

Grandpa's Violin

by

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Woodrose watched the fiddler pack her bags, its lips pursed in a disapproving line. She didn't seem to be in any great hurry, and it wondered if she had any idea what was expected of her at all. If she did or not, she was the violin's bearer; Woodrose could clearly see it lay out beside its case. The power invested in the old instrument pulled at the spirit, urged it to leave hiding and stride across the bare ground surrounding the maypole.

The little spirit looked over at its companion, a nettle, and grimaced. It wasn't surprised to see Nettle's face already in a deep frown. It was, after all the prickly being's most common expression.

"I don't think she knows," Woodrose ventured.

"Of course she doesn't know. Stupid humans can't keep a bargain even if you only give them one option. It's a wonder they ever made it past mound building."

"Come now, it's not her fault if no one told her. We'll just have to make the best of it. And we do need to make the best of it," said Woodrose. "If she refuses to help us, we're sunk."

After a grudging nod from its companion, Woodrose stepped out of the shadow of the large ash tree in which it had been hiding. It was a small being and roughly humanoid in shape. Its face was inhumanly round and vibrant lavender; its wide green palms and sharply tapering fingers looked far too big for its slender wrists and arms.

Its companion was altogether plainer. Nettle, too, was small, though it was both taller and broader than Woodrose. Its body was a uniform dull green, and covered in short, stiff hairs. The expression it wore was grim, and it stalked toward the fiddler as though setting about some truly distasteful task.

The two spirits approached the fiddler in complete silence, and as they neared her they could hear her humming to herself. The tune was mournful, and the fiddler was lightly touching this bit and that of the box from which she was retrieving her things; it looked very much like she was committing it all to memory. When they were six feet or so from the musician, Woodrose motioned for Nettle to stay back. Contrary to his normal nature, the taciturn sprite complied without complaint or comment.

Woodrose cleared his throat for attention, and spoke up in a musical voice, "Excuse me... Betsy, isn't it?"



Elizabeth Burke had been a fiddler at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival's maypole for three years. A maypole act that had ended, today, at the sounding of the closing cannon. The troupe of dancers she had known in that time would not be back, nor would the other musicians with whom she had played; no matter what fate befell the tall pole and its crown of ribbons, the maypole she had known would never return. She was the last one there, and she hummed a bittersweet tune of parting as she moved around the musician's stand, gathering her instrument, her basket, and all the little odds and ends of her festival persona. She should have left an hour ago, but she couldn't stand to part with any of her friends until the last possible moment. Despite the fact that she knew many of the troupe members personally, and was sure to see them again at ceilis, concerts and other functions, she felt as though she were leaving them forever.

She was roused from her reverie by a feeling on the back of her neck, like she was being watched. As she began to turn to see what was behind her, she heard a small cough, and a high sing-song voice said, "Excuse me... Betsy, is it?"

The fiddler started, and completed her turn. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you! Actually I go by Liz. How can I help..." Her words faltered as she turned to see who was addressing her. She had expected a child of some description, perhaps one of the other performers' children looking for her own daughters. What she found instead was

what could only be described as a little green man. He had a round purple face, and two leaf shaped hands held out toward her in supplication. He was shorter than her waist, and his body was far too long and thin to be a child in a costume. She felt her knees grow weak with the shock, and sat down heavily on the musician's bench behind her.

"Hi," said the little man, hopefully. "I don't suppose you're ready to go? It's just that we have to get you there soon, you see."

"We? What? Where?" Liz's gaze rose from the small being in front of her, and she caught a glimpse of another standing behind him. This second figure was taller, and broader, but still possessed of inhuman proportions. He wore thin spikes all over his body and a sour look on his face.

"Who are you?" she managed after a minute of staring. "Where do you think I'm going?"

"Air and darkness!" blurted the unpleasant looking figure. "I told you she wouldn't know what's going on. We don't have time for this. We should either take her, or leave her here and tell the Council to put every mage they have on the problem."

Woodrose spun suddenly, and his musical voice took on a discordant note as he raised it in anger. "No! Absolutely not! That sort of thinking will do nothing but make this task impossible! Haven't we all learned by now that kidnapping mortals never works? Didn't she give us examples enough of that, and more?"

"Fine," Nettle said grudgingly, "do it however you want. But we're exposed here, and if we're going to have a nice little confab, we should at least move to where no one is likely to see us."

Woodrose' face took on a shocked expression, and it glanced around quickly as though to see who was watching. Nearly everyone had already left the festival grounds for the night, if not the year, but there were still a few stragglers like Liz herself.

"My companion is right," it told her. "We are very exposed here, and if anyone managed to see through our glamour it would cause even more delay. Will you come with me? Just to a less open area of the fairgrounds?"

Caution warred with curiosity in the fiddler's mind. Seclusion meant safety from detection, but it also meant isolation if these little beings intended to do her harm. She stared at the pair, as though willing their motives to become clear through the force of her gaze. Finally, she said, "I'm not sure why I should trust you."

"Your grandfather did," said the smaller of the two. "That's who you got your violin from, isn't it? Gene Muggleton?"

"You knew grandpa?"

"Well, I didn't. I'm a short lived spirit. But your grandfather helped us, the last time it happened."

"The last time what happened?" Liz half-shouted the question.

"I promise to explain everything, but we can't do it here. Someone who can see us is bound to wander by eventually."

The idea of her grandfather consorting with these strange beings these spirits. It called itself a spirit. was too alluring for her to pass up. Besides, she thought, I know this fairground like the back of my hand. I will be able to get away from them if I have to.

"Okay," she said at length. "Where do you want to go?"

Woodrose grinned widely. "I know just the place."



Liz looked incredulously at the sign hanging above a replica of the most famous round green door in history. "Fairy Garden," she said, "You live in here?"

"Of course not, you idiot," growled Nettle. "Fairy garden. Mmpf. Like they even let nettles grow in there."

"I'm sure what my friend here is trying to say is, we don't live anywhere on this site, but the vegetation is thick enough that it will be easy for us to hide if someone happens along. Though I do suggest avoiding the f-word. It's a bit of a loaded gun with some of us."

The fiddler's head was swimming. This was too much strangeness, too quickly. They wandered down the path, and she took a seat on the first of the benches set out for patrons to rest upon. They were on a winding trail in an area of the fairground that had been left wooded. On the sides of the trail were small houses and workshops, decorated in candy-colors and introduced by doggerel poems. Each was the purported abode of one traditional type of fairy or other, and was designed to look like its diminutive occupant had just stepped away; perhaps they were off fetching a bowl of cream left out, or tripping the horses.

"Okay," she said, turning to Woodrose, "you - purple cheeks. You promised me an explanation. So spill - how do you know about my grandfather?"

"I'm a Woodrose, thank you very much. And I know your grandfather because he was bearer of the Mortal Voice during the last turning. Mortal Voice is, of course, your violin."

"Okay, that makes sense, I guess. What is the turning?"

"Mortal Voice, and its sister instrument, a flute called Spirit Song, were created to be part of a great spell. An extremely powerful sprite, one of the princes of the animal kindred, had gone bad. He was a danger to both humans and the spirit world, and he had to be stopped."

"He went mad is what he went, Woodrose," Nettle interjected. "None of the nobility are here for you to kiss up to, call it what it was."

"Well, yes, I suppose that's true. The animal he was riding had been infected with the foaming fever, what you call rabies. No one knew it could happen, but it affected the prince's mind as well. And like rabies among the mortal animals, those he injured became as crazed and dangerous as himself."

Liz sat quietly, trying to keep track of all the details. She was fascinated. Although she had been warned not to use the word "fairy," Woodrose' reference to mortal and spirit worlds, and these two sprites' own identification as plant spirits brought nothing to mind so much as the tales of Faerie. Woodrose' smell grew as he warmed to the task of narration, and the sweet scent lulled the fiddler into a relaxed and drowsy calm.

"The others whom he hurt were largely dealt with by the soldiers of the prince's own guard, but a spirit as powerful as he couldn't be dealt with by lesser powers. His mother, who was queen, refused to allow him to be killed, despite the assurance of the best of her astrologers and wizards that the prince could never be cured or his mind restored. So the king secretly met with the sages of the realm and devised with them a plan to imprison the prince in a magical jail through the power of magic. Magic born of music, and human blood, and spirit power and moonlight."

The mention of human blood was alarming, but Woodrose' drowsy scent was even stronger now, and Liz found herself unable to muster the energy to interrupt and demand an explanation. Somewhere inside a small voice was railing against her complacency.

"In those days there were a lot more humans who understood magic, and also more who truly understood the spirit world. The longer we go, the further we get from truly understanding one another, I'm afraid. It's turning into fairy tales and religion, now. They found a human magus and were able to convince him to help. A luthier was equally difficult, particularly once he learned what the peculiarities of construction would be. The musician was the easiest to find of all. Musicians and artist

have always had the easiest time seeing us; many want it so badly they convince themselves they see things that aren't even there."

"The magus was old. He had been born before the industrial revolution, and used his arts to keep himself alive but could not manage any true youth. It took them two months to safely collect the amount of blood required without killing him. The luthier took another three months, working on nothing else, to fit the pieces of the violin together. Each was anointed with the magus' blood, and bolstered by his spells. Finally, the violin was finished, and the old man laid the final great enchantment upon it. The strain was too much for him, I'm afraid, and he collapsed as soon as the magic was complete." Woodrose closed his eyes reverently for a moment. "He gave his life to save us, you know. Every spirit child is taught to revere his name. Rest well, Alexi Petrov."

"Once the actual creation of the violin was done, humanity's contribution was nearly over. The Spirit Song was created at the same time, in similar fashion, by my people. The musician we had found was taken to the spirit world and joined the chosen champions of the plant kindred. The prince's own guards were used to lure him to the place where the ritual would be held. Many of them died, holding him there while the plant mages and the two musicians built his eldritch cage."

"The prince was terribly strong. He's still strong to this day, and he rages against the confines of his cage without cease. Even the mighty works and sacrifice of those mages cannot stand against him forever. So the cage must be renewed, using the same spells and instruments that built it one hundred and sixty human years ago. Every forty years we must renew it."

The spell of Woodrose words began to lift from Liz's mind. "So, since I am the bearer of the violin, now, I have to do it? And grandpa did it forty years ago?"

"You don't have to do it. There are other options, though it's very late in the cycle to try to exercise them. Your grandfather certainly did. He was remarkable, according to the stories. He was supposed to teach his successor about the bargain though. I wonder why you didn't know."

"I didn't play the violin until recently. Maybe he imagined it would be someone else's problem. I don't know. And now he's gone, and I can't ask him. But wait, you said that every piece of the violin was enchanted; some of the pieces are missing. It had to be repaired."

"Oh, brilliant," spat Nettle.

Woodrose's face became a horrified rictus as the implications of Liz's statement began to sink in. "How much of the violin was replaced? Was it more than half? And when?"

"No, definitely not half. It's been more than a year."

"We'll have to hope that the power of the original material was sufficient to imbue the new pieces in that time. I don't see where we have much of a choice. Failing is no worse than not trying."

"You said there were options besides me performing the ritual," Liz said. "I'm not sure what to do, but just in case, what are they?"

"You could just give up and let the world go hang itself," barked Nettle. "That's the normal human response."

"You could do that," Nettle said, "or, you could give the violin to someone who would be willing to help. The problem is it has to be done before the time of the ritual."

"Loan someone my violin?"

"No. If you loan it, you're still the violin's mistress. You would still be the one required. You would have to give it away freely and without any hope of getting it back."

"I couldn't do that! Not to grandpa's violin."

"Our options are narrowed considerably, then."

"When is the ritual going to happen, anyway?"

"Tomorrow."

Liz was stunned. This was all too much, too fast. She rested her aching head in her hands and tried to think. "I have children, you know. I can't go haring off into the spirit world with no time to plan. I can't go do something dangerous and maybe never come home to them again."

"You won't be in any real danger," Woodrose said soothingly. He had sat down quietly beside her on the bench and his gentle fragrance was enveloping Liz in a comforting shroud again. "The last time someone died was the first ritual, and those sprites were contending with the mad prince directly. You'll just be playing music, raising power for the mages to pour into the wards that already stand."

"Yes. I suppose that's true. And I don't know if I'd ever forgive myself if I gave up a chance to see the spirit world." Liz's objections were slowly easing, and her headache was only a distant memory. It would be simple. She'd just have to let them know at home that she'd be busy tomorrow.

"That's right," Woodrose said. "Boston isn't really that far away in today's world anyway. You'll be home by sunrise on Tuesday, I guarantee it."

The smell was intense again. It was almost a physical presence now, invading her nostrils and preventing her from stringing her thoughts together. She heard herself agree to help as though listening to a stranger. What followed after was a confused welter of images. A cell phone call home to give a confused explanation to her partner and make sure the kids were looked after. Wandering bewildered through the parking lot to her car, and a drive to the airport that she remembered only as a collection of streaking lights and loud noises. Shuffling through the airport, giving her documentation to security, and taking her seat. Once the plane was in the air, the cotton in her head overcame her, and she knew no more for a long time.



Liz woke to sunlight in her face, and the sound of bird calls. She was in a strange, luxurious bed, in a room she didn't recognize. She was overcome by panic until the memory of yesterday's meeting flooded back, replacing it with anger. She was sleeping in her chemise, and her festival garb lay in a heap on a nearby ornately carved chair. Another dress, equally archaic in style but made of a beautifully embroidered collection of fabrics was hanging on the back of a dark wooden door.

Casting around for some clue as to her location, she spied a note folded neatly on the unused pillow on the other side of the bed. She picked up angrily and pulled it open to read:

Hawaiian Baby Woodrose (Argyreia nervosa) "The plant is a rare example of an herb whose hallucinogenic properties have only recently been discovered." That's what Wikipedia says about me. I'm sorry; there just wasn't any more time to spare. I hope you can forgive me, but if you can't, I hope you will at least still help my people.

He had drugged her! No wonder she had agreed to this so quickly. Liz crushed the note, the pathetic attempt at apology, and flung it away with a scream of rage. How dare he? She strode across the room to her discarded clothing; each footstep caused a dull boom as she brought her heels down hard on the hollow floor. As she was pulling up her skirt and tucking her chemise back inside it, a knock came at the door.

"What?" she barked.

"I have come with clean clothing, fiddle-bearer," said an unfamiliar voice. It was breathy and reminded Liz of the sound of wind in the leaves of a tall tree. "Perhaps you would like to change out of your dusty clothes and have a shower. May I come in?"

The idea of a shower was incredibly tempting after a day at the festival. The fairgrounds were always dusty unless it was raining, when they became a swampy, muddy morass. Either way, she was always filthy after a day of performing. Now that sleep and anger were beginning to clear, she realized that her head was killing her as well, and that she was incredibly hungry.

Suddenly, it was all too much. She had not been tricked, but she had been drugged. She was a thousand miles from home (assuming she was even still in her own world!). She hadn't eaten any dinner, and she felt like she had all the free dirt in Minnesota smeared into her skin. She slumped down onto the chair, careless of the clothing she was sitting on, put her face in her hands, and began to sob.

She heard the door open and barely audible footsteps crossed the floor toward her. Soon she was being held in slender arms and cradled against a thin, hard chest. "There, there," crooned the leafy voice. "I know, it's all too much, and no one warned you. Woodrose is a fool and brought you here before you were ready. It will be alright. No one will make you do anything you don't want to do."

The sympathy in the alien voice somehow made it all even worse, and Liz buried her face in the uncomfortable shoulder and cried helplessly. After a while she looked up to see a female-looking face peering down at her in concern. The woman (Liz could not help thinking of the being as female, despite knowing she was most likely some kind of plant spirit and void of true gender) was thin, with warm brown skin that felt much harder than it looked. Her torso curved gently, reinforcing the impression of femininity, but the curves were unyielding and in subtly the wrong place. Her long hair and sleeveless gown were pale green. Her every small movement spoke of grace, and the arms she held around Liz seemed to curve, even between the joints.

When it was clear that the current storm at least had passed, the kindly spirit said, "There, now, feeling a little better? Perhaps that shower, now, and then some breakfast? No one should have to make important decisions on an empty stomach. I myself refuse to have discussions of any importance if I have not felt the sun on my face for at least an hour."

Liz nodded jerkily, and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. "I think that would help."

"Good. The shower is right through there." She indicated a door that Liz had originally taken for a closet of some kind. "There are towels and soap and such things already there. If you require any assistance, call out for me. You may call me willow." With this, she backed quietly through the door, and Liz was alone again.

Bemused, the fiddler began to undo her hasty attempt at dressing, and moved through the doorway into the bathroom. She had expected a half-bath, something with a shower stall, pedestal sink and perhaps a toilet. The reality was far more luxurious. The room was spacious with a large frosted glass window to let in diffused sunlight. The expected pedestal sink was there, in ornately decorated porcelain and surmounted by a brass faucet and mirror in an ornate gilded frame. A low linen cabinet of light colored wood was surmounted by a potted flowering shrub in full bloom, and instead of a shower there was a beautiful antique porcelain tub surrounded by a curtain with a massaging shower head leaning over it from the wall. The linen closet revealed a treasure trove of fluffy white towels, flower-scented soaps, and what appeared to be bath oils.

With a little sensuous cry of delight, Liz doffed the rest of her clothing and started the shower. The pressure was just right for soothing aching muscles, and the soap's bouquet was light and airy and invigorating. Twenty minutes later she was clean

and dry, and felt like she could face the idea of this "turning" calmly and rationally. She still might strangle Woodrose if she saw him again, but she felt far less helpless.

As she finished toweling her hair, she realized that Willow had left a bundle of clothing on the bed. It was a dark green dress made of light cotton cloth, and ornately decorated with needlework. There were also under things in her size, and a pair of tall socks that would be perfect under her boots, the only footwear she had with her. She put on the clean clothing, grateful to avoid having to wear the dusty festival garb again. As she slipped into the dress she was pleased to see that the sleeves were short and gathered at the elbows. They would not get in the way of her playing the violin, but the neck and shoulders of the dress covered her fully enough to avoid any discomfort from her shoulder rest. Someone, at least, had clearly thought of her comfort during this ritual.

She stuck her head out of the bedroom door and called out, "Willow? I'm finished. You said something about breakfast?"

A small ball of light came flitting through the air towards her. From where she was standing she could see down a short hallway and into some sort of open, well-lit room. The will'o'wisp stopped in front of her and bobbed gently. Each time it moved there was a suggestion of music, like tiny bells.

"Willow?" Liz asked. This time the bells sounded suspiciously like giggling. "Okay, fine. You're not Willow. Am I supposed to follow you?" The wisp began to bounce furiously, like an overeager puppy. "Okay, then, let's go find breakfast."

The glowing ball swooped away in a shower of sparks and a tinkle of bells. Liz slung her violin case over her shoulder and followed carefully. The wisp led her through a small, neatly appointed house. Whoever owned it obviously had money, but taste enough to use it subtly. The furnishings were all made of solid wood, and most of them were carved. When they passed through the living room, the couch and easy chairs were upholstered in high quality fabrics in tasteful patterns. The wisp led her through the house and out an ornate set of French doors and into a well tended yard. Once her eyes adjusted to the bright morning sunlight, she saw Willow, another brown-skinned being, and an old man sitting around a wrought iron table on a tile patio. Willow raised a hand in greeting, and the wisp bobbed excitedly behind an empty chair.

The redheaded fiddler sat gratefully at the table and looked down at the meal that filled a delicate china plate before her. The plate was heaped with fruit and bread, and a faceted crystal cup was filled with yogurt and toasted oats. There was fresh honey, with the comb still in it, and a pitcher of milk with beads of condensation forming on the sides sat in the center of the table. Liz picked up her fork and dug into the repast with gusto. When the urgency of her hunger had been eased, she put down her fork and looked around the table. Her three companions were watching her with smiles on their faces.

"Thank you. I feel much better. I do wish you had given me more time, though. I had just about made up my mind to come here. Wherever here is."

The old man spoke up, in a thin, croaking voice. "Woodrose was not prepared for the possibility that you would not know what was going on. I think he panicked, really. Though they resemble us in some particulars, the spirits frequently fail to understand the way our minds work. The plant spirits particularly."

"So you are human, then," Liz blurted, then blushed. "I suppose that was a rude thing to say."

The old man's body shook and he wheezed alarmingly with what Liz finally realized was laughter. "No, no, child. I know what I look like now. I'm as gnarled as a Thorn spirit. I'm human, but I am one of the few people in these times who knows the spirit world and its magic. I'll be helping you cross over into their world when the time comes. And yes, you're in Boston just like Woodrose and Nettle told you."

The unknown spirit said, "I want to apologize to you on behalf of the court of

the Oak King. As Gartner says, it was handled very poorly, and you would be well within your rights to refuse to aid us entirely, though I must warn you that doing so would have as dire consequences for your own world as it would for ours. Take what comfort you can from the knowledge that you will be compensated for your time and the emotional hurts you have been caused."

This brown skinned spirit sounded so much like a lawyer that a little snorting laugh escaped Liz before she could stop herself. She composed herself with some difficulty, and tried to answer in as weighty a tone as the one with which she had been addressed. "I'm glad to know that the court of the... the Oak King takes such incidents seriously, and that my safety and well being are being taken into considering during this difficult time. May I know who I am addressing?"

"Since my offspring has already bespoken the name of Willow, the plant to which we are related, you may call me Old Willow."

"So Willow isn't truly her name? And I suppose the same is true of Woodrose and Nettle?"

"Indeed. Plants, and the spirits most closely associated with them, have little use for names, and when we do we tend to have names made up of more than simple sound. We learned long ago that the humans with whom we dealt were totally incapable of reproducing them, and frequently even of properly perceiving them. For this reason, assuming some variation of the name of the plant to which we are bound has become the norm. When more than one spirit of a similar type deals with a given human or group, we add some modifier, like Old Willow, or perhaps a different variation of the name."

"That's really incredible. So many stories told about the spirit world and none of them quite right."

"I hate to break up the spirit social studies class," croaked Gartner, "but we should probably go ahead and get her prepared for the task at hand. If we get it done properly there will be plenty of time for extending the olive branch later."

"Oh, right, sorry!" Liz said. "What will I have to do, exactly? Is there any music in particular that I need to know?"

"You can play whatever music you like, Liz. The act of playing music on Mortal Voice in the spirit world will raise the proper kind of power by its very nature. The musician playing Spirit Song is a gifted master of improvisation and is skilled at supporting and following the lead of other musicians. It was decided that he would wield the flute in case there was a problem bringing the fiddler to the spirit world to practice in advance. Good thing someone thought of that, isn't it Old Willow?"

"Yes, Gartner, your contribution in this event has been noted and our gratitude has been expressed repeatedly. Your constant harping on it grows wearisome."

"That doesn't seem too hard," interjected Liz. She was worried that the two elders would fall into wrangling and forget their preparations entirely. "I just have to go to the location, play any music I want, and wait for the spirit mages to do... whatever it is they're doing?"

"More or less," said Gartner.

"More or less."

"Yes. You see, we need to prepare you and your instrument a bit. You are already wearing the ritual attire, which is convenient. Woodrose told us that the violin has been repaired, and some of the parts replaced. I should examine it and make sure the flow of its power has not been damaged, nor some fatal flaw introduced. It would never do to have the thing blow up in your face, would it?"

"I should hope not!"

"May I see the violin, my dear? And then we shall replace the strings. Those will never do."

Liz handed the frail old man her violin case and watched as he opened it, and began to pass his hands back and forth over the instrument inside. He muttered under his breath the entire time, in a language that the fiddler could not recognize. He looked pleased with whatever he was doing, until the very end. His face took on a look of concern, and he ran his fingers along the fingerboard over and over. Eventually he produced a small crystal vial of clear liquid and anointed the board with it, and only then did his face return to its original set of contentment.

"I think that will do just fine," he said when he was finished. "As I said, the strings will have to be replaced. It's not quite like the fairy stories, but steel and magic don't get along very well. I have some actual gut strings here that will work better for this purpose."

Liz made a face, remembering the casual way in which Woodrose had referred to sacrifices of lives and blood in his story of the first time the magic was worked. "Gut? Gut of what? Or should I ask, 'whom'?"

Willow spoke up finally. "You probably should ask 'who,' but I think you might be content with 'what.' The strings were fashioned from the gut of a dragon. He was one of the last to stand against the Queen before they were banished from the spirit realm into whatever makes up the world beyond. Several sets were fashioned before the original casting of the spell; there are enough violin strings to last a dozen turnings. What we will do then is a matter of great debate. I think that most hope that a cure for the prince will be found before we run out."

"Here are the strings. Why don't you take them back to the room and put them on, and practice playing them? I imagine it will be different from a steel set of strings."

And so Liz found herself back in the room wherein she had awakened. Then it had seemed strange and a little threatening; now it seemed welcoming and comfortable. She settled into one of the beautifully carved chairs and began to change the strings on the violin. The dragon gut strings were different from anything she had worked with before. They were unexpectedly light and delicate lavender in color. They felt like next to nothing in her hands. It was similar to the slick feeling of silk sliding over her skin, but there was almost no sensation of weight. She soon discovered, however, that the dragon gut was immensely strong. She put the first string in place and tightened it until it was nearly in tune, and the material took the strain easily. When all four strings were stretched taught over the instrument, the fiddle seemed almost alive. Even its weight seemed less, as though it were helping her to lift it and prepare to play.

The sound from the dragon-gut strings could only be described as massive. It filled the room with a full, robust sound. On some level she was aware that the physical sound wasn't that much different from more mundane, high-quality strings, but the emotional and psychic response it elicited was enormous. Mournful airs brought her near to weeping in just a few notes, and she found herself trying to dance and play at the same time when she tried a reel. When she had been playing for about fifteen minutes, a cough from the doorway startled her out of her trace-like state. Gartner was standing there with a genuine smile on his face. He had changed his comfortable summer clothing for a floor length red robe, decorated with eye-bending patterns.

"I'm glad you were able to find your peace with the new strings. Best to stop now, though; we don't want to attract any unwelcome attention. And it's time to go, anyway."

"Unwanted attention? I wasn't playing that loud." Liz opened her violin case and lay the now-unfamiliar instrument inside.

"A violin like that could be heard in the spirit world as well, not to mention magical effects here in our own world. Sadly, there are some who have been seduced by the promises of the Mad Prince in our own world, and the spirit world."

"That's terrible. What could he promise that would make it worth risking the safety of both our worlds?"

"Power. Vast, magical riches. Some even relish the idea of the ensuing chaos. But most of them have probably been convinced that he was unjustly imprisoned. They're so fixated on their own greed that they can't believe, or won't believe, that there will truly be consequences."

With these words the old wizard began ushering her out of the house. The willows were waiting in the foyer, and as Liz passed by the younger of the two gave her another of those warm but uncomfortable hugs. "Thank you again," she whispered.

Liz stepped out into the midmorning sun, and was led, half-blinded by the bright light, to a black SUV with darkly tinted windows. Gartner held the back door for her, and once she was seated climbed into the front passenger seat. As her eyes readjusted for the second time in as many minutes, she realized she was not alone in the back of the vehicle. There was a large, broad shouldered man in a dark suit and shooter's glasses on the driver's side of the back seat. His jacket hung open, and Liz could see that he was wearing a harness with a holster under right arm. The gun, heavy and black and deadly, was a stark contrast to everything she had seen since leaving the maypole yesterday afternoon. The spirits, even Woodrose with this hypnotic fragrance, teemed with life. This man and his cold metal gun and colder expression spoke only of death.

"What in the hell is going on?" she asked as the truck began to roll. Fear and confusion and anger added an edge of challenge to her voice.

Gartner looked at her from the front seat. "I told you, the prince has agents in this world and the next. They know just as well as we do that it's the time of returning. This is their chance to set their patron free. If you never made it to the ritual, or I was unable to open the door for you to pass through to the spirit world, well, then they'd win. The high mage for the first ritual was killed on the way. Thankfully, he had journeymen who were able to open the door. We don't have that luxury."

The fiddler watched the man in the seat beside her. He was watching out the windows, just a few seconds in direction. He seemed to be oblivious to the fact that they were talking about him. "So, what? He's one of the Oak King's guards or something?"

"No, both of these gentlemen are mercenaries. They don't really believe in what we're doing, but they don't care, either. They'll make sure we aren't molested as long as they are paid. And they have been well paid."

The vehicle entered a tunnel, and the passenger compartment was lit only by the lights of the dashboard. Liz was gripped by a sudden fearful awareness of her own vulnerability. "What if... what if they're working for the prince? What if they're double agents?"

The man beside her snorted. He was listening after all. Gartner turned all the way around and looked deeply into her eyes. In the darkness, his eyes glowed with an unnatural green from within. "No, they are not any kind of double agents," he said, firmly. "They have no secrets from the likes of me."

Liz suppressed a shudder at this reminder that her companion was far more than just a frail old man. Trying to hide her discomfort, she changed the subject. "Where are we going, anyway? Why don't we just go to the spirit world?"

"There are only a few places that one can cross into the spirit world, or from it, without expending an enormous amount of power. We're headed to the closest one. It's in Cambridge."



"A die-casting plant?" Liz asked incredulously. "The mystical portal to the fairy realm is a die-casting plant?"

They were standing outside a large brick building. It looked very old, but had modern steel letters mounted on the side: "Cambridge Die-Casting."

"Yep," replied Gartner, with another of those wheezing laughs. "Funny, isn't it?"

"What about magic and steel and all that?"

"Overemphasized. I think it's caused by the memory of a well known spirit-world visitor who didn't care for it. It doesn't bother me much at all. And besides, no one checked with the local mages before they turned this old textile mill into die cast plant."

"So, what now? Do we just walk in and ask nicely to be taken to the gate to the spirit world? They'll never let us in."

The old man's response was just more of that alarming laughter. "I don't intend to ask for permission." He handed two silvery pendants on red silk ribbons to the guards, who put them on with expressions of good-natured amusement. Then he began a low chant, and passed his hands through the air.

"Wait," said Liz, interrupting the old man. "Don't I need one of those?"

"Nope. I embroidered yours right into the gown." He pointed to the neckline of the dress, to a circular design that Liz had taken for decoration. "I'm more than just a pretty face, you know," he wheezed.

Uninterrupted this time, Gartner repeated his chanting and his mystical passes. Finally, with a crescendo that broke his voice and left him out of breath, he stopped. "There, that will take care of it."

"Are we invisible or something? I can see both of you," Liz said.

"No, not invisible. That's more difficult. Or possibly impossible. It's a matter of great debate among my colleagues. No, this spell will simply make us uninteresting. People will see us, but the magic will see to it that they don't think about us, or even take any conscious notice of our presence. In an environment like this one, that can be dangerous. Rambo and his buddy here are with us just as much to make sure you don't get knocked into a die casting machine as they are to shoot any stray bad guys."

One of the mercenaries, the one that Liz had mentally labeled "Driver," spoke up. "Sir, our contract does not include going to prison for breaking and entering. I hope you understand that we will not help you force entry into a lawfully operating business."

"Blah, blah, blah. I promise, if anyone so much as makes a peep about our presence, you can leave. For now, just follow along."

Gartner took led them toward the front doors. His movements were sprightly, even more so than they had been earlier in the morning. He strode through the doors as bold as brass, and the receptionist at the large L-shaped desk in front didn't even look up. He cast his head back and forth, and, finally finding what he was looking for, set off across the lobby and through a sea of cubicles in the front office. He led the little band straight to a door marked, "OSHA Regulations Require Eye Protection Beyond This Point." He reached into a box on the wall and handed out four pairs of slightly scratched goggles before turning to address them. "This is a factory. It's full of large metal things that are probably moving faster than is strictly safe. Try not to get caught in anything. And for goodness sakes, Liz, don't let that violin case get caught. We will have to cross the main production floor and find the old freight elevators that lead downstairs."

Driver and his compatriot, Rider, were looking a little wide-eyed. They had clearly expected the old man to be thrown out of the office, and weren't sure what to make of the events as they unfolded. It was a testament to their professionalism, then, when Driver stepped out to take point and began leading the group across the production floor. Rider fell back, watching the bustling factory around him for threats.

Liz was fascinated by the factory. It was more like some kind of allegorical painting come to life than what she would have expected from a modern factory. The building's construction was probably still more or less the same as when it was built in the nineteenth century. The ceiling was held up by squat brick columns, and large areas were vaulted by arched ceilings. The die cast machines were tucked into archways and alcoves, like huge metal beasts lurking in cave mouths, ready to spring out and devour unwary passersby. Forklifts whirled by carrying metal ingots and finished pieces. At one point Rider had to drag Liz bodily into a narrow doorway to prevent her from being run down by one of the aluminum carrying lifts that careened by so quickly it seemed to be out of control.

As they neared the freight elevator, Liz thought she saw something moving in the shadows of a nearby alcove. It was full of pallets stacked with unrecognizable aluminum machine parts, and poorly lit. She was certain she had seen something moving in the darkness behind the pallets. It was large, but moved like a living creature, not a machine. Rider had obviously seen it as well. He drew his gun, and gave a low whistle that was just barely audible over the noise from the machine floor. When Driver turned to see what was wrong, Rider held up two fingers, and then pointed toward the darkened alcove. He followed it with some complicated gestures that Liz couldn't begin to follow. Driver nodded, and ushered Gartner and Liz toward the elevator. Rider stayed behind, his gun pointed down, but ready. Liz tried to watch every shadow nearby at once. Her heart was thudding in her chest, and every flickering light made her feel like something was leaping out at her. She clutched the violin case to her chest and backed slowly toward the elevator cage.

When the elevator arrived, Driver opened the cage doors and ushered them inside. "You go on downstairs and get started; we will be along as soon as possible. We'll stay behind and deal with this issue."

As Gartner and Liz entered the old freight elevator, the figures lurking in the shadows leaped toward them. Their two body guards closed ranks and barred the path to the elevator. Liz could easily see the attackers over the heads of the big men. Whatever they were, they were huge, at least eight feet tall. They had long, angular heads and enormous rounded shoulders. Their mouths were impossibly large, making their face look like one huge maw, and Liz could see their sharp white teeth in the light of the single incandescent bulb outside the elevator. As the car began its decent, she saw the two creatures pounce on the mercenaries, and heard their pistols begin to fire.

Liz turned, wide eyed, on Gartner. "You said we'd be safe! You said it was no big deal!"

"I know I did. We should have been. Those two really were just a formality. I will see what I can do to make sure we aren't disturbed at least until I can get you through the portal." Gartner's voice had lost its friendly lilt and his eyes their constant twinkle.

The elevator came to a halt with a screech, and Liz opened the cage door and stepped out. Gartner stood in the center of the car, and his eyes blazed again in the dim light. He spoke in a language unfamiliar to Liz, and as he made more passes in the air, his fingers trailed light until he was standing in the middle of a complicated diagram of arcs and symbols. He looked at it with an air of satisfaction, and stepped carefully through the already-dimming design.

"There. Anything non-human that comes down that elevator is going to be in for quite a shock."

He didn't wait for a response from Liz, but went straight to work again, with more chanting and gestures. He used a wand this time, a long thin black device that reflected the lights of the dim bulbs mounted in the ceiling. Liz tore her gaze from the quiet elevator and looked around the cavernous room in which she found herself. It was damp, and she could hear the sound of water flowing nearby. She wandered a bit,

never letting Gartner out of her sight, and discovered that some unknown river flowed underneath the plant. There were huge turbines connected to paddle wheels that pierced the floor and dipped into the water. She wondered again at the strange coincidence that put the intersection of her reality and the spirit world in a musty factory basement full of hydroelectric generators.

The area where the old man was working was now bathed in a soft golden light. As she returned to stand behind him she could see that the light came from more symbols and lines, apparently suspended in air, in the shape of an oval, just a bit taller than she was herself. The shape was hollow in the center, and that area had begun to change as well. The column visible through the opening looked warped, like she was gazing through a heat haze. The air became thicker and thicker, and finally looked like a glowing fog through which nothing was visible. Liz was staring, captivated, when the elevator began to move.

The fiddler shrieked and turned jerkily to face the machine as it made its ascent. After a moment, it started back down again. It was eerily quiet. The sounds of shouting and gunfire from the floor above had ceased, and now the only sounds were Gartner's chants and the hum and creak of the old elevator. Liz gathered herself, ready to run when the monster came out of the car, but it was only Rider, leaning heavily on the side of the cage. She rushed forward and helped to steady him as he slumped forward out of the elevator car. His left arm hung bloodied and limp by his side, but he still clutched his pistol in his right hand. He had lost his glasses and Liz noticed, absurdly, that his eyes were very blue.

"Remington is down. They both went after him, but he got the first one. The second one got me a bit, but I managed to put it down before he could do the same for me." The mercenary seemed to gather his strength and planted himself firmly between the elevator and the chanting old man. "I hope there aren't any more of those things."

The chanting behind Liz stopped, and Gartner said, "No, there shouldn't be any more. What they did to create those things took a huge amount of energy, more than I thought the prince's followers could gather." He spat the word things like it was poison. "The portal is ready, Liz. Go ahead and take out the violin, and then just step through. The Oak King's guards will be there to keep any unwanted visitors at bay while you play up the power. Your old friend Woodrose is there, too. Try not to be too hard on him." A semblance of the old man's usual grin came back at this last utterance.

The fiddler felt like she was on autopilot as she laid down her case and opened it. She picked up the violin carefully, and her bow. Even after everything she had seen in the last day, even with these otherworldly strings on it, she couldn't think of it as Mortal Voice. It would always be grandpa's violin to her. He felt very close right now, and she wondered if he had been as frightened when his turn came to carry out this bargain made so long ago by strangers. The idea of her grandfather, and his big strong farmer's hands, gave her a boost of courage, and she straightened her back and shoulders. Her face was set, her mouth a determined line, as she began striding toward the glowing oval hanging in the air before her. As she approached it, she turned to Rider. "What's your name?"

"Gregory ma'am. David Gregory."

"Thank you, David. For everything."

Gregory looked uncomfortable for a moment, but covered it up with a quip. "Just part of the service, ma'am. You be careful."

Liz looked toward the old mage, who nodded encouragingly. "It's almost over, child. In you go."

The fiddler stepped over the threshold of the portal, and into bedlam.



Stepping through the portal was like shutting yourself into a tumble dryer. As she left the glowing oval, she had no true concept of which way was up, or what she was seeing. She felt strong hands catch her, and steady her on her feet. After another moment's disorientation, the scene before her began to come into focus.

She had stepped into a melee. The clash of metal and wood came to her from every direction, and there were pairs of struggling figures everywhere she looked. She saw Woodrose, sitting on the ground by a sharp faced, colorfully dressed being holding a deep red wooden flute. Liz guessed immediately that this must be Spirit Song, and the colorful spirit must be its bearer. He was lying on the ground because there was a terrible gash in his thin left leg, and Liz could see Woodrose' intoxicating vapors surrounding him.

The hands that steadied her belonged to a tall, broad, gnarled spirit. Its face and hands were covered with skin like thick bark, and it wore laminated wooden armor from under which hair like dark gray moss peeked.

"I'm sorry, fiddle-bearer. It seems the opposition has better intelligence than ever before. They knew almost the exact time you'd be crossing. Don't worry though, it's almost wrapped up. The ritual will take place over there." Its crooked, massive hand pointed toward a low hill, upon which stood the three tallest trees Liz had ever seen.

The hill was not far, perhaps half a mile, but that was the most harrowing half mile that Liz had ever crossed. The huge soldier who had caught her seemed to be in charge. He rallied his troops around her, and had one (who he called Elm) pick up the flautist and carry him along as well. The soldiers, who all resembled armored, walking trees, formed a wall around her and smaller spirits, and began to march in lockstep toward the hilltop. It was a harrowing experience. Most of their attackers resembled animals to varying extents, and of those the vast majority were predators. Humanoid bodies with wolf heads, feline bodies entirely covered in fur, and feathered spirits with cruel talons or hooked beaks abounded. They would descend upon the formation of tree spirits, shrieking and howling in rage, and throw themselves upon the closest of the defenders with claws, teeth, or even rocks. The soldiers, like the terrestrial plants they resembled, withstood most of it by dint of sheer toughness. They were not fast, but they were extremely strong, and the small weapons of the attackers were largely ineffectual against their bark and armor.

When they were perhaps three quarters of the way to the hill top, the formation stopped. Liz peered between two of her armored guardians to see a small party of elegant looking spirits blocking the path. They were very tall, and lithe, and looked more human than any spirit Liz had seen so far. They were clearly animal spirits, but instead of blatantly animalistic features, they had nominal human features that strongly evoked the idea of predatory beasts. They affected human dress, but the styles were centuries out of date. The tallest of the group stood in front, and looked down on the tree men's formation with haughty contempt. He looked like a cat made into a man. His eyes were wide and slit pupiled, and his ears were pointed and set unusually high on his head. His face was a mottled yellow and black, like jaguar, and his mouth was cruelly upward in a humorless smile.

"That's far enough, scratching post," sneered the cat man. "My father will be free tonight, and anyone who tries to prevent it will be destroyed without mercy."

"Well, if it isn't the renegade princeling. Son of a madman, descended from tyrants, and a traitor to boot." The oak soldier's face hardened and his fists clenched as though already grappling the foe. "Neither you, nor your pathetic crowd of sycophants have the will to prevent me from my goal. Go home, boy."

"Boy? Boy? You dare too much, you pile of kindling. Though my father is imprisoned, mine is still blood royal, and you will not speak to me like that!" With this, he turned his cruel eyes on his comrades. "Kill them. Kill them all."

What happened next was like a scene out of a nightmare. The crowd of young nobles looked like dandies but moved like death. They were upon and among the tree guardians almost faster than could be seen, and their claws and teeth were far more devastating than their lower class cousins. The Oak King's guards were immediately pressed to keep the attackers away from their charges, and began to lose armor and bark and swaths. The battle was not one sided, however. Feral, wolf like faces were smashed by bough-thick arms. Feline claws were caught and twisted in vice strong hands.

After losing ground to the initial rush, the King's guards began to turn the tide of the battle. Just when it seemed a rout was inevitable, the renegade prince and one of his companions, fighting back to back, broke through the tree guardians' line and turned immediately on Liz and the brightly dressed flautist. The prince advanced toward Liz, hands out wide, black claws gleaming on the ends of his fingers.

"Stupid human meat. You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into. I will not let some squealing game extend my father's imprisonment even one more day!" With this, he sprang at her with murder in his eyes.

During the confrontation, Liz had been so scared that she could hardly move. Faced with the princeling's anger, however, her terror lent her speed. She jerked sharply aside and barely avoided the wicked curved claws. She backpedaled quickly and looked around in desperation for help. All of her guardians seemed to be locked in struggle with the attacking animal spirits. The cat man's next attack was more measured. He was stalking her, now, waiting for his opening. His claws flashed out again, and missed Liz's heart only because she fell backward heavily and landed on her rear end. The renegade stood over her, hand raised to his shoulder. "Now it ends. My father's rule begins tonight!"

As his arm began descending in the final, fatal thrust, Woodrose crashed bodily into the tall feline creature's shoulder, knocking him to the ground. His heart-shaped hands were curled in fists and he pummeled the wicked princeling's head and shoulders frantically. "Run, Liz! Run! I will keep him busy!" As Liz scrambled to her feet and turned to run up the hill, she saw billowing clouds of Woodrose' psychedelic lavender essence encompass him and the renegade.

The rest of the noble spirits seemed to have been dealt with. Three of the tree spirits were sprawled unmoving on the ground, but the area was littered with the bodies of the feral attackers. Liz ran up the hillside and found the bearer of Spirit Song and Nettle. The abrasive sprite had apparently tackled the renegade prince's companion, and impaled him in a set of spikes much larger than the ones Liz had seen thus far.

Liz and the flautist struggled to reach the summit of the hill together. Both instruments had come through the melee intact. Liz couldn't even remember thinking of the violin during the struggle, but she had managed to hang onto both it, and her bow.

As the adrenalin from the battle ebbed, Liz entered a state of unnatural calm. As though this were a normal day at the maypole, she started to tune the fiddle and check the tension on her bow. While she prepared herself, she looked around. The slope of the hill was a charnel house. Bodies of feral beast spirits and her tree man protectors were strewn on the turf. Liz could see Woodrose lying unmoving where he and the renegade prince had fallen. The hill top was bare, packed earth, except for a small ring of stones about waist height, and the three enormous trees she had seen before. The trees were each different: one oak, one ash, and one thorn. Each was easily three hundred feet tall. In the triangle formed by the three trees, an enormous figure stood. He was at least ten feet tall, and monstrous. His body was covered in fur, and his eyes were cruel and hard.

Liz heard a low note from the flute, and began to tune the fiddle to it without taking her eyes from the figure among the trees. Once again, she felt the violin with its

dragon-gut strings come alive in her hands. The feeling was ever stronger, now, and felt almost eager. When the two instruments sounded together, a nimbus of pale blue light surrounded the trees, and the space between them glowed as if there were a Plexiglas wall between them. The Mad Prince screamed in rage and beat his fists on the now-visible walls of his prison.

"You will die, do you hear me?" he raved. "Your paltry magic will fail, and I will walk the Earth once again, and when I do, I will rend you limb from limb! There will be no end of the tortures you endure at my hands! Unless," he said, his voice suddenly mellowing, "unless you go home now. If you abandon this silly quest now, and let me take my destined place, when I rule I will leave you and your family in peace. As a matter of fact, I will put you under my protection. Just lay the fiddle here at my feet."

The prince's voice was compelling, and Liz's bow ceased its progress over the strings. She turned toward the prisoner and found herself staring into his eyes. He was right. They probably would fail. She had no idea what she was doing. Her playing wasn't good enough, either. What kind of power could she raise? Maybe it would be better to go home now, and protect her family, instead of failing and protecting no one. She took a step toward the prison among the trees, and lowered the fiddle from her shoulder. Then, she felt a frail hand on her wrist, pulling her away from the prince. As her gaze left his, she felt his compulsion lifted from her mind like a veil. The hand on her wrist belonged to the flautist, and he was staring at her with urgent concern.

"Liz?" he trilled, "Liz? Are you with us? The prince carries with him the seeds of every predator - including the snake. It's best we don't look at him." The colorfully dressed bird-man turned her gently the rest of the way around, and they walked away from the prison. When the prince saw that his geas had been broken, they heard him scream again in frustration.

The sun was high overhead, now. Even when they were not playing their instruments, the spells that held the diseased prince were visible, and lightning crackled between the crowns of the great trees. The air was thick with the smell of ozone. Each mighty trunk began to glow from within, each a different color. The oak tree's bark took on a golden nimbus, while the ash trunk was bathed in blue radiance. The thorn tree was limned in red. From each glowing trunk stepped a tall humanoid figure. The three beings' eyes glowed, each in the color of the halo surrounding their tree, and their skin was the precise color of the bark on the massive trunks.

"We are the council of mages," the three tree spirits intoned as one. "The time of renewal is come. Let the ritual begin."

With these words each of the spirits strode clockwise around the trees until they each stood before an open face of the triangle. The being that had stepped from the oak tree gestured towards the musicians without looking in their direction. "Bearer of the Mortal Voice, begin."

Liz had never felt stage fright like this. Her arms felt like jelly as she lifted her grandpa's fiddle to her chin and held the bow over the taught strings. Once again, the strings murmured in anticipation before she actually stroked the bow across them. Taking a deep breath, she began "Swallowtail Jig." The first bar was shaky as her traitor hands betrayed her nerves, but when she found her rhythm the powerful magic of the fiddle and dragon-gut strings flowed out once again. The lively feeling of the music infused the hilltop, and made her want to dance. The bird man began to play Spirit Song in accompaniment. Gartner was right; the flautist was a master accompanist and a genius for improvisation. His flute supported the fiddle in every way, while taking musical side roads around and under and through the main theme of the piece. As they played, the nimbus around the trees and mages grew in strength and pulsed with the rhythm of the tune. Liz was startled by a dull boom behind her. She turned and saw that their honor guard had begun to pound their armor in time with the music. It was slower than a bodhran player's frenetic beat, but each downbeat was punctuated by a

massive crash that pinned the music in time, and buoyed it up.

The Mad Prince's reaction was immediate, and violent. He threw himself against the invisible walls of his prison, raving and howling. His claws and teeth were awesome to behold, but ineffectual. He hurled bolts of fire against the prison, and the trees themselves, but to no avail. Once again, his eyes sought out the musicians.

Liz shrieked and jerked the fiddle away from her chin as the fingerboard that had been added to her grandpa's violin rose up as a snake and bared its fangs at her. Spirit Song's sweet sound immediately changed to take up the main theme of the music, but it was clear that the magic was suffering from the sudden slackening of the brightness of the magical wards. The snake's body melded into the body of the fiddle, but its head was quite alive, and its naked fangs dripped venom as it menaced her. Liz could hear mad laughter from the hilltop prison.

"Fiddler," shouted the thorn-spirit, "the mad one cannot affect the physical world outside his cage, and would be unable to change Mortal Voice in any event! It is an illusion. Play on!"

The snake was winding down Liz's left arm now, and she could feel its dry scales gripping her flesh and its strong muscles squeezing her for grip. Its head slithered closer and closer to Liz's face, and she could feel its tongue flick over her bare skin. Shuddering, she closed her eyes so she could not see it, and raised the bow once more to the strings.

As soon as the strings sounded again, she could immediately feel that something had changed. She could still feel the illusory snake wending its poisonous way up her arm, but the sensation was distant, like her arm was asleep. She also felt like enormous arms held her from behind, protecting her from the entire world. A smell filled her nostrils that her conscious mind had nearly forgotten, but which flooded back to her immediately. It was a farm smell. A smell of hard work and old wood. Hay and cats.

Easy, Betsy, a deep voice sounded in her mind. He's a tricky one, but you can beat him. Just play.

"Grandpa?" Liz asked in a small voice. "Is it really you?"

A part of everyone who plays the Mortal Voice stays with it forever. One day, you may be helping the bearer put this beast down one more time. I'm glad you have my violin, Betsy. You play it beautifully.

Tears streamed unheeded down Liz's face as she played on. Some of them were for missing her grandpa, and more were tears of joy at his praise. He had never heard her play his violin, and she had always wondered what he would think. As they brought the jig to a close, she heard a second fiddle join in with hers. The ghostly duet and their otherworldly flute accompaniment filled the hilltop with sound as they closed the piece forcefully.

Emboldened by her support, Liz grew angry at this beastly Prince who had twice chosen to play with her mind. She thought it was time to give a little back to him. She called out in a defiant voice, "I picked this one just for you, your Highness. I'm sure you'll agree it suits you perfectly. Where I come from, we call it the 'Fairy Reel!'"

She launched into the reel, accompanied by a startled but effective bird spirit on a magical flute, the dear memory of her grandfather playing a ghostly copy of her own fiddle, and the raucous laughter of everyone on the hilltop. Gene Muggleton's enormous booming laugh echoed through her spirit.

The taunting laughter of the spirits surrounding him seemed to finally break the will of the Mad Prince. He shouted and cursed, threatened and begged, but did not hurl any more attacks at the wards or the ritual participants. It was several more minutes before the mages declared the renewal of the warding complete. Once it was done, Liz realized that her hands ached terribly. Her fingers were raw as though she had been playing for much longer than the fifteen minutes or so the ritual had required,

and the magical strings were visibly deteriorated.

She sat down heavily, and tried desperately to hang on to the feeling of her grandfather's presence. When the last notes died away, however, he faded as well, and she was left only with the bittersweet memory of playing with him. She held her fiddle close, rested her head on its body as it murmured its strange magic song to her, and sighed.

"Fiddle-bearer," a diffident voice intruded on her reverie, "there are two here who wish to see you."

Liz looked up to see the captain of the Oak King's guard standing before her, with a strangely limp Woodrose in its arms. Behind him stood Gartner, looking more stooped and aged than even before.

"Oh, no, Woodrose!" Liz ran to where the soldier was laying him gently on the ground. His left arm was missing just below the shoulder, and there were cruel gashes on his body and face. "Please don't tell me this happened for my sake."

"It's alright, Liz. You can't say I didn't owe you, after what I did." He followed Liz's horrified gaze to his missing arm. "It's okay; I'll grow a new one in the spring. Which is not to say it doesn't hurt like fire." He smiled the same charming smile that had convinced her to listen to him in the first place. "So, apology accepted?"

"Yes, Woodrose. Apology accepted. But the next time you need someone's help, you should give them time to get their ducks in a row before you go whisking them off to who knows where. Or even Boston," she added with a smile.

She looked up tiredly at Gartner. He was standing there, holding her fiddle case. He took grandpa's violin from her unresisting fingers, and laid it carefully in its place. The magical strings had deteriorated completely, now, and the fiddle lay bare. He reverently closed it, and smiled at her. "I watched from the other side. You did amazingly well. None of us thought the resistance would be so organized this time. I suppose we will have to plan for a battle the next time."

"What now?" Liz asked heavily. "I don't know how much more I can take."

"Now?" he said. "Now, it's time to go home."

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