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THE FERRY GIRL

By Jaelithe Ingold

The Temple fog crept across the surface of the lake. Always at this time and this place. Always with that damp green smell. The golden rotundas and pristine columns were hidden from view, and even the evergreen forest was cloaked.

The Gods were so secretive about sacrifice.

Twelve men and two women were gathered at the shore. Though the mist had not yet reached their beach, all sounds were muffled. Voices murmured and movements stayed slow.

Faith remained in her boat and tried to stay unnoticed. Today belonged to Sarah. Not to her. Never to her. She was nothing but the ferry girl.

Sarah was beautiful, of course. They always were. Soft brown hair and large black eyes full of sadness. Waifish and lovely, she stood apart from the villagers. She wasn't one of them anymore. Though she trembled, her emotions were under control. No tears had fallen.

At least not yet.

Faith caressed her worn wooden oars. Polished from years of use, they were smooth as

the marbled columns of the Temple and perfect as nothing of the earth could be.

The priest drew Sarah to the side and as always Faith tried to imagine what he might be saying. Did he wish them well for the next life? Did he thank them for their generosity?

Or did he warn them to remain strong? The weak ones could destroy their land, so the chosen one knew her duty and accepted it.

Just as Faith had accepted hers.

The priest finished saying whatever he needed to say, and Sarah bowed her head while the man decorated her forehead with ashes. The other villagers joined the moment of silence, but Faith did not bow hers.

Grief was for the living. Not for the divine. And therefore, not required, no matter what the priest chose to call it.

Once the moment was deemed over, Sarah turned and began walking to the boat. Faith stood and assisted the girl to her seat, and then she resumed her position at the front. Her back to the island, she nodded to the three men waiting at the docks, who slowly pushed the boat into the mist-shrouded water.

The three had been selected by Sarah. A privilege, it was considered, to be one of them. Much the same as the honor placed on those who carried the dead to their final resting places. So much easier to say goodbye now, while the sacrifice retained her quiet dignity.

And far more honorable, so it would seem, than the immortal girl who ferried the sacrifices to the Temple of the Gods. The girl who served the Gods' most malicious order. The girl who witnessed when that quiet dignity vanished, and all that was left was the desire to live.

Survival was instinctual, and Faith had never blamed the sacrifices for wanting it.

Perhaps Sarah even deserved to survive, but it was not for her to say. It wasn't for any of them to say, but that didn't stop the villagers from suggesting that Sarah wasn't the right choice. That this fate never should have been hers.

Last season, Sarah had been engaged to a farmer. A good man, all admitted, one who should have lasted. But the Gods could be cruel too. Only days before Sarah would have married him, his body had been found on the shores of the lake. Blue kelp had encircled his throat and hands, like the lake itself had consigned him to drown.

Maybe it had.

Faith began rowing. The susurrant melody was so familiar and calm. How many times had she taken this voyage? Perhaps too many times. She should remember the sacrifices. All of them, at one time, had been familiar to her. Though she would always be an outsider, Faith lived with the villagers. She interacted with them daily.

But looking back, only a few of the sacrifices stood out. The most dignified. The most terrified. The extremes were what she remembered.

In a century, would this girl be forgotten too?

Halfway across the lake, Faith halted her rowing and allowed the boat to drift. The milky fog had risen all around them to press against her lungs and body. No land could be seen in any direction, but she still sensed their distance from the shore of the Gods.

Her passenger did little but stare at the floor of the boat. Her feet brushed the wooden

slats in slow kicks. Back and forth. Seemingly in time with the sounds of the oars slipping through the muffled water.

And so Faith had to stop. If only out of curiosity and wariness. To see what her passenger might do, which kind of sacrifice she might become.

Sarah continued her kicks for a few extra seconds, and then she also stilled. She looked up and there was a wealth of sorrow in her eyes. “Why do you do this?” Her voice was husky. Ill-used and soft.

Faith gripped her oars more tightly. They were made from the wood of the evergreen forest, harvested from the arbor surrounding the Temple to the Gods. They were as sacred to her as anything Sarah might have possessed, including the man she’d loved.

“Because it is my duty.”

Sarah hesitated before speaking again. “Have you no desire for another life? Another chance?”

“There is no other life. Not for me. And not for you.”

The girl swallowed. “I know it’s too late for me. I would never shirk my duty. I am... resigned to it, in fact. But you might have a choice. If you allow it.”

Faith adjusted the oars in her hands and began rowing again. That kind of talk was blasphemous. The agreement sacrosanct. There could be no discussion.

But Sarah, it seemed, had no desire for silence any longer.

“Do you not feel that you have served the Gods for long enough? That you have more than repaid the debt?”

“That is not for me to decide.”

“But perhaps it is.” Sarah’s voice had grown stronger. Less wispy. “All of us must decide how much we are willing to sacrifice. I could have run away. All the others could have run away. None of us did, because we were willing to pay the price in spite of the hurt and the loss. If it means nothing to us, it isn’t a sacrifice. Do you understand?”

Faith paused mid-stroke. A flicker of indecision, and then she continued. Others had tried to sway her with pretty words. Some had begged. Some had offered money, eternal servitude and promises to disappear and never tell another soul. A very few had attempted the unthinkable.

Those girls hadn’t even made it to the opposite shore before the lake claimed them. In the end, they weren’t willing, and the Gods had punished them for the travesty.

But Sarah wasn’t questioning her own fate, and that seemed worse somehow. More offensive and dangerous.

The Gods were undoubtedly listening. They were waiting. Would they sense the temptation? Would they punish her for that single moment when the words penetrated and she wondered if Sarah was right?

“Perhaps I am also willing to pay the price.”

“I think not,” Sarah said. “I think you are trapped. I think you have no understanding of everything you have given up and you cannot remember what it is like to be mortal. Because it costs you nothing, it means nothing. It’s no longer a sacrifice. It simply is.”

Heat flooded her face, and Faith had to resist the urge to club the girl with the oar. It would not be the first time blood had spilled over the polished wood.

Nor would it be the last.

How could it not be a sacrifice? Hadn't she given everything? She had never lived a normal life. She would never know the warmth of a man's touch, or the love in a baby's eyes for its mother, and she yearned for those things. She would never grow old, she would never get sick, and she would never die. And yes, she yearned for those sensations too.

How could that mean nothing?

No. It wasn't true. And she couldn't allow doubt to enter her thoughts.

Then Sarah reached out and touched her hand. Delicate fingers trailed lightly over her sun-browned skin. A gesture of sympathy, and one no one had shown her in generations of sacrifices.

The ache of that simple touch.

Was this pity?

Did this simple girl feel sorry for her? Long after Sarah's body had rotted in the ground, Faith would still be alive. She'd still make her journeys across the lake. She would still be serving the Gods.

She was lucky.

And yet, a small part of her envied Sarah, whose service would be complete in a few hours time. Sarah would do her duty to the Gods, and her memory would be one filled with honor, even if it was without distinction.

Faith swallowed an unsteady breath. What would it be like to know the end was near?

There was no dock on the opposite shore. Just a gradual sandy incline which led into the forest. The mist inundated the smell of the evergreens. Clean and sharp, Faith inhaled the breath of the Gods. So familiar and soothing. Like the feel of her oars, she took comfort in its certainty. In its tangibility. The Gods themselves were so elusive.

Sarah remained seated until Faith had dragged the boat to shore. Only then did she step onto the land where the Gods dwelled. Her slippers barely whispered against the sand as she moved up the beach and towards the walkway between the trees.

Torches had been placed at regular intervals along the path. The mist grew thicker and more fragrant the closer they traveled to the Temple. Sarah took in a deep breath.

“This place...” and her voice trailed off with a frown. “This is not what I expected.”

Though she knew it could do no good to speak further, Faith was curious. “What did you expect?”

“Can you not feel it?” Sarah rubbed her arms for emphasis. “I can feel them all around me. Like they are whispering in my ears.”

Faith felt another pang in her chest. Of course Sarah would be the most sensitive, the most receptive. Some of the others had shrunk away from the island. They’d disliked the magnitude of the Gods’ presence. They’d tried to escape. They’d run from the inevitable pathway, though all places eventually led to the Temple.

There was no escape in the mist. It hid both the Gods’ secrets and the way home.

Only a ferry girl could find her way out.

Sarah reached down and clasped her hand. “Will you show me the way?”

Faith hesitated. She had never traveled the pathway with the sacrifices, though she had

been to the Temple more times than she could count. She had lit all the torches, she had measured twenty steps between each pair, and she had cleaned the steps of the Temple. She had removed debris from the beach, and she'd brought the sacrifices to the Gods. Every time. Every season. For countless centuries.

Without fail.

Faith nodded, though she disengaged her hand. Her fingers were thick and callused. Unpleasant in comparison to Sarah's, which were delicate and fine. Ladylike.

Everything she was not. Everything she had never been.

The island was silent as they walked. Nothing else lived here. Not even Faith dared spend more than a few hours here at a time. She was uncertain why she had never done so, as much as it soothed her to be in their presence.

A part of her regretted it.

Regret? Faith frowned.

Though Sarah did not rush her footsteps, neither did she linger among the trees. But it wasn't long before the Temple grew distinct against the mist. Fifty-five perfect stone steps led inside. They finished the climb and crossed the threshold just as the moon drew overhead.

Sarah let out a little shiver, but whether that was from excitement or the descending chill, Faith couldn't be sure. Gooseflesh had pebbled her arms as they moved deeper inside the Temple. Candlelight flickered everywhere. Eternal flames that never grew dark.

In the writings scrawled over the walls, Faith had learned the flames were the villagers who worshipped the Gods. The fire representing their souls was held by the Gods for safe-keeping. A covenant sprung from fire and bound by the water of the lake.

Some of the alcoves held burned-out wicks. Faith had tried to light them, but they refused the flame. Whether that was because the person no longer lived or because that person no longer believed, she could never be sure.

The reasons were beyond her. She was nothing but the ferry girl.

Faith led the girl towards the doors at the far end of the Temple. Golden double doors that glowed in the candlelight and held the warmth of the Gods' embrace within.

She had never been beyond those doors, though she had caressed them once or twice. She'd felt their heat and wondered what it would be like to cross that threshold. What it would look like on the other side. Would she finally see the faces of her Gods?

But the magnitude of that betrayal—of that blasphemy—it kept her locked outside.

“You must proceed by yourself now.” Faith avoided eye contact with the girl, though she felt Sarah's gaze upon her.

Sarah glanced at the doors, and then she touched Faith's shoulder. “You are upset with me, I think. Have I been unkind?”

Faith shook her head.

“I don't wish to cause pain, but you must understand why the Gods require sacrifice. You cannot begrudge them anything. And in my heart of hearts, I believe you are no longer a believer.”

Faith clenched her hands into fists. What did this silly girl know about sacrifice? Her

loss would last but moments. Faith's loss had been ongoing anguish. Enduring loss and forever dissatisfaction to know, that even after all this time, the Gods still didn't want her enough to end the torment.

“And what is my alternative?” Faith snapped. “To leave the island? To abandon the Gods which have given me eternal life? To make a mockery of everything my life has been before this moment?”

“Trade places with me.”

Faith blinked at the words.

Sarah touched her arm again. Squeezed it once in emphasis. “Trade places with me, Faith.”

How did Sarah know her name? But that question was a distant echo compared with the effect the command had on her senses. Trade places with her? No one had ever offered that before.

Faith looked the other girl over. Sarah was strong and lovely. She was a willing sacrifice and she could sense the island's power. Moreover, she wanted to serve. She was devout, more so than all the others. And she was right.

It had been generations since Faith could remember feeling the same.

“Will you do this?” Sarah's voice had softened. Sympathetic and understanding. “Not for me, of course. Nor for you. But for them.” Here she nodded towards the golden doors which were still closed.

The doors which, even now, beckoned her forward.

The ferry girl slipped from the Temple with the stars still perched in the sky. Her heart ached with loss, but newfound delight made her breathing unsteady when she located the boat and her beloved oars again.

The Gods had chosen well. Sarah's sacrifice had been worthy and would undoubtedly appease them for a long time.

As would hers.

She was still nothing but a ferry girl.