times but not 'bled' to death until the third film was well underway."

"Then we must destroy that chimera to break the curse," Carmouche concluded.

I grabbed my walking stick. "Take us to it, Katarin."

* * *

I'd been to the studios on numerous occasions but had never seen inside Warehouse Three, a hulking gray building at the far end of the lot. It took longer than usual to walk there, with Katarin and I still suffering from a twice-viewed curse. Strangely, my lethargy was slowly fading while Katarin remained weak.

As Katarin unlocked the door, I took my foxfire-in-amber out of its cherrywood box and mentioned my returning strength.

“Same for me. What do you think it means?” Carmouche asked.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “We may have overlooked something.”

The warehouse was dark but for a glimmer of light near the other end. I held my foxfire-amber high, illuminating the rows of movie props. I recognised a few iconic set pieces in the shadows: a two-storey Tarot card depicting Ankou, the personification of Death in Graalon myth; the massive Bronze Gong of Shangdu; and the colossal clockwork griffin, star of a series where it terrorised the Great Undrowned Cities of the World.

“The light’s from Marec’s workshop,” Katarin whispered. “That’s where he keeps the chimera.”

Carmouche drew his palmcannon. “Go back to your office and lock the door, Madame.”

“No.” Katarin was adamant. “My company, my responsibility.”

“Then stay well behind us,” Carmouche said. He and I led the way deeper into the warehouse, with Katarin a distance behind us. The row we walked down held props from *Lioness in Summer*: a rack of spears and mirrors from the Hall of Mirrors

scene, arrayed facing each other. The mirrors magnified the light from the amber, creating the illusion of infinite corridors as we passed.

At the four-way juncture, we turned right and then left onto the adjacent row. An open work area, illuminated by a gem-dish of foxfire-ambers on a cluttered table, lay at the end of the row of obelisks and sarcophagi. Bernard Marec stood behind the table clutching a glassy object in his left hand. When he saw us, he raised his free hand and flicked his wrist.

The shelves to our left came crashing down on us. Carmouche pushed me forward in the nick of time, but I hit the ground hard, and the foxfire-in-amber skittered out of my hand. I glanced back: Carmouche was half-buried under the avalanche of boxes. Luckily, Katarin had been far enough behind us that the shelf missed her.

Then I saw the chimera.

The beast stood in the adjacent row, its lowered goat's horns undoubtedly what toppled the shelves. The lion's head clicked its jaws open in an odd staccato motion while the serpent's tail stayed motionless.

"Katarin, run!" I shouted.

She turned to flee, but the chimera darted behind her with the speed of a live lion, barring her way. When it stopped moving, it remained as still as taxidermic art.

Without turning, I called to Marec. “Are you going to kill us?”

“No one was supposed to die!” The chimera trembled in time with his shaking voice. “I only meant to steal enough life to give me back my strength. My body’s breaking down, Voss. This arthritis, these failing eyes—I won’t become a prisoner of my own body.”

So that was it: he stole strength from others to stave off his illnesses! That explained his speed at *Le Pégase*.

I turned towards him. “But you took too much. People are hurt, and a young man’s dead.”

Would he kill us now to keep his stolen life energy? Yes, if he were desperate enough. But if the same power animated the chimera like a puppet, then the puppeteer might need to see us to attack with it.

“What of you, Tremaine?” Marec said. “Wouldn’t you want to feel young again, and walk as though you’d never injured that leg? I can teach you how.”

Oh, to be able to run again! How the thought tempted me. But the cost to my humanity would be too great.

“How’d you do it?” I asked. “A spell from a book in my museum?”

“Exactly. I needed a way of drawing enough lifeforce all at once from the audience, so I made a taxidermic chimera and

used stop-motion photography to simulate its life and motion. The viewer's eye interprets the fast-moving frames and thinks the dead model's alive, their energy in fact *willing* it to life."

"Clever, making the audience unwitting participants in their own doom."

I finally recognized the crystalline object in his hand: a polished lens. But if it wasn't the projector's lens...it must belong to the camera that had filmed the chimera.

"That's why you were at the theatre, wasn't it? The chimera's physically too far from *Le Pégase*, but you could capture the audience's life energy if you were there with that lens."

"You have it," Marec admitted. "I etched the spell on the lens I used to shoot the stop-motion."

The chimera model owed the illusion of motion to the ensorcelled lens, so any lifeforce torn from the audience would flood into the crystal. That explained why Carmouche and I had regained our strength soon after the screening room viewing; the crystal lens wasn't physically close enough to trap our life energy.

"You had to come back for the chimera, didn't you? It's a linked set, the lens and the model. Brilliant."

"They say that photography's the art of stealing souls, but *my* art has stolen years of—"

As he was gloating, I reached out with my walking stick, hooked back my foxfire-in-amber with the lion's head and scooped it up, hiding its light. The area around me turned pitch black. I could still see Marec but hoped he had lost sight of Katarin and me.

“—Vooossssss!”

Under cover of darkness, I moved and crouched, trying to ignore the pain that flared in my leg. I managed just in time: the chimera crashed into the spot that I had vacated.

Marec beckoned the chimera back towards him with a gesture, and as it padded past me, its fur brushed against my hand.

Marec grabbed a glowing amber from the gem-dish and made its viper's mouth bite it. He sent the puppet back towards me, now bearing its own light source.

Time to run. Marec would have to move to keep both the chimera and I in line of sight. I uncovered the amber to light my escape and hobbled at top speed into the next aisle, fighting the ache in my leg—

—and came to a dead stop when I entered the corridor of mirrors.

Photography was the art of stealing souls, Marec had said. But I knew my anthropology well enough to know the su-

perstition came from a similar taboo against mirrors. A mirror was said to trap a creature's soul as reflection within itself.

I turned and saw Marec coming down the shadowed aisle, sending the puppet chimera after me. The reflection of the great beast filled the expanse of the mirror next to me.

With as much strength as I could muster, I smashed the mirror with the pommel of my walking stick moments before the beast reached me. As the mirror shards fell, the force animating the chimera peeled from its frame like a glove. The lifeless puppet skid to a halt at my feet.

"How...?" Marec rushed towards the fallen chimera but didn't see a rune-carved spear extending at ankle height from under a shelf. He tripped, and the crystal lens flew from his hand, smashing to pieces against the floor. "No!"

I stepped over the inert chimera, drew the blade from its cane sheath, and put Marec at the point of my sword. He grew wizened before my eyes.

"Mirrors steal souls as well, Marec. It's said that if a mirror breaks while you're reflected in it, it damages your soul. You imbued your chimera with stolen lifeforce, a pale imitation of a soul at best." I ground fragments of the life-stealing lens under the heel of my shoe.

Katarin and a bruised Inspector Carmouche emerged from the adjacent aisle.

“Well done, Professor,” Carmouche said. “Bernard Marec, you’re under arrest for murder and several counts of attempted murder.” He grabbed a length of rope from a prop shelf and tied Marec’s hands.

I once thought Marec had a decent man. It might have been a façade, I supposed, but I sincerely believed he had not strayed until the spectre of death changed him. For the sake of his soul, I hoped he remembered who he was, and who he could still be.

Katarin touched my face with a hand, her touch warming my cheek. “My strength seems already to be returning. Will the others recover as well?”

“In time, Katarin.” I turned my head, my lips grazing her fingers. It was all I dared. “In time.”

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in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* #11 and [the BCS anthology The Best of Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Year One](#). "The Curse of Chimère" is the third stand-alone tale in the Leolithic Age setting (following "Sphinx!" in *Ages of Wonder* and "Night of the Manticore" in *Abyss & Apex*). His stories can also be found in such diverse venues as *Writers of the Future*, *Clarkesworld Magazine*, and *Intergalactic Medicine Show*.

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THE GIRL WHO TASTED THE SEA

by Sarah L. Edwards

Pigeons and sea swallows nested at the top of the house, under its eaves and sloping gables. Below, at the meeting of masonry and cliff, lived the gulls and the salt shrifts. Sometimes Abby would climb down to the cypress trees sprung from stone and watch the shrifts as they wheeled and dove into the surf. Then up they soared again to the green-eyed, stump-winged babies bawling from stone nests, with never a glance for the green-eyed daughter of the house, perched above.

Down below even the clumps of cypress, Abby guessed there were limpets and hanging clams like in the ricepaper paintings, though of course she could not climb down so far even if she were allowed. And below that there were two massive trunks of stone on which stood the whole house, gables and cypress and Abby and all.

And below *that* was the sea.

The sea, Abby thought, must be like if she could strain all the air smelling of salt and seaweed through a cheesecloth and then squeeze the drippings into a bucket with a brim wide as the horizon. Yes, that was the sea. It was only natural that a girl

born squalling into the world just a few hundreds of feet above its surface and living her entire brief life in its breezes would want to kiss it, taste it, wash her hair in it until her pinewood-blond curls were brown as the floating kelp. Only natural.

And so, when the stryke flew wheeling in from the north coast to deliver abstract news of battles and bandits and the sale of thirty-seven bolts of hand-spun Mowerian silk, it was only natural that Abby would sneak from her nursery-turned-playroom-turned-solarium down into the eyrie where the stryke was bedded. She brought crumbles of cheese and three black sardines folded in a napkin. The stryke's eyes flashed even wider and yellower when it saw her, but it didn't screech, and when she opened the napkin and held out the first sardine it took it with one hook-nailed hand, tossed it, and snapped it from the air with its hooked beak.

"Will you take me down to the water?" Abby said.

The hand, reaching toward the napkin, pulled back.

"No, it's all right. You can have the fish anyway." She held out a second sardine, waiting, until the stryke took it.

"Please, will you take me down the water? I've never been there before."

The stryke cocked its head, no different than a gull when she tempted it with a bread crumb. It gave a questioning squawk.

“Not far, you know. Just down to where the pillars stand in the water. I’ve never seen them, but the painting in the dining hall shows. They’re like legs that could walk away and take us anywhere—though they never do. They can’t, I suppose. Have you seen them?” She reached suddenly and caught the stryke’s hand.

The stryke considered, nodded.

“Please, won’t you take me? You can have the cheese and the fish for your journey and I’ve the key to loose your cuffs”—she pointed to the single, clanking chain that stretched from the wall to the stryke’s wrist. “And you can fly out tonight if you like, instead of tomorrow.” She hadn’t meant to promise this; doubtless there were messages to be returned in the stryke’s carrying sack to those mysterious names and places up the coast. But— “Please. Let me touch the water.”

The stryke paused longer this time. It raised its beak and shook it side to side, and Abby caught the odor of the oilfish three days past that the sailor boy had fed it for its troubles.

“Please.”

The stryke clucked softly and held out the bound wrist. Abby dug the key from her apron pocket and sprang the lock. Swiftly the stryke folded the crumbles and the last sardine into a bundle, knotted it, and slipped it into the carrying sack. Then it stood—oh, it was taller than she’d thought, when she’d spied

it from the corner of dining hall. It was taller even than her father, she thought now, maybe half as high again. Its wings still folded, it strode the few feet to the eyrie door and swung it open to the night sea air. Then it took Abby in its arms as easily as Nurse had done when there still was a nursery and it stepped from the eyrie's edge.

Abby's mouth was open to scream, but no sound came as they plunged towards the surf. Then with a soft snap the wings opened and they hung suddenly in the air, stryke and girl, only halfway down the house. They began to circle, spiraling as the shrifts did but in wider, slower sweeps. The last lights of sunset glinted over the water. So calm it had looked from above, the waters temperate and orderly, but as they slowly dropped Abby could hear the waves heaving and breaking.

A lift of a wing and their circle encompassed the whole of the house. They swung around it and Abby could see them now, the twin pillars of stone upon which she'd stood all her life. Suddenly she was dropping nearer, nearer, and then they dove and landed flat in the carved hollow in one pillar just a foot above the tide. The stryke set her down, upright, and she ignored the trembling in her legs as she crouched at the edge and dipped her fingers in the water.

Salt! It tasted of salt as much as the sardines did, but with some wilder flavor, too—the seaweed, perhaps.

She cupped seawater and splashed it on her face, and laughed. And then gave a sudden cry as the stryke leapt from the ledge and flapped upward.

It could not leave her here! It couldn't. How would she get up? She'd never known a tide before, but she knew of them, and the brimming pools etched in the walls at her back told her the water would rise above where she stood.

But she hadn't told the stryke to take her back. She had bargained badly, and now would it only honor the word of the bargain, and not the spirit? Cunning creatures, they were, that was what the cook had said. And hadn't the sailor boy told of a pair of nesting strykes that killed their eyrie master and fled?

And then the beat of wings returned and the stryke scrambled again at the ledge and stepped tuck-winged into the hollow. She turned to scold it, but her eye caught on light in the water and she turned back again....

A girl rose from the brine and clutched at the hollow's edge with one hand, the other lifting a lantern flat like a seed pod and glowing a wet green light. Water streamed from her sea-black hair. She barked to the stryke and then she tossed her head, twice, keeping her eyes on Abby.

This girl wasn't like the stryke, trained to docility by a mage's charms and whispers. She was wild—even Abby, who'd never met such a being, could see that. Her eyes glistened mad-

ly with flecks of peridot and gold, and they repelled and invited and saw Abby as she was sure she'd never been seen before. They mocked her.

Abby crept forwards, newly trembling, and then suddenly the girl let go the ledge and seized Abby's arm. Pulling her close, she reached up and kissed her once on one cheek, once on the other with lips cool and wet. Then the girl laughed a barking sort of laugh and flung herself backwards into the sea, and instantly she was gone, her light blinking out a moment after.

Abby's cheeks were damp where the girl's lips had been. She rubbed at one and licked her fingers, and they tasted briny and salt-wet.

Abby rose. "Up, now?" she said. She had seen the pillars of her house and met a wild sea girl, and that was enough strangeness. Nor was the fear entirely eased that the stryke might leave her stranded at sea's edge. But it didn't; at her words it cradled her again, hopped from the ledge, and climbed wingbeat by wingbeat to the heights. She pointed to her bedroom balcony and it landed there just long enough to set her down. Then it was gone.

Early, early next morning she returned the key to the rack where it hung, and then all the day she kept to the playroom while her father stormed of the lost stryke. She drew pictures of

the sea and the girl and her lantern, though she tore them all to bits and threw them from the balcony when she was done. She knew they mustn't be found.

It was only later she understood that the stryke had flown without its guiding charm, the bit of magic that kept it flying down the north coast and up, down and up. It wouldn't be caught by humankind again. She hadn't understood that before, but she wasn't sorry.

It was later still that she understood what the sea girl had done when she'd kissed her, what binding charms were loosed and what new charms bound. For Abby was a girl no longer of the house, but of the sea, and when she was tall and grown it would be the sea she served.

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Sarah L. Edwards writes science fiction and fantasy, reads a lot, knits (anybody need a scarf?), and wonders what to do with this math degree she just got. Her fiction has previously appeared in Writers of the Future XXIV, Aeon Speculative Fiction, and Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine. Her

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MORE FULL OF WEEPING THAN YOU CAN UNDERSTAND

by Rosamund Hodge

During the later part of the war, the government issued a pamphlet on how to recognize changelings. Violet read it (*a green tinge of the features; propensity to cruelty*) and laughed. The real signs had been far more pervasive, far less clear. Sometimes she thought she had only realized she wasn't human when she was fourteen. Sometimes she thought she had always known.

The external, everyday things were always easy. She liked French, hated mathematics, and complained about her governess. She sailed toy boats with Thomas, bridled when he was patronizing, and once threw her oatmeal at him. She cried when a picnic was rained out, when she fell and scraped her knee, and when her governess disciplined her.

Other things were harder. None were inexplicable.

She did well at her piano lessons, but all music was only a string of notes to her. She supposed this was what Papa meant when he talked about his old tutor who was tone-deaf.

There were nights she climbed out her window into the garden because she could not *bear* to be inside another moment, and she could never go back in till she had danced herself breathless. Mama shook her head and said that Aunt Maisie, too, had been a tomboy.

She didn't cry when her kitten or Grandmama died. She poked the kitten and she stood respectfully at the funeral, but both times she was curious, then bored. Thomas had once read her a poem that said hopeless grief was passionless.

She *knew* she was different. She knew everyone else felt the same.

Then the summer she was fourteen, they stayed with Papa's family in the countryside. It was the last summer before the first rumours of the war began; a summer of sunshine and slight, warm breezes, croquet and boating and tea on the lawn. Thomas was back from his first year at Oxford, and he spent more time with her than he had in years. They went horseback-riding and translated Latin together; he told her stories about life at Balliol, and she showed him how much her drawing had improved.

But one bright summer evening, everyone was busy and Violet took her sketchbook to the river alone. She settled in her favourite spot, on a rock half-hidden by drooping willow branches, and began to sketch the leaves. At first there was no

sound except the trickle of the river and the scratch of her pencil on paper, but after a while she realized that the river-noise had a rhythm and a tune and *meaning*, as no song ever had.

Beyond the willow-branches, the river was silver with the sunset light. In the middle, her bare feet just brushing the surface, stood a tall woman with pale hair and pale eyes. She wore a white dress with lace at the neck and wrists, as one might wear to a tea-party; but streaming out from her shoulders were great, half-transparent butterfly wings that shimmered blue and cream and pink and deep, royal purple as they drifted open and shut.

Violet stared, reduced to a racing heart and dizzy head and not a scrap of thought.

The woman smiled at her and said, "My child."

Her heart still beat fast, but the fear was gone as she watched the woman step across the water to her. When the woman's toes touched the pebbles on the shore, Violet said, "You're my mother."

"Yes," said the woman. Even standing on the drab shore, light clung to her hands and the folds of her skirt. "And you have been in exile, but I shall show you how to come home."

She cupped Violet's chin with cool fingers and tilted her head up; Violet closed her eyes and stood, sketchbook falling to the ground. She supposed this moment should be difficult, that

she should be thinking of her family and home, but it was not hard at all. Not at all.

Cold fingers brushed her back, and her shoulders loosened. She knew that her wings were blossoming; she could feel their colours in her throat. When she opened her eyes, the world was different: shadows were longer but filled with hidden glimmers, and the house was hazed with mist but she could see leaves on a tree half a mile away.

“Come across the water,” said her faery mother.

* * *

Violet returned to the house as the grandfather clock in the parlour chimed seven; in the human world, she had not been gone over a quarter of an hour. Her wings were hidden and her hair, which had flown free and tangled in Faery, was neatly braided. She felt as if she had been opened up and re-made, then sewn back together and wrapped in her normal clothes.

Thomas leaned out of the study and smiled across an invisible infinity. “I say, Violet—I’m reading a bit of Virgil; would you like to help?”

It had been easy to leave, and it was easy to follow him into the study and laugh at how many declensions he had forgotten. That evening felt almost real, just as all the evenings before had felt almost false.

* * *

For the first few years, she only passed information, while the reports of faery incursions began to grow. Then—when they went to London for Violet’s introduction into society—three things happened. The faeries turned the Prime Minister’s fingers into twigs and his eyes into acorns. Papa died. And Thomas discovered what she was.

There was a curfew after the attack on the Prime Minister, but it made no difference to Violet’s family. They were all staying at home anyway, listening to Papa’s breath rattle and guessing how much longer he would last. Violet had wondered a few times if she would need to hurt her foster-family, but in the end it was a purely human sickness that killed him. All she had to do was stand by and give Mama damp cloths to wipe his forehead.

There was a song called “Swans at Sunset” that to her was just a string of notes with a sentimental name; but Papa loved it, and she played it every evening, pounding the keys so the sound would carry to the sick-room. As she worked through the measures, she remembered Papa’s throaty laugh, and teaching him to play patty-cakes, and handling his rock collection as he told her about where he had found the pieces.

The man she remembered didn’t seem to have much to do with the withered body upstairs, and neither of them had anything to do with her. She spent hours listening to the clock and

hoping he would die before the next chime so the waiting would be over. But she still played “Swans at Sunset”; maybe she had picked up the habit of love, if not the substance.

When Mama finally came downstairs and told her it was over, Violet said, “Oh,” and went to pay her respects, bubbling inside with happiness because she could spend the rest of the evening undisturbed. Then she curled up in her room and finished *The Moonstone*.

Thomas discovered her the day after the funeral. They had gone back to the country to bury Papa in the family plot, and when the sun touched the horizon she slipped down to the river to make her report. This time they let her visit Faery, and she came back with her wings still unfurled. She stretched, enjoying the feel of mortal sunlight on gossamer membranes—and heard the click of a pistol.

She turned, and saw Thomas holding the gun steady, his lips pressed together.

“Where is my sister?” he whispered, biting off each word.

The last remaining bits of the old Violet, who had babbled proudly to everyone about her older brother and always put on her best dress when he came home, shredded and blew away on the evening breeze.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“When?”

“We were switched as babies,” she said. “It wasn’t your fault you didn’t notice.”

The change in Thomas was a little like the change in Papa as he withered on the sickbed. Suddenly there was a new Thomas, wide-eyed and desperate, who had nothing to do with the brother who had slapped her on the back and taught her Latin. And as with Papa, she knew he was gone and felt no regret, for she had changed equally. He had loved her, and now hated her. She had been his sister, and now was not. There was no one left to be sorry.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asked. She was almost certain she could confuse him with a glamour and escape.

Thomas drew a shaky breath. “No.” He lowered the gun. “I’m finding her. No matter what it takes, I swear I’ll get her back. Then maybe I’ll come for you.”

Violet nodded and turned back to the river. She knew she didn’t love him because it didn’t hurt to leave.

“Did you always know?” he demanded.

She knew he was asking if the sister he loved had ever existed. He was a human and he wanted to know what was in her heart.

“Yes,” she said, because she was a faery and had no heart. Intentions mattered nothing; and her nature was that she had always been a traitor.

* * *

Afterwards, people often asked her why she had worked for the faeries even though she had been raised by humans. When she told them how it felt to stand in Faery after the grimy dream of the human world, and that she could not stay there until her task was done, they took that as reason enough.

But for the faeries there was no such thing as reason. There was only *theirs* and *mine*, *us* and *them*. She knew at last why she had never cared for her family: they were not hers. She knew why she would work for the faeries: she was theirs.

To the extent that she had been tainted by humans, and therefore needed a reason, she thought that she worked for them because they gave her an answer.

* * *

Miss Stanton's School for Young Ladies in Yorkshire was cold and damp, its paint peeling on the walls. The girls stood in rows for inspection every morning, their hair parted down the middle and pulled into painfully tight braids. By the end of the day, Violet's gums hurt and her shoulder blades ached with the need to let her wings free.

But the school sat on the edge of the moors that the faeries were raising to life, and they needed someone to make sure no one who guessed the truth came away again. So a handful of leaves and a mouthful of glamour became a letter from the

school's patron that made the headmistress, Miss Stanton, not only hire Violet but keep her when she was in trouble.

"Miss Thornton, I *cannot* permit you to give your students such things to read."

Violet kept her voice submissive. "If I am to teach them French, ma'am, I must give them something."

"We have several French Bibles." Miss Stanton drew her thin eyebrows together. "I think they should provide you with sufficient material."

Violet strongly suspected that Miss Stanton had never heard of *Candide* before yesterday, and she was torn between wanting to laugh and wanting to turn her Miss Stanton's knobby fingers into twigs.

"I understand," she said.

"Indeed?" Miss Stanton let out a little huff. "I realize, Miss Thornton, that you find it amusing to treat your students in this fashion. But I have a duty to safeguard the souls of those in this school—including yours."

And I must guard my people, who have no souls, thought Violet, but she did not say it aloud; making any more trouble could endanger her mission. So she looked at the table and nodded, thinking that when she was done here, she would drive Miss Stanton mad to run naked over the moors.

That night, Agnes Thompson was missing at curfew. In twenty minutes, Miss Stanton turned the whole school upside down; then she started search parties. Violet tried to make them wait for morning, but Miss Stanton would have none of it. So she walked into the damp spring night with one of the porters, and when he turned his back she took a leaf from her pocket and blew it onto the wind, thinking, *They are coming*.

The wind shifted, and she knew that the moor, already more than half-alive, had heard her. Violet smiled and hummed a scrap of faery song. Mist began to rise out of the ground.

The porter stumped along, lantern held high, bleating, “Miss Thompson! Miss Thompson!” Then he paused, staring at the base of a bush. “What’s this, then?”

Violet peered around his shoulder and saw a cluster of imp-eggs, glowing blue in the darkness. She thought to the wind, *Now*.

Jewel-bright butterflies bubbled out of the ground, glowing ruby and amber and lapis lazuli, and they rushed up through the porter as if he were mist. He collapsed with a soft, choked noise, his chest shredded and bleeding where they had touched him. The butterflies corkscrewed up into the sky, then descended in a rush to twirl about Violet, who laughed at the crazy scraps of colour.

“Go find the others,” she said, and they streamed away into the darkness. The mist had thickened into fog. Violet tilted her head and let her wings unfurl. Every now and then she heard shouts in the distance, as the butterflies found the intruders one by one. At this rate nearly all the school staff would be dead by morning; perhaps the girls could be lead away to serve the Faery Queen. They were all young enough.

“*There* you are.” Violet spun around to see Miss Stanton emerging from the fog. “We must get back to the school at once; something’s not right here. I’ve sent the others back already.”

The air trembled and told Violet that four had made it back alive. That was more than she would have believed Miss Stanton capable of saving, and Violet looked at her with a measure of respect.

Miss Stanton stared back, beady eyes gone wide, and Violet realized she was watching her wings open and close.

Violet almost laughed. “You see why I’m not worried about my soul.”

Colour caught at the edge of her vision, and she turned to see the butterflies spinning lazily towards her.

“They’ll kill you.” Miss Stanton’s voice was high and reedy.

Violet ignored her and held out a hand, waiting for them to cluster on her palm—

“You *fool*,” said Miss Stanton, and stepped in front of her.

The butterflies sank into her and then gushed up from the back of her head. Violet did not feel them as they settled on her hands and her hair, did not listen to their laughter in her mind. She was staring at the ugly woman crumpled on the ground, her mind repeating a single concussed thought: *She died for me.*

Miss Stanton had not loved her, had not needed her, had known she was not human. Had still died for her.

Violet dropped to her knees in the grass. She had thought she understood humans. When they talked of love and altruism, they meant *protecting mine*. When they talked of bravery and moral choices, they meant *destroying yours*.

Despite what humans thought, faeries did know sacrifice; every day of the war they laid down their lives for their Queen and their kin. But not for their enemies. Not for strangers. They would never die for someone who had betrayed them, simply because she needed help.

For the first time in her life, Violet wanted to know *why*.

And for that the faeries had no answer.

There was no *point* to dying for someone who had tried to hurt you, and no point at all to dying for someone who had never been in danger. Violet knew it as surely as she felt her own heartbeat, and she could feel the butterflies laughing at

the blood dribbling out between Miss Stanton's wrinkled lips. But she knew, also, that something in that death had been needful and right.

Maybe it didn't matter who was us and who was them, whether she was human or faery, and maybe it didn't matter whether she loved anyone or not. Maybe there was something still she had to do.

She took a train to London, walked into the War Office, and said, "I am a changeling. I want to defect."

* * *

"Nasty little fight, but we killed the buggers." Major Harris's voice echoed slightly in the tunnel. Then he saw Violet. He stiffened, mouth working uncomfortably, but didn't apologize for his language.

The soldiers were all like that: they could not treat her as a man, did not want to treat her as a woman. Violet only smiled and unfurled her wings, laughing inside as he turned away uncomfortably.

"Right this way, miss," said Colonel Weston. He was afraid of her, like the rest of them; Violet could taste his nightmares sometimes. But he still pretended she was a lady, and so Violet had tracked down his wife and laid protections on her. She appreciated anyone who, like her, pretended to be kind.

Violet followed the Colonel down the tunnel, trying not to gag. They had gassed the mound with sulphur to weaken its enchantments, then thrown jam-tin grenades full of iron filings to destroy them, and enough iron and sulphur still hung in the air to make her vision swim.

“We’ll have to hurry. We think they might have called for reinforcements.” He gave her a sidelong glance.

“I can’t tell if there are any nearby,” said Violet. “The fumes are still too strong. They’d likely come through Faery, anyway.”

Through a doorway she glimpsed the great white anchor stone. It was split clean across, and her wings ached in sympathetic pain: there would be no more easy passage to Faery through this mound. But come twilight, the faeries would be able to use any stream or forked branch to cross into the mortal world.

Colonel Weston shrugged. “Well, there’s not much point to holding the mound anyway. We’re just lucky they didn’t kill the prisoners this time.”

They were deep into the mound now, and the air had become clear again. Then Colonel Weston stepped through a doorway into the round prison room and raised his lanterns, and Violet could see the shadowed lumps of the prisoners twitching. He looked at her, and this time there was no fear in

his eyes, only hope and desperate expectation. He wept for the prisoners as she could not, and he looked to her for hope; and that was another reason why she liked him.

She knew that humans needed signs, so Violet laid her hand against the wall. This deep in the mound, there were still some scraps of power; at a touch from her mind, great glowing white flowers bloomed across the domed ceiling, filling the room with light. Under the faery lights she went to each of the prisoners in turn. They had been changed inside the faery mound, and being still inside it, could be changed back: twigs to fingers, acorns to eyes, thistles to tongues, goat's head to human. Each one healed under her hands, and maybe this was what mattered. Maybe it was.

* * *

At the height of the war, Violet was with Colonel Weston in Devon. All of Cornwall had fallen, as had Lancashire and Yorkshire, and great swathes of Wales and Scotland. Will o' the wisps floated up the Thames to London, hobs and brownies roamed the streets at night, and the new King had gone into hiding. Everyone was terrified of possible treachery, and even the small towns were papered over with propaganda posters urging people not to submit.

The parade of pictures and slogans was endless. A square-jawed young soldier grasped a rifle, while beside him a young

woman held aloft a flag: "BRITONS NEVER WILL BE FAERY SLAVES." A green-faced, slant-eyed faery leered at screaming little girls: "THE FACE OF THE ENEMY." The smoking ruins of a cottage, with bodies lying across the doorstep: "The village of Wattingham surrendered, and the faeries SLAUGHTERED every man, woman, and child. MEN OF BRITAIN, NEVER AGAIN!" A neatly-groomed housewife smiled over a bonfire: "Every flower is faery food. BURN YOUR GARDEN!" Two little girls knelt at their father's knee: "Daddy, what are YOU doing to save us from the faeries?"

And everywhere, with a hundred different illustrations: "ONE TRAITOR CAN DOOM A CITY. REPORT SUSPICIOUS BEHAVIOUR AT ONCE."

Even so, every day they heard of another town or village that had accepted faery rule. Violet could not be sorry that the mining had stopped in South Wales, or that the factories in Manchester no longer belched poison into the air; but the same people who smashed the machinery and broke iron gates were the ones who delivered children to the faery mounds and cut throats at the cromlechs.

The news from abroad was even worse. The *Erlkönig* rode freely across the Sudetenland; in Norway, King Haakon tried without success to stamp out the *álfablót*, while in Sweden the *älvdanser* met every night in Stockholm; *weisse frauen*

roamed the streets of Vienna. In France, the *dames blanches* sent *matagots* across the countryside and raised the *Tarasque* to attack Paris. The Hapsburg emperor and all his family were driven mad or cursed with donkey's heads, and the Pope had gone into hiding.

They no longer got any news from Ireland at all: after the Irish had cast off British rule, they had broken into a civil war over whether or not to ally with the Sidhe. No one knew which side was winning; sometimes after dinner, the soldiers liked to discuss strategies for invading Ireland, but privately Colonel Weston admitted to Violet that the generals were drawing up plans for when Ireland invaded them.

But then the tide of the war began to shift. The Germans sent over some of the new flamethrowers, and though they were clumsy, the fire was elemental enough that faery magic could do little against it. Then they got the new Vickers guns, which could fire round after round of alternating silver-and-iron bullets, and better grenades. For the first time in over a year, the army went on the offensive. The official name for the policy was "sectional cleansing," but most people called it "scorched earth": working outwards from London, they killed every faery they could find, torched every moor and forest the faeries had awakened, and surrounded, gassed, and blasted every mound.

On the day the Yorkshire Dales burned, Violet finally collapsed. She crouched outside the whole day, rocking and keening as the ash fell on her hair and the moorland's agony ripped through her mind. They had to hold her down and give her a double dose of laudanum before she would quiet. Since there was no way she could be discharged, her commanding officer promptly sent her south to join Colonel Weston's unit in Devon, where they were trying to hold the Cornish border until the main campaign arrived.

* * *

Violet crouched in the ditch, Colonel Weston slumped beside her. A night raid on a faery mound had gone disastrously wrong and they were separated from the rest of the unit, the Colonel badly wounded by elf-shot. In the distance, she could hear the crack of guns and scattered booms from the men who still had grenades; the cold air pulsed with the silent faery-horns. Answering song bubbled up in Violet's throat, and she clenched her teeth to keep it back. She doubted any of the humans abroad tonight would see morning, but she owed it to the Colonel to try.

Cautiously, she stood and cupped her hands towards the sky, then leaned back, her wings blooming. The air cradled her, caressed her fingertips, and in its eddies she could feel the men's lives winking out, one by one, like vanishing fireflies.

“Are their deaths not beautiful?”

Violet opened her eyes and saw her faery mother at the edge of the clearing. She wore again the white tea dress, her pale hair floating free on the wind, her wings glistening.

“You know what you are.” Her voice thrummed with power. “Why do you resist?” Moonlight caught and clotted in her hair, and a wave of song crashed through Violet’s mind. She fell to her knees. The whole night had been a trap to make her use her powers, opening herself so she could be turned back to them against her will.

“Come back, my child, thread of my gossamer.” Her mother knelt before her and cupped her chin. “Come back across the water to your kin, and drink the sunlight on the fields of Faery,” she whispered, and Violet’s wings ached with longing.

Behind her, Colonel Weston made a wet, choked noise. Violet clenched her teeth. “No.”

“He is dying,” said her mother. “Unless you heal him.”

If she used her powers once, even just to heal, she knew that the last dams of her mind would break. Violet wondered if her mother had planned this part too.

“Either way he is betrayed. One way he lives.”

“I have orders. So does he.”

Her mother’s voice was thick with disgust. “How could you betray us for these gasping things of smog and dust?”

Violet thought of Miss Stanton and Thomas, of the army chaplain's long sermons and the ragged, pointless songs of the soldiers. She could guess what any one of them would say, but they were all human replies, and here in the moonlight she could not pretend they were hers.

Instead she lifted her eyes and said, "Because their deaths are beautiful."

Her mother's fingers dug into her chin. "Do you think they'll ever love you?"

"Do you think I'm human enough to care?"

There was a rustle at the edge of the clearing: a soldier stumbled through the trees. Her mother turned, and Violet flung herself to the side; as briars sprouted from the soldier's eyes, her hands found Colonel Weston's revolver and she brought it up.

Her mother went still. "You are not of them."

Violet thought of the men she had cursed for the faeries, and the men dying tonight; the woods destroyed by factory pollution, and the fields screaming as they burnt in the war. "I know," she said, and pulled the trigger.

"You will *never come home*," her faery mother snarled as she died, and Violet was not sure that she cared.

* * *

After the war ended, nobody was sure what to do with Violet. Her mother had died of a fever, and none of her more distant relatives would take her, but the army would not let her go free.

Eventually Colonel Weston offered to take care of her, and since he had commanded her during the war, he was allowed to adopt her as his ward. He took Violet back to his country estate; after a while, Mrs. Weston stopped looking at her with fear, and even sat with her in the evenings to sew.

Violet embroidered roses on a pillow, sketched the parish church, and practiced playing songs that still made no sense to her. She took care that nobody saw her dancing in the woods, and when the longing for Faery was so bad that she could only curl up in her bed and shiver, she said she had a headache.

She still couldn't weep for Mama or Papa, but she could remember them both with the hallucinatory clarity of faery memory, and she thought that if she could not be a daughter, at least she was a faithful monument. One evening she finally played "Swans at Sunset" for the first time since Papa died. It was still just a string of notes, and she wondered why she had waited so long.

Then one morning, as she sat practicing at the piano in the parlour, the maid came to her and said, "There's a man here to see you, miss. He says—"

“Show him in,” said Violet, because she could feel him, she could *tell*.

A moment later Thomas stepped into the room. She did not turn around but continued playing “Swans at Sunset.”

“I heard about you sometimes, during the war,” she said.

His voice was lower than she remembered. “Sometimes I heard about you. Mostly from the faeries.”

He’d never joined the army, but had gone straight from nobody to legend: the half-mad son of a peer who charged into faery mounds alone and came out again alive. The man who’d sworn to walk into the Faery Court itself to find his sister.

“Did you find her?” she asked.

“Yes. She didn’t remember being human.”

“I didn’t remember being faery.” Her fingers moved smoothly over the keys.

“She made her choice. I made mine. What are you doing now?”

“Colonel Weston has been kind enough to adopt me as his ward.”

Thomas sighed, then stepped to the side of the piano, where she could see him. There was a scar across his cheek and lines around his eyes.

“I’ve just settled the estate,” he said. “Father left me the house in town, and Uncle Harold left me the old house in the

country.” His fingers drummed against the wood of the piano. “If you want... you could come stay with me.”

“You know I’m no family of yours.”

“I think you’re the closest I have left.”

She stopped playing. Thomas watched her steadily, waiting for her answer.

It would not be true to say she had ever missed him, but she was now fairly sure that she had, all this time, been waiting for him.

“And what are *you* planning to do?” she asked.

He shrugged. “The war’s over, but they still need men with experience of Faery. Here, or... there’s talk of posts in the Orient. I might be gone sometimes.”

She could never exactly care for him, any more than he could ever make her kin. But she thought that she would like to try.

“We could study Chinese together,” she said.

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COVER ART

“Fantasy Gate,” by Wolfgang Wachelhofer



Wolfgang Wachelhofer is an Austrian graphic artist and web designer who has a deep passion for surreal art. Most of his inspiration comes from the rich and colorful cultures of Brazil, where he lived for four years. He has done a lot of work for various clients for which he has earned a high reputation for his uniqueness. View more of his art in his [online galleries](#).

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