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## THE GHOST OF SHINODA FOREST

by Richard Parks

I didn't know how Kenji found me. I didn't know what possessed him to look. Yet there he was, coming up the mountain trail to what was left of Enfusa Temple. I was sitting on the broad stone steps that now led to nothing, looking out over the valley below and admiring the view, when I heard his approach.

"What are you doing here, Kenji-san?" I asked.

"That would be my question to you as well, Lord Yamada. Or does it simply stand to reason that the only temple you feel any attraction to is a failed one?" Kenji the reprobate priest leaned his mendicant's staff against a pine tree and sat down beside me on the steps. "Charming view," he said, looking down the mountain.

"Yes."

After a moment of more or less comfortable silence, he frowned and looked behind him. There wasn't much to see. The temple building had burned down years ago; there wasn't much left save the stone steps, blackened, shattered roof tiles,

and a couple of moldering guardian statues, their features almost weathered away.

“There are ghosts here,” he said. “I can sense them.”

“Most likely. There’s something about thwarted plans and lost opportunities that tends to attract them.”

Kenji sighed. “I know you’re under no obligation to tell me, but I have to ask again: What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know.”

Kenji frowned. “Lord Yamada, you’re frightening me.”

“I haven’t touched saké in three weeks.”

“Oh. In that case, I brought some with me...strictly for charitable reasons, you understand.”

I sighed. “It’s not that I can’t *afford* saké, Kenji-san. I haven’t *wanted* it.”

Kenji stared for a moment. “I was wrong. *Now* you’re frightening me.”

I looked out at the view from the mountain. “The ancient Chinese poet Li Po once said that when he drank, he forgot Heaven and Hell. And when he *really* drank, he also forgot himself and thus found his greatest joy. I’ve been ‘really’ drinking for a long time now, Kenji-san. Would you concur?”

“If there were such a thing as drinking at heroic levels, you would be an immortal,” Kenji said cheerfully.

“And in all that time I never, not once, forgot myself or found any joy.”

Kenji frowned. “So the lesson is ‘Never trust a drunken Chinese poet’?”

I almost laughed. “That’s one. There may be another lesson, and perhaps that’s why I’m at Enfusa, but I have no idea what it may be.”

“It simply could be that you never drink while you’re on a mission.”

“I’m not on a mission.”

“Yes, you are, though you don’t know it yet. Lord Yamada, I came to tell you that Princess Teiko’s ghost has been seen in Shinoda Forest.”

\* \* \*

Whether I was drunk or sober, Teiko haunted my dreams. I had always assumed, if I drank enough that one day this would no longer be true, but there had been fifteen years of drinking after we parted, plus two more after her death, and now my optimism was quite exhausted. As this foolish hope had been all that I had to fight her with, there was nothing left for me to do tonight except the only sensible thing—I surrendered.

In this new dream I was back at Lake Biwa, two years ago. I knew it was two years ago because I was searching

desperately along the shore of the lake. Teiko had eluded her guards, and her brother Prince Kanemore and I were searching, though now I knew where she was. I emerged into an open area near the cliffs, Kanemore at my side. I tried to look at him but he had no face. The only face I could see was Teiko's, almost lost in the distance as she stood on the edge of a precipice, too far away to reach in time.

I've heard that a dreamer can wake himself once he knows he is dreaming, but I always knew, and I never awoke. Maybe I didn't want to; at least this way I could see Teiko again. Even if it was only to watch her die.

She stepped off the edge, as I remembered. But this time, unlike all the times before, she did not strike the water. Her fall slowed from a hard plummet to a gentle drift, as if she were no heavier than a snowflake or the ash of a funeral pyre. She stood on the surface of the lake for a moment, and then she began to walk towards shore.

Towards me.

Kanemore, silent, bowed down. I merely waited, though I wanted to run. She moved across the surface of the water with barely a ripple. I finally sank to my knees and bowed, because I could not think what else to do. "Teiko-hime."

"It had to be," she said. "You know this. There was no other way."

I knew. Teiko took her own life on her way to exile, convicted under a false accusation of treason, the accusation then disproven with my help. With her death laid squarely at the feet of the Fujiwara minister of justice, no one could openly oppose her son's claim to the throne. All had gone according to her own plan. I, all unknowing, had merely played my part.

"My son," she said.

"He is safe," I said.

"No," she said. She sounded sad. "He is not safe. Neither are you."

"What must I do?" I asked.

"Forgive me," she said.

I had tried. I was still trying.

"Forgive me."

"I—"

The words stuck in my throat, and when I looked up, she was gone.

\* \* \*

Morning, as it usually does, came too early, and after a night sleeping on hard ground I was not in the best of moods to greet it. Besides, if there was a more foolish act for a human male than seeking out a fox spirit deliberately, I couldn't think what it might be.

Yet this was the second time in my life I'd found myself doing exactly that. It occurred to me that I wasn't always my own best friend, and I said as much to Kenji. He paused on the road long enough to wipe the sweat from his bald head.

"Lord Yamada, this is perhaps a revelation to you, but I can assure you that it's no surprise to anyone else. But what prompted this sudden newfound understanding?"

"I would have thought that obvious. Who else would travel from Enfusa Temple to the Capital and on to Shinoda Forest in search of foxes playing tricks? It's not as if anyone's asked me to do it. Frankly I still don't understand why you came along."

"My reasons are my own," Kenji said, "but yours are plain enough, which is part of the reason I did come. Lord Yamada, are you so certain that we're chasing a fox?"

I took a deep breath. "To the best of my knowledge, Princess Teiko never traveled through, never even set foot in Shinoda Forest in her lifetime. Even assuming that her ghost walks the earth still—a possibility I consider extremely remote—there is no reason, none at all, for her to manifest within Shinoda Forest. Therefore, it is someone or something counterfeiting her appearance, and a shapeshifter such as a fox would be the obvious choice. Forgive my arrogance, but one reason to do so would be to lure me there."

“Which would be a good argument for staying away,” Kenji pointed out.

“Risky, perhaps, but the one sure way to reveal a trap is to fall into it.”

Kenji didn't say anything for a while. We walked in a heavy silence that the world around us did not share. It was barely mid-morning, but already the heat was becoming oppressive. Birds sang anyway, as well as cicadas, from almost every tree along the road.

We finally stopped to rest by a cold spring, and after we had drunk our fill and eaten a rice ball, we sat on opposite sides of the spring and wrapped our silence around us like cloaks. Two years had passed since Princess Teiko's death, most of which I had spent in the dregs of a saké cup, until Kenji found me at Enfusa.

“Say what you're thinking, Kenji-san,” I said finally. “I know you're dying to do so.”

“Lord Yamada, do I really need to point out that this may actually be Princess Teiko's ghost? Can you honestly tell me that you have not thought of this?”

“Of course he has.”

Prince Kanemore stood just downstream from the spring. It was obvious to me now that he had used the sound of the water to help mask his approach, not that he would have

needed much cover. For the son of an Emperor, Kanemore was very much at home in the countryside, and there were hunters and assassins alike who envied his stealth. He looked a little older than I remembered him. He carried a bow and wore a tachi, along with a companion dagger thrust edge-up into his sash. Save for the lack of armor, I would have thought him dressed for war.

I put aside my surprise long enough to touch my forehead to the ground, a move Kenji quickly copied. “To what do we owe this honor, Prince Kanemore?” I asked.

“Oh, get up. It’s just us now,” Kanemore said, and he sat down on a nearby rock without further ceremony. “I’m here for the same reason you are. I do not believe my sister’s ghost haunts Shinoda Forest. And yet, part of me hopes that she does.”

I sat back down. “Prince, your sister had no regrets and no unfinished business. I fear that is all on our side.”

“I think so too. But as your astute friend was likely to point out,” he nodded at Kenji, “what if we’re wrong? Unless I am mistaken, you would like to be such a regret.”

“I would be ashamed to be such a selfish person,” I said.

“Yet you persist in wondering,” Kanemore said. “As do I, and so here we are. Shall we hunt our ghosts together?”

\* \* \*

“You are right, Highness, as usual.”

We were approaching the borders of Shinoda Forest. So far I had seen two of the monsters called *youkai* and at least one actual ghost. Kenji held a ward in each hand and had been muttering sutras for the past half hour. I didn't blame him. From here on, the monster and demon population was only going to increase.

Kanemore frowned. “About what particularly?”

“About both my feelings and what lies at the end of this search. We're not hunting ghosts, except perhaps among our own regrets. No, I have no doubt that a fox has lured us to Shinoda Forest. I even think I know which one. The only question I have at this point is why.”

“How about to deceive and beguile us and eat our livers?” Kenji asked.

“I rather doubt that any of our livers would be much of a delicacy,” Kanemore said. “Or does this particular fox have a reason to want your liver?”

That last was directed at me. “Quite the opposite. I once did her a tremendous favor, so I confess myself baffled.”

“At least I have lived to see that, Lord Yamada.”

It was a new voice, and one that I was not expecting. Even Prince Kanemore was caught completely by surprise. Princess Teiko stood before us on a large flat shelf of gray-white stone

lying beside the path. One instant she wasn't there, and the next she was, looking every bit as heart-wrenchingly beautiful as I remembered.

Kenji just stared. Prince Kanemore obviously couldn't decide between drawing his tachi or throwing himself face down before the image of his late sister. I just smiled and bowed low.

"Greetings, Lady Kuzunoha."

The image of Princess Teiko shimmered, and then an unnaturally large white fox vixen with two bushy tails stood on the boulder. I'd have thought it was smiling, if a fox could smile. Then the image shimmered again, and the fox I knew as Lady Kuzunoha, once wife and consort to the leader of the Abe clan, stood in front of us. Her human form was lovely, but it was not that of Princess Teiko. She kneeled gracefully and bowed low to us.

"Forgive me, but I knew you would come."

Now Prince Kanemore did reach for his tachi, but I stopped him. "No, Highness."

Kanemore glared at me. "This is a fox demon!"

"True. It is also the noble Lady Kuzunoha," I said, "and I would like to hear what she has to say."

Now both Kenji and Kanemore were staring at me, but Lady Kuzunoha smiled. “It is not often one hears ‘noble’ applied to a fox,” she said.

“I choose my words carefully,” I said. “For your sake, I hope you do the same. I doubt Prince Kanemore sees the humor in your little joke.”

“This is not a joke, Lord Yamada. I apologize for using this method to get your attention, but it was impossible for me to come to you. I needed you to come to me.”

“But why?” Kenji asked.

She looked at him. “Because I owe Lord Yamada a debt, which I hope now to repay.” She turned back to the other two men and bowed low. “This concerns Prince Kanemore as well, so I do pray Your Highness will listen to me before you think of your sword again.”

“I had not stopped thinking of my sword,” Prince Kanemore said gruffly. “But I am listening. What do you wish of us?”

“Only to warn you. This concerns Teiko’s son, the heir to the throne. He is in great danger.”

Kanemore scowled, and it was such a powerful scowl that I half expected the skies above to scowl as well.

“Prince Takahito? He has been in danger since he was named heir. The only reason I remain at court is to protect him.”

She sighed. “I know your reputation, Prince Kanemore, and I know that it is well-deserved. But I do not think you alone will be enough. His enemies are plotting to send an assassin after him.”

While I did want specifics, I didn’t need to ask whom she meant as a group. While none of them dared to move against the Crown Prince directly, any one of a number of the Fujiwara clan, not excluding the Chancellor, would shed no tears if he were removed from the succession. Just so long as the crime could not be traced back to them, of course. Had my dream been prophetic or merely my own suspicious nature proven correct?

“Who is the assassin?” I asked. “Do you know?”

“Lord Yamada, it was supposed to be me.”

\* \* \*

Kenji had set his wards around our camp. They wouldn’t stop a human, but Kenji knew his business, and no *yokai* or demon or ghost in the forest would get past them.

Despite these precautions, Prince Kanemore sat on a fallen log with his back to the fire, his eyes slowly scanning the darkness between the trees. Kenji was out gathering firewood

on the opposite side of the camp. Now and then we could hear him cursing as he tripped over a root or snagged a bramble in the darkness.

“Do you believe her?” Prince Kanemore asked.

A rather troubling question. I didn’t pretend to understand the fullness of Lady Kuzunoha’s reasoning—she was, after all, a fox—but I was reasonably certain of at least part of the answer.

“That she was approached by agents of the Fujiwara? Yes. That she refused them? Also yes. That those agents sought contact with other denizens of this place? Again, yes.”

“It’s very worrying,” Kanemore said. “I have seen Lady Kuzunoha’s human form. It would be relatively easy for such a...charming assassin to gain access to the inner Court. She says she refused, and you believe her. Is that your inclination, or do you have reasons?”

I almost smiled. Aside from his martial prowess, Prince Kanemore was a very fine tactician, too good not to consider all possibilities in a situation. One of those possibilities being that I was completely wrong about Lady Kuzunoha. However, there was something that I don’t think even he had considered.

“Prince, by masquerading as Princess Teiko she drew attention to herself, something a fox does not do without reason. Further, we would be far from the only interested

parties to hear of it. It's likely that our presence in Shinoda Forest is known."

He frowned. "Your point?"

"The Fujiwara will know that Lady Kuzunoha met with us. It will not take much thought to know why. By alerting us to the plot, she's done us a service and at the same time placed herself in a great deal of danger. That is one reason I'm inclined to believe her. However...."

Kenji chose this moment to return to the camp. He held a small bundle of broken limbs, but he kept glancing behind him.

"I hear voices," he said. "I think they're coming this way."

I had hoped I was wrong. Sadly, no. The fire had been a bad idea, in hindsight. That and the wards would keep the denizens of Shinoda Forest at bay, but not these. For the ones coming, it was a beacon.

"What of it? Don't you trust your wards?" Kanemore asked.

I reached for my own tachi. "These are not *youkai*, Highness. These are worse."

Kanemore had already drawn his own sword. "Demons?"

"Humans."

\* \* \*

They looked like lighter shadows moving against darker shadows, but I knew that was their clothing. Every now and

then I caught the glint of steel through the trees. “Get your staff, Kenji.”

“There are many, but we are not encircled,” Kenji pointed out. “We could run.”

Prince Kanemore sighed. “Have you forgotten where we are? Shinoda Forest is full of monsters and demons and night creatures. Not a viable alternative.” He peered into the darkness. “Who are they?”

“Agents of the Fujiwara,” I said. “I wager that they realized from the start that Lady Kuzunoha would refuse them. In my arrogance I thought the trap was for me, but now I believe their real intent was to lure *you* here, Highness. Away from the Court and any witnesses, your death could easily be blamed on the *yokai* of Shinoda Forest, with only the word of a fox demon to counter it.”

“Which no one would believe, obviously,” Kanemore said.

I bowed. “Just so. And with Your Highness out of the way, Takahito’s ‘accidental’ demise would be simpler to arrange.”

Kanemore swore softly. “You must admire the elegant simplicity of the plot,” he said, “even if it is utterly without honor.”

The fire was burning low, but we still moved to put the dying embers between us and our attackers; silhouetting ourselves in front of it would invite arrows.

Kenji frowned and clutched his staff tightly. “Why haven’t they attacked? If they want us, they have us. We’re far outnumbered.”

It was hard to see in the darkness, but it seemed that the assassins were moving in an odd pattern, darting tree to tree, ignoring bushes or other trees that were better cover. Then I realized they weren’t attempting stealth.

“They’re removing your wards, Kenji-san.”

“Why? Unless....”

We all heard the low-pitched roar coming out the darkness.

“Unless,” I said, “they’re taking no chances. It seems they’ve made a bargain with at least *one* resident of this forest.”

There were *oni*, terrible ogres, in Shinoda forest. One for certain and possibly more, and in my previous visits I had barely managed to avoid them. Apparently we would not be so fortunate this time.

It came crashing through the trees like the implacable brute it was. Red skin, black hair, curling tusks. It was twice the height of a human, thicker than two saké barrels, and it carried a massive club bound in black iron. The human shadows held back. I didn’t blame them. They had managed to set the devil loose on us, but that didn’t mean it was to be trusted.

Kenji quickly began to chant a sutra, but I knew he wouldn't be able to do much more than slow the *oni* down. As I looked at the thing, my *tachi* felt no more substantial in my hand than a lady's hairpin, but it was better than nothing.

Prince Kanemore stood a half-step in front of us, his *tachi* held low. I couldn't see his face, but his entire posture was not that of a man in danger of his life. For an instant I wondered if he'd entered some state of resignation to his fate, since he didn't move in the slightest as the *oni* approached us, its club raised high.

"Highness, look out!"

It felt a foolish thing to say, even as I was shouting it, but the creature scattered the remnants of our fire as he charged through and seemed about to smash the prince's head in where he stood, but Kanemore took one quick step back, and the club thudded harmlessly into the earth.

As for what happened next, well, I saw it and I'm still not sure I believe it. Kanemore sprang forward even faster than he had stepped back. Just as the *oni* began to raise his club for another strike, Prince Kanemore's forward leap landed him directly on its club, on which he balanced as if it were no more unsteady than a log bridge over a stream. One more step and he was level with the *oni*'s thick neck. It had time only to bellow

in rage and surprise before Prince Kanemore, with one swift, precise motion, cut its head off.

Kanemore was standing back in his place between us before the creature had time to fall.

I had always known that Prince Kanemore was formidable. I don't think I realized until that moment exactly *how* formidable he was. Then the ogre's headless body crashed to the earth, and the human assassins, with barely a moment's hesitation, pressed forward.

There were three of us, and both Kenji and I knew how to handle ourselves in a fight, but Prince Kanemore was the one who counted. Even so, he was still no more than human, and no one, not even the prince, could fend off a more than a score of attackers at once.

"It's rude to keep us waiting," Prince Kanemore called out. "Or are you hoping another *oni* passes by?"

A young man finally emerged into the weak light, dressed in a monk's robes and carrying a ringed staff much like Kenji's. "We've brought force enough," he said. "Killing that brute won't save you."

Kenji scowled. "I know you. You're a sōhei from Enryaku Temple. What is the meaning of this?"

"Meaning? Only that the right person ascend the throne. We're here to see to it."

It appeared that the sōhei, the warrior monks that the temples sometimes used in religious disputes among themselves, had been brought to bear against a matter concerning the Imperial Court. If Enryaku Temple was meddling in politics again, that was good to know, assuming we lived long enough to make use of the information. If monks made up the rest of his forces, on the other hand, our chances of survival had lessened considerably. A substantial portion of the monks at Enryaku had always been trained fighting men, and their reputation as skilled warriors was well known.

“And who would this ‘right person’ be, monk?” Kanemore asked. There was an edge in his voice I had heard before, and I was grateful that I was not that young monk just then.

“Such knowledge does not matter to one about to pass from this world of pain,” the monk said and raised one hand in blessing.

It was the signal to attack.

The first ten through the trees were dressed as sōhei; their armor had been darkened for stealth and they carried swords, not staffs as their leader did. But there were only ten, by my count. Those who came after were more of a ragtag bunch, armed with crude weapons. No matter; there were more than enough of them.

Standing our ground meant being surrounded and cut down. Kanemore nodded at me and I understood his intent. He charged right and I charged left, and as the sōhei pressed on toward Kenji, we turned the two flanks to face us.

I saw one of the monks fall immediately, but I was too busy staying alive to follow Kanemore's progress. I managed to cut one of them in the leg and he was down, and then I was merely faced with two, more cautious than the one now on the ground trying to keep from bleeding to death.

I wasn't getting any openings, and all my attention was on defending against both at once. I knew more attackers were coming and also knew I was about to die and soon Kanemore as well, and then, in due course, Prince Takahito.

*It seems I've failed you after all, Teiko-hime.*

Something hit one of the men attacking me. It looked like a white blur, but suddenly there was only one man in front of me, a man startled and distracted and off guard, so I killed him. Then I was able to see what had knocked down the other man.

It was Lady Kuzunoha.

She was in full fox-demon form, at least four times larger than a normal fox, with two tails and pure white fur now spattered with red. She had torn the first man's throat out. She

tilted back her bloody muzzle and she *screamed*, and for a moment almost everyone froze in place.

Prince Kanemore, two dead bodies at his feet, seized the opportunity to take down a third sōhei. Kenji was bloodied but still standing. The men behind the monks looked behind them as a chorus of answering shrieks rose from the forest from where they had come

I was careful to raise my voice enough so that the surviving attackers could hear. “Perhaps it wasn’t wise to remove the seals.”

A wave rolled out of the forest. Not just foxes, but water-goblins, several wild-haired ghosts, and *yūkai* of all sorts. The fight turned in that instant, and now the attackers were in full disarray. All of the men except the sōhei tried to run, but there was nowhere to go.

The criminals and other rabble were pulled down first. The remaining sōhei abandoned their attack for mutual defense, but now the odds were overwhelmingly not in their favor. One by one they died, until there was only one left, spared only because Lady Kuzunoha adopted her human form again and stood over him.

“Not this one,” she said clearly, and the *yūkai* drew back. At another word from her, the rest of the denizens of Shinoda

Forest withdrew silently into the woods, while Lady Kuzunoha daintily wiped the blood from her lips with a small cloth.

Prince Kanemore was winded but unharmed. Kenji's wounds were dramatic but not serious, and for a few moments I was busy binding them up.

"It seems we owe you our lives, Lady Kuzunoha," Prince Kanemore said after he had caught his breath. He bowed to her.

"We would have come sooner," she said, nodding toward Kenji. "But it took us some time to find a way past your friend's handiwork. Fortunately, your attackers cleared a path for us." She then noticed the dead *oni*. "Oh, that one. He always was an idiot." She looked down at the cowering young priest and nudged him with her foot. "Get up."

"How did you know?" I asked.

"I was already suspicious, as I imagine you were. When I learned that there were men in our forest aside from yourselves, it was not hard to ascertain their intentions. And yet I cannot even count this service against my debt to you, Lord Yamada."

"How so?"

"It was strictly self-interest. If Prince Kanemore had been slain in Shinoda Forest, it would have been necessary for the Imperial Court to take action. I fancy that those most

responsible for the crime would have insisted the most stridently, and I did not want our home burned down around us.”

Kanemore bowed again. “For what it may be worth, Shinoda Forest will not be touched so long as I have any say in the matter.”

I could see that Prince Kanemore’s opinion of Lady Kuzunoha had elevated considerably since their first meeting, but I wasn’t surprised. She had that effect.

“I have unfinished business with this one,” she said, kicking the priest again, who would likely have cowered lower, if that were possible.

“I think we do as well,” I said. “May we go first?”

Lady Kuzunoha demurely withdrew a few paces while I reached down and hauled the monk to his feet. He wasn’t entirely steady. He still held his staff, and he used it to lean on. I should have taken it away from him, but part of me hoped he would do something foolish.

“Who set you against Prince Kanemore?” I asked.

“No one,” he muttered. “I thought there were those who would reward me within the Court if Prince Kanemore was removed.”

It almost sounded plausible, if one assumed the fellow was a complete simpleton. I did not so assume. “So you took it upon

yourself to involve the sōhei of Enryaku Temple in a plot to murder a Royal Prince on the off-chance that someone would approve? Sir Monk, you will have to do better than that.”

“Much better,” Kenji growled.

“The abbot of Enryaku ordered it,” the monk said then, pushing my patience just a little closer to its limit.

“If the abbot had been involved, he would not have trusted this mission to so few. More, I know the abbot. As does Prince Kanemore. We do not believe you. Now. I will not ask this again.”

“Nor will I.”

Prince Kanemore took one step forward, and his blade flashed in the weak light. The monk fell, and for a moment I thought Prince Kanemore had lost patience and killed him. Then I realized he had only sliced through the monk’s staff, sending him tumbling back to the ground.

“Search him,” Kanemore growled, and I held the man down while Kenji did the honors.

The man was carrying almost nothing, save a wrinkled slip of paper with some writing. Kenji handed it to me. “It’s a love poem, and I do not think it was written by our young man here.”

Kanemore scowled. “Let me see.”

I handed the paper over, but he did little more than glance at it. “The reference to the wisteria is no surprise. It’s the Fujiwara emblem. What interests me is that the poem also makes reference to the willow tree. Would you care to explain, monk?”

He just glared at us, and Prince Kanemore sighed. “I know who our enemy is, and I will deal with it...with the assistance of the good monk here. To that end, Lady Kuzunoha, I must ask that you refrain from ripping him to shreds, at least until I am done with him.”

“I will never betray her!” the monk shouted, and at last I understood. It was not politics or profit—at least on the young fool monk’s part—but love. And yes, monks and priests were supposed to be above and removed from such things. In theory. In practice, well, there were as many of casual piety like my friend Kenji as not. I almost sympathized with the man.

“You already have,” Kanemore said. “And you will continue to do so for a while yet. Otherwise....”

“You can kill me if you wish.”

Prince Kanemore smiled. “That’s true. Your life does belong to me. And I am fully within my rights to bestow that life upon Lady Kuzunoha.”

Lady Kuzunoha, who had been following the conversation with amused interest, knew a hint when she heard one.

Immediately she was in full fox-demon form. Her teeth were very long and sharp.

“Give him to me,” she said. “I want to play.”

For a moment the monk apparently forgot to breathe. He turned back to Prince Kanemore like a drowning man grasping a twig. “What...what do you want me to do?”

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Prince Kanemore was circumspect as always, but later I heard that Lady Akiko, known at the Court as Willow, sister to the Emperor's Third Wife and aunt of one of the rival claimants to the Throne, had suddenly decided to leave the Court to take Holy Orders. I also heard that Prince Kanemore and his private guard personally escorted her to a very distant western temple to assure her safety. As for the young monk, I never did discover what happened to him. Nor did I ask. I had other things on my mind.

It was six months before I entered Shinoda Forest again. It was perhaps foolish to do so, especially alone, but unfinished business was unfinished business, and I had no idea how else to settle this particular bit.

I followed the path to the shelf of stone where I had seen Lady Kuzunoha in the image of Princess Teiko. I kneeled before the stone and closed my eyes, bringing the memory of Princess Teiko back to me.

“I have failed,” I said. “I thought I could hang onto my anger and use it to push me to forget you. But as long as the anger was there, so were you.”

“You were right to be angry,” she said.

I opened my eyes. Princess Teiko kneeled on the rock, not in an elaborate Court dress but as I had seen her last, dressed in traveling clothes at the camp near Lake Biwa. She was sipping tea. I closed my eyes, blinked, but she was still there. I thought I knew why.

“I tried to drink free of you and of myself. That did not work either.”

“Obviously,” she said, but that was all.

“I knew what I had to do. I chose drink instead. It was easier...no, not easier. At the time it was *possible*. I was weak, perhaps, but I did what I could do, and now that’s done. I will be ready to help your brother Kanemore when and if he needs me. I *will* see your son on the throne. There is just one more thing I must do first.”

“Then do it,” she said. “For both our sakes.”

“For using me...for taking advantage of my affections for your own ends. For everything. I understand why you did. I always understood, but only now I can forgive you for all of it. And I do.”

She smiled then, and the image of Princess Teiko bowed low. “Thank you.”

I returned the bow. When I looked up again, she was gone.

“Lord Yamada? This is an unexpected pleasure.”

Lady Kuzunoha stood beside the stone, looking at me. I think she was amused, but I wasn’t certain. As with Princess Teiko, it was—had been, rather, hard to tell sometimes.

“I think our debts are properly settled, Lady Kuzunoha,” I said.

She smiled at me then. “Lord Yamada, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Lady Kuzunoha looked a little puzzled. Or perhaps it was my imagination. I didn’t know for sure, but that was all right. There were times when it simply wasn’t wise to be certain.

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## DIRT WITCH

by Eljay Daly

Relentless as winter and time and dirt, the dead soldiers came back to Szukowo.

Dorota cried as she stabbed her shovel into dirt grown hard with frost. She tried not to see her father's body—that long, shrouded bundle like a dirty flower in the weeds. The rest of the village were too frightened to help—even sweet Erik the beet-farmer's boy, who'd found her Tata's body in the river and dragged it to shore. At least Erik had promised to come later and help roll Tata into the hole.

The air rang with banging, as though hammers and wood and nails could repel soldier ghosts full of hate whose bayonets still stabbed and whose rifles killed with phantom bullets that vanished from their victims' bodies.

For hundreds of years they'd killed Dorota's people, from first frost to spring thaw, masters of slaughter and torch, until Tata had stolen a fire-flower from a witch in the deep woods and used it to drive them away. For all of Dorota's sixteen years, he had driven them away. He drove them away, and now he was drowned, and the soldiers? The soldiers had come back.

\* \* \*

After Tata was buried, Dorota went back to the shack to feed old Baba. With Mama dead years ago, it was just the two of them now—Dorota and Baba. Not that there were that many more in all of Szukowo; the dead soldiers had nearly wiped them out.

Dorota tried to spoon the broth into Baba's toothless, helpless mouth, but Baba shook her head. "You're no Pietrek," she said, meaning Tata, her son, who had stolen the fire-flower twenty years beforehand and had limped home nearly dead of his burns.

Dorota thought she'd cried all the tears in her body, but a few more squeezed themselves out. Baba had it right; Dorota was no hero. "So he said nothing about where he planted the seeds?"

Baba swatted away the spoon. "You can't even cook. I don't taste the meat."

"There is no meat, Baba, remember? We can't hunt because of the soldiers. They already killed the Turieks and Simon the fisherman."

Baba pursed her lips and tightened her shawl awkwardly with hands like crippled spiders, then rocked her chair back and turned her head sharply away. Not fast enough; Dorota

saw the glitter in her eyes by the dirty light through the waxed canvas window.

There was nowhere to flee in the wide, wide wood, or Szukowo would have fled already. The world was trees and trees and trees, all the way to where miles of lichenized ruins lay like bones, then trees again forever.

*We need food for strength to fight*, thought Dorota. Then a new thought surprised her. *We need another fire-flower*.

But how? Dorota took the spoon and bowl to the table. Baba had said it; she was no Pietrek. He'd taught her nothing of his old witching ways.

\* \* \*

Later that night as Dorota tossed in her cot, a distant screaming snapped her awake. She crept to the window and peeked around the cloth. Deep in the woods, red flames licked the sky. The beet farm was burning.

Erik the beet-farmer's boy broke through the treeline, running. Barefoot in his night-shirt he bolted across the new snow toward Dorota's shack, all gangly boyish arms and legs.

A dead soldier chased him, greatcoat a flapping shadow, spiked helmet glittering in the moonlight. The soldier's longer strides narrowed the gap: a flash, a stab of metal, a meaty hiss of blade in flesh, and Erik stumbled another two steps then collapsed into the snow.

Somehow he rose to his knees and began to crawl. The soldier watched him inscrutably for a moment, then lifted his bayonet and stabbed and stabbed until Erik's shirt blossomed with blood like red flowers and he lay twitching in the white. Dorota bit her knuckle to dam back a scream.

Finally the soldier stopped. He jammed his boot on Erik's back and cocked his head while he sniffed the air. He looked right at the shack's window—right at Dorota. She didn't dare move. She didn't dare move, not a hair, not a breath. *Piss* heated her legs.

Blessedly, miraculously, the soldier turned away. Bayonet jutting over his shoulder he jogged back into the woods toward the burning farm, leaving no footprints in the snow.

Dorota slid to the floor, shaking with grief and horror. If not tonight, then another night for her and Baba. Maybe tomorrow night.

*You're no Pietrek.*

No. No, she was no Pietrek, but the rest of the village were busy or dead or hiding for their lives. It was Dorota or no one.

She would find the witch and barter for a new fire-flower. A witch surely was less dangerous than the soldiers.

\* \* \*

The next morning she bullied the remaining villagers for barter goods—linens, mostly, and a flask of plum brandy from

Dobrecz the kind goatherd, who agreed to care for Baba. Her Tata's tales had said north, so north she went.

For days she struggled through thick woods shivering, sucking ice from the frozen creeks and eating only stale bread; every branch was winter bare. At night in the trees she scanned the woods for soldiers, but it seemed they had more interest in clustered village shacks than in one lone girl trudging.

The leaden fall of her boots over days became a heartbeat, up-down, up-down in time with her white puffs of breath as she clutched her mittened hands in her armpits. Days, nights, she wandered, until one midmorning when a tingle of something, of someone else's curiosity, pricked her.

Dorota flailed through brambles, inched across a splintered plank of a bridge, dragged herself by root and rock up a nearly vertical hill, and there it was, *that house*, a rickety squat buzzard of a house tarred in mud and the leaves of a hundred dead winters.

Her relief turned almost instantly to dread. It had a dozen windows in the front, yes, *real* windows made of glass rather than waxed canvas, judging from the streaks of glint in the filth, but so caked with rain-splatter and bird droppings that they were mostly crusts among the few shutters dangling like broken wings. Two roofs capped the green-slimed timbers, both shingled, with gaps like missing teeth: a broad oblong roof

and a smaller square roof above it like a hat with a round chimney poking up like a feather. And a porch, too, beneath a triangle eave. Dorota crept up between the porch's pillars, raised her hand to knock, and heard from inside the sound of a man shrieking.

Startled, she tried the doorknob, but the door was locked. The man inside screamed again.

It was a thin sound like someone being spitted, and in the periphery of Dorota's thoughts his fear and pain licked at her. She opened her mouth to shout *hello, hello!*, lifted her fist to pound the door, when it struck her that this was *that house* and perhaps caution might be the wiser course. So instead she crept from the porch to the first window and used her elbow to scrape a peephole in the muck. She was just crouching in the thorn bushes for a peek when the door squealed open and a phlegmy voice said, "There you are!"

Dorota jumped. The house's doorway gaped black and empty. A smell gusted out, warm and moist and decayed like rotten teeth.

"I've come for help for Szukowo village!" Dorota slithered out of the pack on her back and held it aloft. "I've brought linens, good linens, and brandy. I'll trade them for a fire-flower to keep the soldiers away."

A pause, then a voice like a curious purr emerged from the shadow. “Szzzukowo?” Each syllable was drawn out and distinct and triumphant in a way that Dorota didn’t like at all.

“Yes, Szukowo. Please! We need your help!”

The door’s hinges squeaked a little again as it opened wider. An invitation. Dorota thought for a minute that no, no, *nothing* could make her go inside that house, but then she thought of Szukowo and Baba and that poor screaming man inside with no one else to help him. So she scanned the ground until she found a heavy branch, and hefting it like a club she crossed the threshold.

The door slammed shut behind her.

Silence. Nothing breathed in that darkness that smelled like potatoes gone black and rotten. Poking ahead with her stick, Dorota took a sliding step forward. Her boot toed something that rolled away with a clatter, a bedpost maybe, or a baluster by the weigh of it.

“Hello? Help! Help!” called the man’s voice from a vast impossible distance. He sounded weak; the words were full of tears.

“I can’t see!” Dorota called back.

“By where you came in, she’ll have left candles. On the shelf. But don’t spill the wax, dear God. *Don’t spill the wax.*”

His voice. His *voice*. Dorota's gut lurched in sudden terror—not from darkness or the warning, but because of the man's accent. He spoke like the soldiers.

It was a *living* voice—not the hollow tones of the dead men.

Despite the hammering of her heart, Dorota considered a moment. Say it *was* a soldier; if so, if he were alive and injured and as desperate as he sounded, surely a healthy girl could outrun him. Couldn't she?

So Dorota gritted her teeth against the fear, stuffed her mittens in her pocket, and fumbled at the wall by the door. She found a shelf at the level of her heart, cotton-soft with dust and littered with tiny grains—*mouse shit*, she realized with distaste. She found wooden matches and a rough stone and a pair of tapers. While she pocketed one candle and lit the other, she wondered: *A soldier. If he has a bayonet, a rifle, why does he not shoot the witch?* But perhaps witches had ways of remaining unshot—all to the good, really, as Szukowo needed a witch very much and a soldier not at all.

The house was bigger on the inside, as Dorota expected from a witch. What she didn't expect, in the flickering candlelight, was the filth. Spiderwebs, of course, in the corners, in the grimy chandelier—but what respectable spider would live among such grubby tatters, festooned with crumbling bits

of insects trapped, dismembered, neglected—wings, legs, heads?

The floor might have been red, might have been stone; the thick black grease of it gripped the soles of Dorota's boots as she inched through debris down the long corridor, club held aloft to ease her passage through the webs. The walls might have been red, too, red wallpaper dancing with bouquets of slime and countless handprints. At the end of the passage, a door—scratched, welts of old burn, smears of brown, and as Dorota turned the tarnished knob the taper shook in her hand. *Don't spill the wax*, Dorota remembered, and she righted the candle although a drop splattered painfully on her thumb.

Mice scattered as she pushed the door open. A long room with a long table on a threadbare rug, no chairs, a burnt-wood musk from the vast fireplace in the wall, a single door in the far distance. In the back corner, a soldier on his knees.

Gaunt and pale, he blinked at the candlelight. A chain led from a rusted cuff around his ankle to a bolt in the floor. One arm was a mass of bloodied bandages cradled against his chest.

"It won't come clean," he complained, then looked down and began to scrub a sodden rag against the floorboards. He seemed much younger than a monster should be, no older than Dorota, lost in his grown-man's greatcoat. Dorota felt abruptly sick.

“A rag that dirty won’t clean worth a damn,” she said.

“I know, but what else is there?” He kept scrubbing. “Get it clean she said, get it clean and you can leave. Are you here to clean, girl? A girl from the filthy rat villages, come to clean? That’s funny, you know. That’s very funny.”

He was mad.

Dorota went to the far door, but the soldier boy pled in a loud whisper, “Wait! Leave the candle! Leave the candle, please! You don’t need it with *her*. Leave the candle, and something to catch the wax. She doesn’t like a mess.” He waved his bandaged hand as though in evidence—a lumpy, unnatural mitten. Its shape filled Dorota with anxious dread.

She walked back to him and pushed her candle into his unwrapped hand. He clutched it. Eyes wary, he let her unwrap the bandages.

The cloth stuck to the wound. There was no water to loosen the scabs except the black muck in a nearby bucket, so instead Dorota used her fingernail to whittle until the caked slime released the rag.

Three fingers gone, chopped straight across near the knuckles, with the stumps burned black and weeping green. No wonder he was mad. No wonder. No one deserved this, not even a soldier. His terror licked at her soul.

The wounds needed washing. He would probably die anyway.

“Is there a pump? At the back of the house?” Dorota pointed to the door.

“There’s a kitchen. And a witch, too. But no good, no good. It isn’t *clean* yet, rat girl.” He jerked away. The candle went out.

The soldier boy was shuddering badly. Dorota pulled the spare taper from her pocket and lit it, then turned the taper sideways to dribble wax on the floor.

“No,” he shrieked. “No. The wax!”

“It’s only a few drops, see? Who could notice in all this filth? Anyway, when it dries, it’ll scrape right up.”

He didn’t answer, just hugged himself and rocked. Dorota lit his candle and jammed the base of it into the wax puddle, then she went to find the kitchen.

The door led to a dark hallway, a long throat to swallow her. At its end was another door; with her club Dorota nudged it open.

It was the kitchen, yes—another long room, a washing tub, a woodstove, a table. Roaches clung to the walls—dense clusters of them like black constellations in a grease-yellow sky. Flies out of season hummed over dirty plates, cups, bowls stacked on the table, the counter, the windowsill, crusted with

lumps of food gone to slag, gone to fuzz, gone to slime. The sweet stink if it gagged Dorota.

And amid it all towered the witch.

On the far side of the table she stood with her hands buried in a tub of rusty slop. A deerhide coat brushed the tops of sturdy boots, the shoulders burned and shiny like black epaulettes. She had antlers, curling and brown, and spectacles fashioned of fuzzed horn like a young elk's.

Her skin was a craggy landscape of ribbed burn scars and weeping blisters. Brown teeth clutched a pipe, a hollowed old bone, its knuckle breathing its smoke up into her eyes—stabbing eyes, intelligent eyes, curious. Hot eyes. Singed hair hung in hanks thick as dirty socks. Tucked among her hanks of burnt hair, a crown of four fire-flowers—great ember lilies that rained sparks. In the middle was a gap where another flower should have been.

“Your father stole from me.” Her rumbling voice bristled.

“He didn't want to! He only did what he had to to save Szukowo.”

“So say all thieves.” The witch lifted her hands. From the dripping muck she shaped a loaf and put it on the table, where others were lined up in precise formation.

*Like bread*, thought Dorota, mystified. *She's making bread-shaped dirt*. "Tata's dead. I brought barter goods. Will you trade me a fire-flower?"

"Oh, that's all, is it?" The witch sneered. "That soldier out there? He asked for food."

"So you cut off his fingers?"

"Ah, but he's done unspeakable things." It was a conspiratorial whisper. "Thieves and thieves and thieves. The soldiers stole this forest from me, then you stole it from them, so everybody's happy, eh? Everybody's only doing what they have to."

"But they're nothing but ghosts! That boy's the only living one I ever heard of."

"Well, I'll tell you what, daughter of a thief." The witch reached into the neck of her coat with one muddy hand, tugged out a chain, and dangled the skeleton key that hung there. "Go back to your soldier friend. Help him clean my parlor. When that room's spotless, you both can go."

Dorota shuddered. That room, with its vile filthy walls—an enormous task, an impossible task. "And you'll give me a fire-flower to save Szukowo?"

"More than that, girl. If your Tata's witch blood runs true in you, I'll show you how to use it."

That hadn't occurred to Dorota. She'd been so worried about getting the fire-flower that she'd never thought to worry about what to do with it once she had it. "But how do I *know* if his blood runs true in me?"

"You follow orders, girl. You clean my parlor." The witch plunged her hands into her mud, her fire-flower crown hissing a shower of sparks. The chatting was over.

Dorota left the kitchen. The dark hallway had grown cool. It felt wide and empty like a cave, and a fetid wind gusted to blow out Dorota's candle.

*So we're playing a witch game, are we?* Dorota thought grimly. Step by slow step she made her way forward, trying to keep her path straight by memory. Her stomach rumbled, and her mouth was parched. Twice she stopped to rest. Was the witch gripping time, stretching it like soft dough? Or was this illusion some power of the dirt house or of the fire-flowers?

Eventually, after hours or days or months, Dorota's groping hands touched wood. She sighed in relief, opened the door, and went into the parlor to tell the soldier boy the news.

He wasn't there.

Near the fireplace, though, was a bucket of clean water, and on the table were stacked loaves of bread. At least, they smelled like bread, not mud, hot and buttery wonderful—or perhaps Dorota was just that hungry. She went to the table and

touched a loaf; it felt like bread, warm and dry-crustled. She flaked off a corner. It *tasted* like bread.

Surely the witch didn't want to poison her. To the contrary, she wanted Dorota quite alive or she would have killed her outright—and a witch with a crown of fire-flowers hardly needed false bread to enchant. The bread, Dorota decided, was merely bread—a test, perhaps, of courage. *Fine*, Dorota thought fiercely at the witch, *play your stupid games*. With defiant gluttony she stuffed bread into her mouth, cramming her cheeks, barely taking the time to chew, sluicing it down with clean water from the bucket.

Bread or mud, she ate and drank until her stomach jutted and she belched like long thunder, but nothing in the room changed: not the height of the piled bread, not the depth of the water in the bucket.

Tears clawed at Dorota's throat, but she refused to let them out. Instead she crawled into a corner and huddled there under her dirty coat. She would rest just a little, just a little, then she'd begin her scrubbing. But sleep drowned her like a swollen dark river.

\* \* \*

Crying awoke her, a ragged sound with harsh edges.

"Boy?" Dorota whispered. She crawled to the table and found a match, her candle, lit them. In the halo of shine she

saw first that the doors were gone, replaced by unmarred expanses of filthy wall. Second, she saw the boy. He was tucked in the far shadows of his corner. His chain was gone. Instead, his left leg ended at the ankle in a bandaged stump.

It was odd and lumpy, caked with—oh God, *caked with streaks of wax*.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. His voice was hoarse and spent, gravelly and small. Sweat carved pale runnels in his grimy skin. His hand moved circularly on the floor, a shadow motion, scrubbing with filthy-nailed fingers.

Dorota ran to him. She held the filthy bucket to his lips. He drank for a long time. His skin gave off heat like a stove, and his eyes were glazed. *Fever. Or magic, perhaps, or herbs from the witch, to let him keep moving, to stave off the pain*. When she tried to get him to eat the bread, he shook his head. It had gone hard and brown as brick.

She had to get him out of there. “What’s your name?”

“Lev.”

“Well, Lev, I’m Dorota, eh? We’ll clean the room, then she’ll let us go.”

Lev looked at Dorota in astonishment, then grunted a laugh. Perhaps he was right to laugh; the witch did seem uninclined to mercy.

Dorota put the loaves on the mantel along with her lit candle and a rag to catch the drips, then she dragged the table to the corner. *Work from the top*, Baba always said. The witch had left no brushes. Dorota sighed, then opened her pack and tore her precious linens into rags, saving only a white handkerchief to wrap Lev's injuries after they were freed. Working from the top with a rag wrapped around her club, she began to dust the thick webs from the ceiling.

Lev watched. "You clean very well for a rat girl."

"Stop saying that! My people are no rats."

"Dorota, yes? Dorota from Szukowo?"

"Yes." That startled Dorota. Szukowo was a small village, and the soldiers had their own names for the places of the wood.

Lev brooded. He stared down at the lone boot peeking from beneath his coat. "My company were starving—the ones who were left, anyway. But I heard of this witch, see, called Dorota, so I ran here to beg for food. But now I see I have begged the wrong witch."

So that was why he'd reacted when he heard her name. "But I'm no witch! And how are you alive, anyway? All the other soldiers are ghosts."

Lev didn't answer. Maybe he didn't know. Maybe she'd blurted tragic news to him in the most unkind way.

Whichever it was, the discussion had exhausted him, and his head lolled to his shoulder. After a minute, he began to snore.

Dorota stabbed at the ceiling until her rag was black, then she dragged the table to the front wall. She sluiced the grime and handprints from the scabrous paint until the wall peeked through: a surprising, delicate spring green. Reflexively she turned to point the color out to Lev—and saw that all of her work had been erased. The ceiling was shrouded again with cobwebs, with bits of insects, was stained with grease and dark smears.

The strength left her legs. With a sob, Dorota collapsed on the table. First Tata, then the soldiers, and a butcher of a witch, and now this: a house that couldn't be cleaned when cleaning was the only way out. There *was* no way out! She would die and Lev would die, and the villagers would die like the soldiers already had. There was no way out.

There was no way out.

The thought stopped her tears like a slap.

*Was there no way out?*

She sat up and looked at the corner of the room where the kitchen door used to be. The witch hadn't passed her on her way back to Lev, had she? Surely Dorota would have heard the

opening of a door, would have seen the fire-flowers burning. And why chain Lev at all if the parlor led nowhere?

There must have been another way out of the room, some secret door or hidden passage that the witch couldn't alter.

Dorota jumped from the table and ran to the fireplace. She lit her candle and leaned in over the bones of blackened logs. Above the hearth's bricks the wood chimney stretched into darkness. The inside of a hollowed tree, it wore a coat of sticky soot but looked strong and unburned itself and was plentifully studded with knots and roots and woody ends of branches. "We can climb!"

Her shout roused Lev. Weakly he waved his bandaged hand at his bandaged stump of leg. "Climb? Might as well fly, witch girl."

"It's big enough for side-by-side. I'll help you."

Dorota slung her pack on her back, eased her arm around Lev's waist, and helped him limp to the fireplace. Up they climbed, one woody foothold at a time, with Lev's useless leg and arm between them. As their good outer feet groped for each safe nub of root, Lev dangled from his good hand, shuddering with effort. Without the fierce iron of Dorota's arm around his waist, he would have crashed back into the darkness.

Up, haul. Up, haul. Into blackness. The air grew chill, then frigid—colder even than the winter outside. “I can’t go any longer,” Lev whispered, the despair in his voice nearly palpable behind the chattering of his teeth.

“Yes you can.” Dorota clenched her teeth in determination. She wrapped her arm around Lev’s waist and dragged him upward by force of will.

Up, haul. Up, haul. Two steps, three, six, then when she reached for the next knot of rope her fingers touched icy metal.

It opened like a lid. A damper!

Dorota poked her head up. She listened for a minute. Silence. She fumbled candle and match from her pocket and lit them, then found herself looking out over burnt logs, snowy with ash, at a tiny crowded room with no door. A small bed crouched under a canopy of rags near a dresser with drawers open, cascading tattered wool, muslin, shrunken human skins sewn together with the surprised faces of people still attached. A dressing table was draped in feathers and fingerbones strung together like beads, the mirror caked in grime.

Beyond the furnishings were walls like ropy pillars of ice. A frozen room for a witch princess.

Dorota pulled Lev up and helped him through the ash and char, then crawled after him into the bedchamber.

“Th-there’s a window,” Lev said, waving his lump of hand at the wall.

It was true. Through the ice peeked a square of dirty daylight. Dorota took her candle over and applied the flame to the ice. It didn’t so much as drip. The ice roots felt ancient and powerful—too strong to notice the tiny flame of a village girl’s candle.

“We need older fire.” Grim and determined, Dorota knew just where she could get it.

She helped Lev to the bed and tucked him into blankets that blew a blizzard of dust when she shook them.

“Don’t leave me,” he whispered.

“I’ll come back.”

He grabbed her arm. His eyes shone with fever, his skin was flushed dark, his voice quavered with shame. “The officers said you were rats to be killed. I didn’t know you then.”

“Where did you *come* from, Lev?”

He blinked at her. “From the city, of course. All the world is city except this forest.”

Then Dorota understood. Poor Lev. Those bones of ruins so many weeks’ distance from Szukowo.... Lev wasn’t alive at all; he was just a boy trapped out of his time.

“What I did...oh, god.” His voice shook. He stabbed his hands forward as though he clutched a bayonet.

Dorota could practically smell the smoke; it stuck in her throat like sharp rocks. She could hear the distant shouts, the cough of rifles. She could see Lev, face tossed back in youthful monstrous joy, hand twisted in a woman's hair as he forced her to her knees while she wailed and clutched a bloodied dead infant to her breast.

"Stop," Dorota heard herself say—not to Lev, but Lev stopped anyway.

He was one boy, a memory of a boy, one tortured boy trapped by a witch in a web.

One boy, she could forgive.

"It was a long time ago, Lev."

Lev looked at her wide-eyed. Then his shoulders relaxed and he began to sob in great whooping gasps.

As Lev cried, the icy walls took on a faint glimmer and the candle's flame grew bright as a beam of spring sunlight. It glittered on the burnished wood of the hearth, and Dorota saw her path. The hollow-tree chimney continued upward above the flue.

Dorota could forgive one boy, but the dead soldiers were too ancient and powerful to notice a village girl's heart. Szukowo still needed saving.

Dorota felt the witch up in the attic, crouching and brooding and waiting.

The climbing was easier without Lev, but the throat of the chimney stretched endlessly. Using the nubs of knot and branch Dorota hauled herself upward until her arms and legs trembled and cramped. Finally her probing arm ran out of chimney.

She hauled herself into the attic and lay for a minute to catch her breath in the hot darkness. It smelled dry and sour up here, like old mildew. It also smelled of horn and hide and brimstone—of witch.

The shadows furled away like a shaken blanket, and there stood the witch twenty feet away, not in a little attic but in the forest near Szukowo. It was nighttime, but the moon shone bright. Dorota recognized the rise of hill beneath her feet, the mottled ring of boulders. That trio of pines, though—where was the ribboning of their bark? They were younger trees now. Time had flowed backward.

Through the woods came sparking flames like a beacon, then a young man limped out of the forest. He dragged one leg behind him, and his red face was a ruin of blisters. In his hands he cradled a fire-flower.

“Tata!” Dorota cried. He didn’t answer.

The witch walked slowly to Dorota. She took her crown from her head. Her gnarled fingers toyed with the gap where

another flower should be. “He had strong magic, Pietrek,” the witch conceded. “And he passed it to you.”

“He *kept* it from me. He never taught me.” Dorota couldn’t keep her eyes off her Tata’s face. So young, so strange. She’d never seen such pain on his face, or such indecision. It broke her heart to see him so...diminished.

Young Tata lifted the fire-flower. Grimacing, he brought the flower to his mouth and bit one its flaming petals. It blistered his lips. It filled his mouth with red light. Teeth gritted, he chewed. He swallowed.

All around Dorota the burning night faded slowly until only attic shadow remained.

Just Dorota and the witch, alone in the little garret that stank of dryrot.

All around were barrels and bushels and piles of linens, of spiked helmets and ragged coats like empty soldiers. Shock stole the breath from Dorota.

The witch walked over, her fingers rubbing the socket of her missing jewel. “I tested your will when you walked through my cave. I tested your courage when you ate my bread. I tested your spirit when you got that boy out of the parlor. Pietrek’s witch blood runs true in you, but more: he swallowed my flower and then he sired *you*.”

“That’s how he kept the soldiers away! It was *in* him. Then....” Then.

The stolen fire-flower lived in Dorota, in the seed that made her, in her mind and soul and body. She didn’t need to steal a fire-flower. She *was* a fire-flower.

But being a fire-flower wasn’t enough, or the soldiers wouldn’t have come back.

“Magic can’t hurt you, girl. Can rain hurt a river? Pietrek should have taught you to use your fire, but instead he taught you water. He taught you bucket and sink when a girl like you, she should *glow*.”

“And that’s what you would do, baba? You would teach me to glow?”

The witch lifted the crown and showed the empty socket to Dorota. “Come live with me, girl. Come home. Magic needs a witch to wield it, and a witch needs magic to wield.”

Dorota eyed that gap in the crown. It looked like a mouth to eat her. “No! I won’t be cursed or shrunk or stuffed in there.”

The witch gaped at her, then laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous! You’re a girl, not a flower. There’s a bedroom for you downstairs. You’ll never grow old, Dorota. You’ll be well and healthy forever—and a wielder of such power as I can’t begin to tell you.”

“We could get rid of the soldiers? We could save Szukowo?”

“We can. We can make Szukowo a city if that’s what you wish.”

A city! People upon people, laughing in streets of sunlit stone. Fat people in their underclothes hanging laundry over balconies, children running, their shoes slapping on the cobbles. Oven smoke and fiddle-song, and the smell of cooking meat. Joyful noises of living.

*Wait*, Dorota thought. Was this witch really so kindly as to offer such a gift?

No.

No, this witch wasn’t kindly at all, was she. *So what comes next, Dorota?* Soldiers, that’s what. Lust for land, and hatred to cleanse away simpler people like rats.

This witch with her antlers and her malice—*she must want a city, too, or never would she offer to build one*. Dorota thought of spiderwebs festooned with limbs of insects—with pieces of men. This witch...she needed meat. This witch was a hunter and the woods were nearly empty of prey.

Dorota scowled. “It was *you*, wasn’t it. You made this happen. You went back centuries and told Lev to look for a witch named Dorota. Then you lured him here and you kept

him, and while he stayed alive the soldiers out there couldn't quite die."

The witch started. She pushed her spectacles higher on her nose and peered at Dorota, then quickly masked her surprise. "The fire-flowers are too old to notice such a small thing as time. When I saw the future, when I knew Pietrek would do.... I had to make you desperate, Dorota, so you would come home to me."

In her hands the crown trembled. Dorota eyed the ring of silver and saw not an empty place where a thing had been stolen but her four unborn sisters, flaming lilies who tossed sparks like petals.

*You're no Pietrek*, Dorota thought—and she wasn't. She was no Pietrek to be tool to a witch.

Dorota jerked her shoulder and dropped her pack into her hand. She reached inside and pulled out Dobrecz's brandy and gripped it by the neck. Before the witch could react, Dorota lunged and shattered the glass against the old woman's antlers.

The witch shrieked. In her hands the fire-flowers leaped to lap at the soaking brandy, and the witch's coat caught fire. Slapping the flames, she dropped the crown. In seconds she was burning like a torch, and where her arms pinwheeled she rained fire on the attic floorboards.

The tattered linens and the old greatcoats flared like dry matches. The whole attic began to burn with hungry fire.

The witch wasn't made of magic, for all the spells she'd used to keep herself safe from the fire-flowers. In heartbeats her screaming stopped and she fell to the ground like a burning tree.

Dorota held her fingers outspread, marveling at the flames that licked but didn't burn.

"Dorota! Dorota!" came a small voice echoing up the hollow tree chimney.

Lev. Lev wasn't made of magic, either.

Dorota scanned the flames but spotted only one of the ember lilies. She gathered it up against her and she climbed into the chimney. It was cool amid the fire that was quickly engulfing the house.

One-handed, Dorota slid her way down, eyes burning in the clouds of smoke that choked her. Her feet touched lightly on the metal flue.

Lev was pressed against the ice watching in horror as the flames danced across the ceiling and rained cinders onto the bed and dressing table. Dorota ran to him and painted her fire-flower across the ice.

She felt it blink.

Then it began to weep.

A ceiling beam fell across the bed; the dusty bedclothes ignited with a whoosh. The ice gave a mighty crack then roared down, a sudden waterfall.

Winter air and daylight flooded the room. There was no time to think. Dorota tossed the fire-flower outside then grabbed Lev and pushed him through the window.

She skittered after him. They rolled down the roof and slid from the gutter, and after a heartbeat's flight crashed into the thornbushes ringing the house. The bushes tossed them bleeding into the mounded snow.

For a minute Dorota lay there, simply breathing. Then she crawled to Lev. She gripped him under his armpits and dragged him away from the house, *that house*, which was burning like a fallen sun except for the chimney—a fire-flower tree, Dorota realized. Too old to notice mortal fire.

*Water cleans, Dorota thought, but fire? Fire purifies. It purges.*

While Dorota held Lev sobbing in her arms, she looked at the fire-flower she'd rescued. Where it had fallen the winter ice had melted away, and around it lay a crown of new spring grass.

\* \* \*

Dorota found a helmet near the fringe of the fire and used it as a bucket to carry the fire-flower back to Szukowo.

Lev hobbled on the crutch she made him. When she'd gone to dress his wounds, she'd found them pale and hard with scar. He would never shoot a weapon again—not with missing fingers. He could hold a rake, though, or pull beets from the ground. He was aging, too; when she scrubbed the back of his neck for him, she saw some of his hairs had gone white. His limbo was ended.

Were the rest of the soldiers gone? Dorota thought so. The forest didn't feel so dark at night.

They drank water from streams that Dorota thawed. They ate blackberries and apples and walnuts that she coaxed from seed in minutes with the fire-flower.

Eventually they reached the little hill overlooking Szukowo—the same little hill where Dorota had stood with the witch. Dorota grabbed Lev's good hand and pointed, "Look, Lev, it's —"

It was nothing. Szukowo was gone.

Nothing remained but the ancient bones of a village, lintels of doorways, a few rotted timbers engulfed in dead vines. The war was gone and Szukowo was gone, and nothing remained of the old world but time and winter and dirt.

Dorota's heart was lead. *No, no*, she wailed to herself. It was gone. All gone. Baba.

She grabbed up her helmet and ran through the trees to the old cemetery. No fence now, and the long field was overrun with weeds. Saplings encroached toward the center clearing like forest children marching inward.

Slowly she paced through the underbrush, not sure if she would even recognize where Tata lay. But a hundred paces north of the old pine she spotted a big white rock that hadn't been there before. The words scratched on the rock had faded with time and weather, but Dorota could just make them out: *Here lies Pietrek, my son. Single-handed he saved Szukowo.*

Relief flooded her, and amusement. Szukowo had survived, because someone had rolled the stone here and only Baba would have scratched those words. Of course, Baba hadn't mentioned Dorota.

What had it been like when the soldiers had stopped coming? For a while the people would have stayed. Eventually, though, when the memory of the soldiers lost its power, they would have moved on. Why stay in the same hard land when the southern sun beckoned?

By the time Lev limped out from the trees Dorota was just patting down the soil on the little plot next to Tata's stone. The fire-flower could live here; it could sprout a new tree if it wished, or simply give Tata's ghost a patch of timeless summer.

*I'll make a new Szukowo*, Dorota thought. A summer land, a new witch house with never a winter to grind men's bones to dirt. She and Lev—a village girl and a soldier, beet fields and gardens.

As endless as summer and mercy and time, Szukowo would quiet their ghosts.

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## COVER ART

“Into the Unknown,” by Kerem Beyit



Kerem Beyit is a freelance artist born in Ankara, Turkey. He started drawing in his early childhood with the influence of comic books, and he trained himself from great fantasy artists like Frank Frazetta and Gerald Brom. He has won Master and Excellence Awards from Exposé 7, and his artwork has been used for covers of European editions of fantasy novels by Tad Williams and George R.R. Martin. Visit his website and gallery at [www.theartofkerembeyit.com](http://www.theartofkerembeyit.com).

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