“My daughter says we have fairies in the woods behind our house. Isn’t that wonderful?” Gwen was a plumpish woman in her late thirties with bottle blonded hair. She looked around, basking in murmured comments of approval.

How bizarre, Elanor thought. But then, English people did strange things. Elanor was keenly aware she was the only African in the group. They were supposed to be studying wicca, the old religion, and learning a healthy respect for anything that lurked at the bottom of their gardens. Sadly this group seemed to be mostly bored housewives and a couple of weird guys.

“Really?” Mifunwi was the group’s mentor, and Elanor’s personal friend. She was also the other person here who wasn’t English. Mifunwi was a petite woman with milk pale skin, long raven hair, and startlingly green eyes. She looked about thirty, but she had looked that age ten years ago when she and Elanor first met.

“Have you seen them?” Mifunwi continued. “Do you know what your daughter talks with them about?”

“No.” Gwen deflated. “She says she plays with them. They look like in pictures - you know, pretty little things with wings, glowing with light.”

“I see. Things are often not what they seem. I think I should meet these beings for myself. When would be convenient? Preferably a time when your daughter normally would play with them.”

“Oh, that would be after school, or the weekend. But my partner’s home then, he doesn’t like Mary talking about fairies.”

“Mmm, then we will be round friday afternoon. Best do this before the weekend.”

“I have a hair appointment then.”

“Will Mary be home?” Mifunwi wasn’t dissuaded. “We’ll drop around before you leave.” That was settled.

As they were leaving, Mifunwi turned to Elanor. “I feel something will happen that afternoon. Please come with me, you will be needed.”

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Mifunwi drove a silver Mercedes with black leather interior. “Elanor, did you know anything of this?”

“No, I don’t know Gwen that well. Her Mary is about the same age as my Leah, but they go to different schools.”

“You and I know that these things probably aren’t harmless. They have a reason for befriending a child.”

“I didn’t grow up here, I’m not sure what fairies are. I’ve read about them though.”

“What you’ve read is likely wrong. The legends tell of small beings with magical powers, long lived, with elongated heads. But that covers many folk, from elves, pixies, goblins and so on. The faery folk have a reputation for stealing children, and they put a glamour on themselves when dealing with humans. There are stories of adults who’ve gone to dance with the fairy folk, and returned years later thinking only a night has passed. In Queen Victoria’s time they were bowdlerised into the pretty dolls people think of today. Whatever that child is seeing is most likely dangerous.”

Gwen lived in a house in Woodlands Crescent, presumably named because some of the houses backed onto a patch of woodland. “That’s her house here!” Elanor exclaimed as Mifunwi drove slowly past.

“I know, but I want to see the area with trees.” Mifunwi turned left at the next street, a short cul de sac. She parked the car near a laneway that led into the woods. Thirty yards brought them to an open area like a playing field with buildings and houses on the far side.

“It’s hardly the wild woods.” Mifunwi commented, walking back to a small track that ran into the wooded area.

“Bike tracks and paw prints.” Elanor commented. “It looks as if children and dogs explore here.”

“I imagine many would find this a wonderful place to play. You could picture ruined castles, monsters, Robin Hood and his band somewhere in here. Notice anything?”

Elanor looked around, trying to find the sources of movement visible from the corners of her eyes. “I don’t think it’s birds, squirrels maybe? But when I focus on it there’s nothing.” She stood completely still, letting her mind take in the surroundings, gazing without focusing. “There’s lights too. Can you see them?”

Mifunwi smiled mysteriously. “Oh yes, unfriendly eyes are watching us. I’ve seen what I need to, let’s walk around to Gwen’s house.”

It was not quite two o’clock, but Gwen served them tea and freshly baked scones. She chatted away incessantly. “Grant, that’s my partner, is happy you’ve come to talk to Mary, he thinks you’ll talk some sense into her. I wish you could talk some into him, she’s only ten, surely she can talk to fairies if she wants to. She came home for lunch but she’s gone back to school now.”

“The school’s not far then?” Mifunwi asked.

“Oh no, she goes through our back gate, there’s a path through the woods to the playing field, and the school. She says the fairies talk to her, and sometimes they chase away strangers that follow her.”

“Yes, they chase away people they don’t like, usually adults.” Mifunwi commented.

“What sort of strangers?” Elanor asked. “I mean, school children or adults?”

“I’m not sure. School children most likely, what would adults be doing following children through the woods?” Her eyes widened. “Oh! It could be some sort of pervert. Maybe you could see if there’s any strange men hanging around the woods. Then it’s good if the fairies chase them away. But Mary said some of the boys used to throw stones but they stopped after the fairies chased them away.”

“I expect the fairies would give them a good scare.” Mifunwi managed to get in.

“Mary told me she didn’t like that you were coming around, the fairies told her you would prevent her from seeing them.”

“Mary has nothing to fear from us, but I want to find out what she does with them, and if possible meet them myself.” Mifunwi replied. “What time is your hair appointment?”

“Yes, I should get ready soon.” At that point the phone rang, and Gwen went to answer it. They heard her side of the conversation - especially the part where she said “She left here over half an hour ago, she should be there!”

Mifunwi walked over to Gwen and took the phone from her; Elanor helped herself to another scone with butter and jam. She was putting on weight, but one more shouldn’t hurt.

“Hello? ... I’m Mary’s aunt. She’s not at school? ... All right, we’ll go and look for her... We’ll call you back... Yes, give me the number... Thank you, goodbye.”

Gwen was visibly shaking. Mifunwi turned to her “Gwen, have you any clothing Mary wore yesterday that you haven’t washed? No? A hairbrush with some of her hair? Good, go and fetch that now.”

Mifunwi turned to Elanor. “I should go alone, I will find the girl quicker. Will you stay and look after Gwen?”

“She will want to go with you, but I’ll stay with her.” I’m Big Mama, I look after everyone. But with my husband dead these past twelve years, who looks after me?

“Than you.” Mifunwi replied. Then, as if reading Elanor’s mind, she added “The great mother will look after you.”

At this point Gwen came hurrying downstairs, hairbrush in hand. Mifunwi took the brush and held it briefly. “I can feel her, she is unharmed. I will go and fetch her home.”

Gwen visibly brightened at the news. “I’m coming with you!”

“Not in that miniskirt.” Mifunwi countered. “Gwen, phone your hairdresser and tell her you might be late. Then run upstairs and change. Elanor and I will clear the table.”

Elanor was happy at the prospect of finding the girl unharmed. But when the two women had taken everything into the kitchen Mifunwi said “Elanor, please trust me. I do not want Gwen with me where I am going. So you must stay with her. If she wants to go into the woods, accompany her and look after her. And...” She unclasped a pendant from around her neck, that Elanor had not noticed until she did so. “Wear this.” Mifunwi clasped it about Elanor’s neck. “It will protect you.”

“What is it?” The pendant was a silver disk inset with carved onyx shaped like a raven holding a spear in its claws.

“That is an ancient emblem of the Raven Queen. Those in the woods will recognise it. If necessary, tell them it is a gift from the Raven Queen.”

At that moment they heard Gwen clattering down the stairs. “Tell her I went outside.” Mifunwi put a finger to her lips, and faded out. Elanor’s eyes widened and she shut her mouth with a snap. Mifunwi had always claimed magical powers. Something to ask her about later. Now, what should she say to Gwen?

“I’m ready!” Gwen came running into the kitchen. “Oh, where’s Mifunwi?”

“She said she didn’t want to wait.”

“Oh! That’s not very fair! Mary is my daughter.”

“I know.” Elanor replied. “I wouldn’t want to stay behind if she were mine. We’ll catch her up. You finish putting these away, I need to use your bathroom.”

Within ten minutes they were through the back gate and at the woodlands. Elanor could sense things moving, watching. Gwen on the other hand was determined to find her daughter. Elanor stopped her. “They’re angry. Wait.” Then she addressed the trees. “We are searching for this woman’s little girl. Grant us safe passage, and help us to find her.” There was no response.

“Do we need to say that?”

“It might help. Let’s go.” You always told the spirits what you planned so there would be no misunderstanding.

There was a meandering path the led to the playing field, along with several smaller side tracks. There was no sign of Mary anywhere in the open area. Elanor cast about and spotted the impression of a small shoe that could have been Mary’s. The track led through the woods parallel to the playing area, behind the houses.

There were strange rustling noises from the surroundings, half seen movement in the trees, bizarre bird calls, and somewhere ahead a deep buzzing like a swarm of angry wasps, only larger. “This is spooky.” Gwen commented. “Do you think Mary goes this way often?”

“I think they’re friendlier to children.”

“Can you hear bells?” Gwen asked, looking about.

“No.” The angry thrumming was becoming louder though. “Where are the bells?”

“This way.” The same direction as the thrumming then. Gwen turned, heading off their track.

“Are you sure it’s wise to go that way?” Elanor asked. The noise sounded menacing.

“Yes! Look! Fairies!”

“Where?” Elanor looked around wildly.

“Fluttering around that tree! Aren’t they beautiful?” Gwen pointed.

“I can see coloured lights floating. What do the fairies look like?”

“Like little dolls with butterfly wings and dragon fly wings.” Gwen was walking towards the tree, eyes wide in wonder.

Elanor wondered why she saw only coloured lights when she spotted movement behind the tree. Pushing through the undergrowth, she saw a middle aged human male in a dark grey suit, lying on his back, his mouth open in a silent scream. Swarming over him were several shadowy, misshapen figures. One thrust its arm down the man’s throat to the elbow, then withdrew it, trailing red rose petals. The man convulsed, then flopped bonelessly, dead or unconscious.

“Hey! Get off him!” Elanor barged into the group, scattering them. The man’s face was fixed in a rictus of a scream, eyes wide in terror, mouth filled with rose petals. She’d have to clear that out before giving him mouth to mouth, Elanor thought, wondering why they’d done that. She knelt, putting her ear to his chest - there was no heartbeat.

She was thinking about heart massage when clawed fingers grasped her shoulder. “He’s dead, human, there’s nothing you can do.” someone hissed. His voice was breathy, the vowels odd.

Elanor swung around, knocking the arm away. “You killed him! Why? How?”

They were five humanoids scarcely five feet tall, slender, clad in green and brown. Their faces and heads were elongated - pointy chins, ears, noses, heads and teeth. They all had short-cropped blond hair, upward slanting eyes and claws on their fingers. They were probably the reality behind mythical elves, but could easily be mistaken for demons. They were armed with swords, and had the two women surrounded.

“Who are you talking to?” Gwen asked dreamily, still watching the coloured lights.

“She can’t see you.” Elanor remarked thoughtfully, getting to her feet. They were deadly, that was obvious, but they hadn’t directly threatened her or Gwen yet.

“You should not be here.” the middle faery hissed.

“No?” Elanor’s voice was a mixture of scolding mother and schoolmistress. “We are looking for a lost child. You appear to be skulking around the woods. What is going on here? Why did you kill him?”

Elanor stood in the ready position, feet shoulders width apart, joints loose, fists half clenched near her waist, eyes gazing levelly at the five faeries. She studied karate as a teenager, still practiced when she found time.

She should be scared, but wasn’t. They’d been disconcerted that she could see them; they weren’t sure what else she might be capable of. That was something to work with. She had a thousand questions, but most could wait; she couldn’t afford the luxury of appearing weak.

“What we do is none of your business.” the faery said coldly. “The child you seek is not here. Leave us, mortal, lest you end up like him.”

“How can she see us through our glamour?” another asked.

“Maybe we should put her eyes out, and her tongue...” a third began.

“Elanor, who are you talking to?” Gwen interjected.

Elanor waved her to silence. “Don’t any of you threaten me!” She drew herself up to her full height and glared down at the band. In her bare feet Elanor was six feet three inches, but now she was wearing boots with two inch platform soles and four inch heels. Her long dark hair was knotted on top of her head, and the rest fell in a cascade to her shoulders. She didn’t just tower over them, she loomed.

Elanor leaned forward, thrusting the medallion into the face of the speaker. “Do you recognise this?”

He stepped back, with a hiss of inbreath. He reached forward slowly, touched the medallion, studied it for several moments. Then he trilled like a bird. One of the others trilled a reply. “It is genuine. From whom did you get it?” He was speaking with careful politeness now.

Elanor permitted herself a small smile. “The owner gave it to me. She said to show it to those who dwell here because they would respect it. Do you respect it?”

One of the group chirped, and the speaker translated. “We respect it.”

“Good. Let’s start again. I saw you put your arm down the man’s throat and kill him. Why?” The reason for their respect could wait.

“We punished him.”

“Why?”

Gwen screamed. “Elanor, what are those ...”

“Gwen, be quiet. They won’t harm us. Let me talk to them.” Why could Gwen see the faeries now?

“What are they?”

The middle figure answered slowly. “We removed the glamour from her eyes. We are the old ones. We are your nightmares, mortal! You trespass in our lands. Do as your companion says and you won’t be harmed.”

Another added. “He tried to harm the child you seek. We stopped him.”

Gwen surprised everyone. “You bastard!” she kicked the dead man.

Elanor grabbed her. “Cool it Gwen. He’s dead.”

“What?!” Gwen exclaimed.

“You heard them say they killed him because he attacked Mary. Please stop interrupting.”

She turned back to the group. “Where is the child now? Is she all right?”

“Oh, she is well, happy and safe.”

“Then you will lead us to her.”

There was a trilled and chirped discussion amongst the group, like a number of birds quarrelling. Gwen said “She’s my child! You take me to her!”

Elanor intervened. “Quiet all of you! When I was given this medallion, I was told to find the child. Will you take me to her, or must I tell the lady you refused?”

The speaker of the group spoke softly, politely, though he looked sullen. “We do not refuse. However, we do not know where the child is. We can take you to someone who might know.”

“Then that’s a start. Hopefully he won’t claim he doesn’t know, and continue to lead us in circles.”

“No, we must respect any emissary of the Raven Queen. You will come with me, the other human will stay here.”

“No.” Elanor was firm. “Gwen comes with me - she’s the child’s mother, and under my protection, by explicit instruction of the Raven Queen.”

Mifunwi said to look after Gwen. The group looked at her with consternation. One of them trilled, and that seemed to be a decision. “Very well. Follow us.” They set off down the track.

“Elanor, where did you get that medallion?” Gwen asked.

“I’ll tell you the story when we get home, Gwen. Now,” She directed her voice to her escort. “how should I refer to you? You call us humans, you obviously don’t include yourselves.”

The spokesman chirped briefly. “You cannot say that, but you have your own words for us - Faery, Veela, Alfar, Elves among others. Our people were here long before the humans arrived. We are the original children of Danu.”

“I know about them!” Gwen interjected. “Danu was a goddess, and her children were the original Bronze Age inhabitants of Britain.”

“Not quite. The children of Danu were the heroes who taught humans the arts of civilisation.”

Elanor continued questioning them. “Why do you dislike us so much?”

It took several more questions to draw out the answer, but paraphrased it was “There are thousands of reasons. Once we lived in the forests and woodlands, you lived on the coastal fringes and riverbanks and nearby caves. You would hunt our forests, but with reverence. Then you began clearing the forest, you burned, you destroyed and you polluted the air, water and land, and you killed us with poisons and traps and iron weapons, along with your diseases. We have magic, we live in harmony, but you destroyed us, you who have no magic.”

“Don’t think the queen will let you return home.” one of them chortled. “And when she finally lets you go, you’ll find hundreds of years have passed, and all your family and friends will be dead.”

Elanor bantered back. “Well, my husband is dead these past twelve years, my parents can look after my children. I might enjoy visiting your lands, and I’ve often wondered what the world would be like a hundred years from now.”

“Elanor, I want to take Mary and go home!” Gwen wailed.

“Oh Gwen, he’s just teasing you.”

“Humans who enter uninvited are killed. We might put both your heads on poles as a warning to others.”

“Ohhh!” Gwen wailed.

“Stop it Gwen, they won’t do that, we’re guests.” Then her eyes flashed. “You kill me, my angry ghost will haunt you the rest of your short miserable days! And they will be miserable, I promise!”

The faeries all made warding gestures, hissing. “Let it not happen.” So they believed in such things.

“Then no more trying to frighten us. You treat us with respect; we will treat you with respect. But if you mess with Big Mama, you’ll be sorry.”

Elanor tried again to make conversation. “Do you have names we can use, instead of saying ‘Hey you!’? I’m Elanor, this is Gwen.”

“Our names are not given lightly. I am one who can speak with humans, you may call me ‘Speaker to Humans’. The others do not speak English well.” But they probably all understand it, Elanor thought.

The track seemed to be very long, far longer than could be accounted for by the length of the woodland. The woods seemed to becoming wilder, greener, and even the quality of light through the trees seemed different, more yellow.

“Do you live in the woodlands where we met you?”

“No, we have our own realm.”

“Then what were you doing in the woodlands?”

“We are guards. Some of the paths lead to our realm, and we prevent humans from wandering in.”

“Why are you interested in human children? If you don’t like humans then your interest in our children could seem sinister.”

“Human children have not yet been corrupted like adults. We can take them to our realm and show them wonders, and they become friendly to our people.”

“How far are we going? This isn’t the woods we started in.”

“You are observant.” Speaker to Humans said. “Our destination is not far now.”

The group walked for about fifteen minutes. Their path broadened into a dirt road wide enough for a modern day car. There were luscious multi hued flowers in the woods, while the trees were taller and older. They came to a clearing perhaps as big as a house block, with a huge oak tree in the middle. Elanor could hear the tinkling of many small bells, the chirping of many different birds - or perhaps the Faery conversing, and many small coloured lights that darted hither and yon.

Gwen turned to Elanor “This isn’t the wood behind my house. Where are we?”

“This is the faery realm. Don’t ask me how we got here, ask them.” My children play a game called dungeons and dragons, it’s like we’ve walked into one of those games, Elanor thought. I hope there’s a way out.

“I suppose that’s all right then. Do you think Mary is here?” How bizarre, Elanor thought.

“I’ll ask them. Speaker to Humans, where is this woman’s child? Is she near?”

“We await the queen’s representative, who can answer your questions. Our task is done, but do not count on going home.” he replied nastily. “Only the Queen can give you permission to leave.”

Another group of seven armed faeries greeted the first group. They trilled to each other, then the first band of Faery withdrew to the side of the clearing.

Elanor led Gwen to the central oak. “Gwen, maybe we should have stayed home.”

“No, I have to find Mary. It looks beautiful here, I can understand why Mary wants to visit with the fairies.”

One of the new faeries screamed “Humans! You will stand in the sun!”

“No.” Elanor replied. “The shade is cooler.”

The faery brandished his sword in her face, screaming “Do not be insolent, human! We will cut your tongue out! Now obey!”

Gwen shielded her eyes, whimpering “He’s covered in flames!”

“That’s an illusion, Gwen.” Elanor turned to face the angry faery, squaring her shoulders and inflating her chest. “I am the emissary of the Raven Queen.” She replied haughtily. “You will show me respect.”

“Respect? Humans are pigs wallowing in muck! I’ll show you respect, like this!” He struck at her with the sword hilt, a hammer blow that should have smashed her face.

Elanor reacted instinctively. She swayed back while the edge of her left forearm swept out and up, deflecting the blow and sending the sword flying from his grasp. Her right fist followed through with all her weight behind it, striking his cheek as he tried to duck. He went down as if poleaxed.

Elanor glared at the others. “Anyone else want to try that? No? Then someone get him to a healer.”

Speaker to Humans came over at a run, chirping furiously. Elanor checked the fallen faery’s vital signs - he was breathing; picked up his sword, then unbuckled his scabbard.

“What are you doing?” Speaker to humans asked.

“A sword should always be sheathed when not in use. I don’t plan on using it, unless you force me to.”

“They will not attack unless they are ordered to, or you attack them.”

The faery she’d hit was unconscious, bleeding from the nose. “Get him to a healer, he’s injured.”

“No, he must stay until his superior has seen him. A healer has been sent for.” Elanor wondered how had they summoned one?

Elanor inspected the sword. The blade was made from some coppery metal, leaf shaped, sharpened along both edges, and pointed. The hilt was of creamy horn, bound with gold wire, with simple quillions to protect the hand from anything sliding down the blade, and a weighted pommel to counter-balance the blade. The hilt was small in her hand, the sword light. The whole thing showed signs of use.

“What metal is this?” Elanor sighted along the blade, spotting a slight kink. There were silver runes engraved in the blade, but some of the silver had worn and fallen away. “The blade’s seen hard usage. How old do you think it is?” With that she sheathed the sword.

“The metal is sun steel, you humans use moon steel. The colours are different, but I am not a sword smith.” He chirped to the group of faery soldiers. There was a quick conversation before he translated “They think the sword is hundreds of years old, he was very proud of it. He will be sad to lose it. They want to know what ransom you want for him.”

“Ransom?” Elanor was thinking quickly. “Could you please explain?”

The faery replied, “You defeated him in combat. All his weapons and armour belong to you, and he is your prisoner. It is our custom to demand payment from the kin of a prisoner. Once it was also human custom.”

Elanor knew enough to know this could go well or ill by her choice of actions. “I shall keep his sword. Have him well treated and healed, I am not currently in a position to look after a prisoner. I will talk with my mentor about a suitable ransom.”

The faery soldiers nodded, proving they all understood English, and seemed to relax. Gwen was shivering, Elanor put her arm about the woman.

“I’m scared! And I want to take Mary and go home!”

“We’ll be going soon; no one is going to hurt us now.” Gwen burst into tears, while Elanor tried to soothe her like a small child.

The healer arrived, a faery in colourful medieval style robes. He stared at Elanor while the others explained things, then snorted, shook his head and inspected the patient. He performed some magic, alarming Elanor when she spied green light coming from his hands and playing over the patient. Gwen couldn’t see the light.

Eventually the light faded. “He should rest today; he will be fully recovered tomorrow. I will visit him then and collect my fee.” He turned to look at Elanor.

“You punched him once? His arm was broken as well. Are you injured? Let me look at your arms and hands.”

Elanor held them out for his inspection, aware of the chipped nails and calluses. “I’m sorry, they’re not very feminine. My fists can break bricks.” Breaking bricks was years ago. Her training was now a set of instinctive reactions, faster than thought; saving her from serious injury.

“A warrior’s hands. You are uninjured. No one else is injured? I will be away then.”

Speaker to humans looked at her almost with admiration. “Many of us wouldn’t attempt to disarm a swordsman with empty hands. They all say you are a mighty warrior.”

“I studied martial arts for many years. Unarmed combat and some weapons.” The faeries began asking her questions, seemingly genuinely interested.

They were still conversing when they heard sounds of music and jingling in the distance. The guards and soldiers formed into separate groups, two of the soldiers rousing their sleeping comrade. He moved sullenly to stand with Elanor.

Within ten minutes a troop of faery on horse back rode slowly in, accompanied by gaily clad faery on foot, playing music or singing and dancing. Some of the musicians had curled horns on their heads like rams’. The horses were white except for one, with silver, gold and precious stones on their harnesses. Most of the riders were clad in white painted medieval armour, but two were not. One was Mifunwi, clad in black leather with silver buckles, her raven dark hair bound with a circlet of silver, astride a coal black horse. In her right hand she carried a short spear with a long leaf shaped silver blade and three black feathers behind the blade. Beside her rode the important official, clad in white silks and a complicated silver harness studded with precious stones, and a gem encrusted silver tiara in her long golden hair.

“Where’s Mary?” Gwen asked.

“On Mifunwi’s horse.” Her head was peering from behind Mifunwi. Gwen waved.

The faery official surveyed their small group. “My lady, are these humans yours?” Mifunwi was obviously respected here.

Mifunwi smiled “Yes, your majesty, and the dark skinned lady is my emissary.” So the official was the queen herself.

“It is fitting that the emissary of the Raven Queen should be dark hued. The witnesses are here, let us hear what they say.”

Speaker to Humans came forward and explained that a man had been frequenting the woods and following children. The guards usually chased him away. But this time they had heard Mary’s screams and discovered him trying to harm her. They had beaten him and then killed him as Elanor arrived. One of their number had already been sent to the queen with Mary.

When Elanor demonstrated that she could see through their glamour, they realised she was no ordinary human. When she showed them the medallion, and explained that she had been instructed to find the child, they decided that both women should be conveyed here.

“You have done well, the Faery Queen will consider their fate. Bring Mary before the queen.”

At this command a knight alighted from his horse, bowed, and walked to Mifunwi’s horse. “Your Highness, with your permission.” Mifunwi nodded. The knight lifted Mary from the horse, leading her by hand to stand in front of the Faery Queen. “Your Royal Highness, the human girl Mary.”

The queen looked down haughtily. “Mary, tell the Faery Queen what happened.” So, thought Elanor, this was the royal third person.

Mary’s tale was similar to that of Speaker to Humans. She walked through the woods every day on her way to and from school, and often spoke with the fairies. They were pretty little beings with wings; they would tell her things and sometimes play with her. They promised to take her to Faery land. The man had begun following her over a month ago, but never into the woods because the fairies chased him away. Lunch time today she had walked through the woods but hadn’t seen any fairies. She almost collided with the man as she left the woods. She ran, he followed and caught her arm. She screamed and the fairies came and rescued her. Then one of the fairies walked with her into fairyland.

“Go and stand by the horse of the Raven Queen.” The queen ordered.

“My lady, with your permission I would question your emissary.”

“Certainly, your majesty. Elanor, please stand forth and tell the Faery Queen what occurred after I gave you my medallion.”

Elanor walked forward with some trepidation. She stopped near the queen; she had no idea how to curtsy and instead gave a Japanese style bow. She sketched briefly their journey into the woods, discovery of the faery folk and the human they killed, and how after seeing the medallion, the faery guards had brought them here.

“Did they offer to convey you here?”

“No, your majesty, I told them I had been ordered to find the girl, and requested that they bring me to Mary. They said the best they could do was to bring me here, and await your majesty’s instruction.”

“And the girl’s mother?”

“She is under my protection, your majesty, by order of the Raven Queen. I insisted she come with us.”

“And a good servant always obeys. You may go and stand by the horse of the Raven Queen. I will question the girl’s mother. Come here human.”

Gwen looked startled, then darted forward to stand before the faery queen. She managed an awkward curtsy.

“You are Mary’s mother?”

“Er... Yes, your majesty.” Her voice was shaking, and one leg was trembling.

“Tell us in your own words what happened.”

Gwen started with the phone call, worked her way through the encounter with the fairies in the forest. She could remember only the pretty little fairies, not the proud grotesque faeries, and even now could not see through the faery queen’s glamour.

Finally the faery queen ordered “That is all. Go and stand beside your daughter.”

Mifunwi spoke. “Your majesty, there is one more witness to call, the spirit of the dead human.”

Elanor was expecting Mifunwi to call the soldier she had punched, and by his look of relief, he had too. How were they going to question the dead man?

The faery queen replied “Very well. Is there anything you need, my lady?” She sounded eager to question the dead man.

“Thank you, no, your majesty; everything I need is to hand.” Mifunwi turned to look at Elanor. “Mary, please do not be frightened by what will happen.”

Mifunwi sat tall in her saddle. “First, I need a pile of fragrant wood.” With a rainbow shimmer, a pile of wood appeared on the ground some six meters in front of them. Elanor sighed, resolving to ask Mifunwi later. Gwen made a girlish squawk of surprise.

“Now we need fire.” Orange yellow flames flickered, becoming a proper fire within a minute.

“We also need smoke for the spirit to manifest.” The fire obligingly began to smoke.

“I sent my ravens to find the man’s spirit. Now they return.” A flock of ravens flew over the treetops and circled the group.

“Alfred Fordham, come down into the smoke where others can see you.” The flock flew through the smoke, then settled in the branches of the oak tree. The dead man’s form appeared in the smoke.

“Alfred, can you speak?”

He peered around, shock painted across his face. “They... they... killed me!” His voice sounded like wind in the trees.

“Yes Alfred, can you tell us what you were doing in the hour before you died?”

Any moment now, Elanor thought, I’ll wake up safe in my own bed.

Alfred stammered his way through an explanation. He loved children, he meant them no harm. He just wanted to talk with them, play with them. But everyone seemed to misunderstand him.

Mifunwi leaned forward from her horse. “And what sort of games did you have in mind? With girls only, or young boys too?” Alfred didn’t seem to know how to answer that.

Mifunwi sat up again. “I can see your thoughts, Alfred. Your ideas of play involve games adults might play in private. Why?” Alfred stammered something unintelligible.

Mifunwi stared at him, then nodded. “I see. Your uncle abused you when you were six, and continued until you were eleven. You never healed, instead you perpetuated the wrong.” Alfred’s mouth worked, then his eyes filled with tears and he sobbed.

Elanor stared at Alfred’s soul flickering in the smoke, feeling a mixture of revulsion and pity. He was sick, damaged, but not quite the evil monster she had thought.

Mifunwi turned. “Your majesty, do you have any questions for this spirit?”

“No, my lady; the Faery Queen has heard enough.”

“Thank you. Alfred! You are dead. My ravens will escort you to a suitable place in the afterlife. Try to be a better person next life.”

The ravens left their oak tree to circle the fire. Alfred’s soul drifted up and vanished into the circling ravens. The flock flew off into the clouds.

“Fire spirits, thank you.” Mifunwi announced. “You may leave.” The fire went out, leaving nothing but a pile of ash behind. “Ash, return to earth.” The ash vanished without a trace, leaving the grass untouched.

The queen considered her judgement. “This is an affair between humans, and occurred in the human realm. The foresters behaved correctly, no faery has been harmed. The Faery Queen begs the Raven Queen to take the humans out of her realm.”

“Thank you, your majesty. We beg leave of the Faery Queen.”

“The Faery Queen grants such leave.” She bowed from her horse. “May the winds be always beneath your wings.”

“May the earth be always beneath your feet.” Mifunwi bowed to the queen, who wheeled her horse and rode off. Her troop copied her, followed by the musicians on foot. The foresters vanished. The humans were left with the faery still standing under the oak tree, and his companions behind the tree. Mifunwi dismounted, holding the rains of her horse.

A raven flew through the clearing, alighting near Mifunwi, and shimmering into a human clad in black leather. Mifunwi handed the rains of her horse to the human, who bowed and mounted the horse. They wheeled and trotted across the clearing, vanishing into a rainbow smear.

“Before we leave, Elanor, why are you holding a faery sword?”

Elanor explained, including what Speaker to humans had told her about weapons, armour and ransom.

Mifunwi rounded on the faery. “You attacked my emissary? Why?”

The faery hung his head. “I behaved stupidly, your majesty. I did not believe she was your emissary. I thought she was a human sorcerer playing tricks.”

“Every queen will issue a token to her emissary, and any faery can test that a token is genuine.” Mifunwi reprimanded. “You behaved badly.” She turned away. “Elanor, do you wish to keep the sword?”

“Yes. If you think it’s all right.”

“Yes, it’s yours by right. Now, what are we to do with him. I don’t suppose you want to take him back to your home and look after him until his kin pay ransom.”

“I’d prefer not to.” It’s a small home, with three children.

Mifunwi smiled. “No, and I don’t imagine he would want to spend years in the human realm as your prisoner.”

Mifunwi turned back to the crestfallen faery. “Taking you with us to the human realms is inconvenient. You will stay here, and return to your duties. Technically you are still a prisoner; please discuss your ransom with your kin. I will return in two weeks to discuss their offer. Do you have any questions?”

“No, your majesty, thank you.”

Mifunwi nodded, turning away. “Let’s go home. We’ll save any discussion until then.”

Together they set off. Along the way Mifunwi’s form shimmered, and she was back to the white clad lady who had visited Gwen. Her spear had vanished. “How did you do that?” Elanor asked.

“Magic is easier in the faery realms.” There was a rainbow shimmer before them, they walked through it and onto the main path through the woods, near Gwen’s house.

“Gwen, you should call your hairdresser, see if she can still fit you in. I can mind Mary while you are away. I also need to call the school, and the police.”

“Yes, thanks. What happened back there? Did we really go to fairyland? Are you really some sort of queen?” Gwen responded. “I have so many questions I don’t know where to start!”

Elanor wanted to know many things too, but her questions could wait until Gwen left.

They were approaching the back gate. Mifunwi said, “I told you I have powers. I have been to the faery realm before. Mary is still young enough to go there, I never forgot how. You will find your trip fades like a dream.”

Gwen opened the gate and they walked into the back yard. “Oh, I was going to cook a roast for dinner, I have to put that on! There won’t be time to go to the hairdresser.”

Mifunwi laughed. “Do you think I can’t cook? Just show me what you want cooked, and tell me when you want it finished.”

Gwen came back from the phone. “She’s had a cancellation, she can see me if I leave right away! Oh thank you for everything Mifunwi, I’ll talk to you later.”

Mifunwi headed to the phone. “I’ll make phone calls, then we’ll get that roast on.”

Mary helped Elanor peel and prepare vegetables and put everything in the oven. “Mummy was supposed to put everything in the roasting dish in the fridge, and I was going to put it in the oven when I got home.” Her eyes were shining. “Are you really a fairy queen? We saw the fairy queen!”

Mifunwi smiled. “It’s a long story, too long for now. In the faery realm I am known as the Raven Queen, and I can do magic. I can do a little here, but it works better there. Your mother said you talk with the faeries; that is why I said I would visit you. Not all faeries are good. They are like humans, some bad, some sick, some stupid. You shouldn’t go into the faery realm by yourself, only with someone you can trust, and whom the faeries respect.”

“You won’t stop me then? My step father said you would stop me from seeing the fairies.”

“No, your step father doesn’t believe in them. Sometimes you need to keep a few secrets. Promise me you won’t tell your father about today, and I promise I’ll help you to see the faery folk as you grow up. Otherwise, in a few years, they will ignore you.”

“Oh, I don’t want that! Please help me see the fairies.”

“You must take care with them. You now know that pretty little fairies are a glamour worn by the faery folk. They can do magic, they are not human; they will not have your interests at heart. Some might be like the man you ran away from.”

“I didn’t know that.” The girl replied. “They were always friendly, playing games with me, and chasing away bad people.”

“Yes, but they were only a few foresters. You didn’t see the one who attacked Elanor with his sword; she knocked him out instead.”

“With one punch!” Elanor added, laughing. “They don’t call me big momma for nothing!”

“So I propose that you and I go to visit the faery realm from time to time. In the meantime you concentrate on the human realm.”

Elanor asked Mifunwi “What did you tell the school?”

“Only that Mary was chased by a man and hid in the woods. I also said that several men have been hanging around the playing field and accosting children. The headmistress will tell the police. I have omitted to report the body, we don’t need to become involved.”

“Gwen is taking it all very calmly.”

“I think she’s always wanted to see fairies.” Then she laughed. “Mary, to your mother this was like a dream, fading now. By the time she returns from the hairdresser she won’t remember much. Just tell her you hid in the woods, and that the fairies helped you.”

They chatted for a while longer, before saying their good-byes. “Don’t go into the woods again today. The faery queen was not happy her foresters spend so much time with you, and you don’t want to upset the faery queen!”

At the front door, Mifunwi and Elanor both hugged Mary. As they walked through, there was a raucous cawing, and two ravens appeared, one alighting on the fence, another in a nearby tree. Mifunwi smiled. “The ravens will see that no harm comes to you.”

Back in the car, Elanor commented, “If I hadn’t been there, I wouldn’t have believed it. How did we get into the faery realm? Why did everything happen today when we came to visit? Why can I see through their glamour? And how did you get to be the Raven Queen?”

Mifunwi laughed. “We visited today because things were due to happen today. How we got in and out is magic, you’ll have to learn that. Wearing the medallion allows you to see through their glamour, keep it.”

“I almost feel sorry for Alfred, after finding out his uncle molested him. What a sad, wasted life!”

Mifunwi sighed. “Too many people go through life damaged, and perpetuating that damage. He could have healed, but instead it killed him.”

“You are staying for dinner, the children want to see Auntie Mifunwi again.” Elanor decided to work back to the Raven Queen.

“That’s what we arranged. Otherwise I’d have insisted Gwen invite me for dinner. But that can wait. Gwen won’t mention what happened to her partner, and Mary will be seeing a lot less of the faery folk.”

“Are faery folk common? This is a suburban area, I’d think they would be driven away.”

“They prefer the wild areas, that is true. But you could meet with them anywhere if they care to visit, and show themselves. It’s easier where the realms touch - the faery put guards on those places to stop things from wandering in.”

“Mary got into the faery realm, and I think more than once. Does that happen to others? Is it good or bad?”

Mifunwi chuckled. “Good or bad depends on the intentions of the folk she meets. The faery folk have been taking people there for millennia. Time passes much more slowly there; a day there can be one year here. They were planning to keep Mary for several years. She would not realise that at first. Eventually they would let her go, and she would come back a teenage girl to a world where her parents were long dead. I know of many incidents like this. I spoke with the queen, they will not do that to Mary now.”

There was a look on Mifunwi’s face that said she knew a lot more than she was saying. Elanor tried to read between the lines. “There didn’t seem to be much time difference for us.”

“We were on the borderlands, time is about the same as here. You must travel further in, to where their cities are. I insisted the Queen go to meet you, not the other way around.”

“They kidnapped you, didn’t they? How long ago?”

Mifunwi was suddenly serious. “Elanor, I am much older than I look. I stayed there for many years, I came back to a very different world, and even that was long ago. I have returned to the faery realm many times, I do not seem to age. But I think we have had enough impossible things for one day. Your parents will be wondering where you are, as will your children. We should be home soon.”

“How long ago? Elizabethan times? The middle ages?”

Mifunwi was silent for several minutes. Elanor was about to press her when she started speaking. “I could tell you many stories over the centuries. From time to time they kidnap human children, teach them magic, and their customs. Their magic offers the possibility of a long life. Barring accidents, the faery folk can live for millennia. Queen Mab is over twelve hundred years old in the faery realm. Elanor, I promised to teach you. Now you’ve seen the faery folk, are you still interested?”

“I would have preferred to be introduced first.” Elanor complained. “But I am interested in what you can teach me. You still haven’t answered how old you are.”

“Ah, Elanor, would you believe me if I told you?” Mifunwi chided gently.

“Try me! We’ve been friends for years. I’m sure I can handle your real age.”

Mifunwi chuckled. “We’ll see. When I first ventured into the faery realm, the faery folk moved freely among us, and Stone Henge hadn’t been built.”

“Wow.” Elanor said softly.

“Ten years in the faery realm was thousands of years here. But that’s another day. We have dinner to cook, and children to feed!”