

**OF
GHOSTS
AND
GEEKS**

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OF GHOSTS AND GEEKS

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For my family, who helps me laugh.
And for anyone who has ever put on
a really dorky costume.

CHAPTER ONE

GWEN WALBERG CLUTCHED HER NEW TISSUE-wrapped treasure to her chest, trembling with excitement as she hurried out of the book fair. Could she really have paid a mere seventy-five dollars for a first edition of Nathaniel Honeypost's *Fantastic Mythologies*, illustrated by the unrivalled Martha Carleton Shaw? The book's bindings and typesetting looked old enough to have been printed in 1873 as the title page claimed. The tired elderly man who sold it to her clearly had no idea what he possessed—he had seemed downright grateful to place it in her hands.

Shutting herself into her car in the convention center's parking garage, Gwen peeled open the tissue paper for another look. Okay, admittedly, the book's value was lessened by the pink lace a former owner had glued to its cover, along with the ink scribbles on the front leaf—mostly the name “Violetta” paired with the names of mythical heroes, inside the shapes of hearts and clouds. Still, if the book was authentic, it had to be worth thousands of dollars. Gwen rewrapped the book and started the car, her fingers tingling.

Imagine the fame! Finally some recognition in her department at the college, something worthy of publication. They might even make her a full professor, but she wouldn't get her hopes up, not until she knew.

The gate lifted at the garage's exit, and Gwen sped out of downtown Seattle and into her quiet suburb.

An hour later, after calling three different experts (on Honeypost, Shaw, and rare books, respectively), Gwen whooped aloud in delight and danced around her living room, rattling the vintage Star Wars action figures that crowded her end table.

The book was genuine. Only five known copies existed in the world, all of them in museums, and now she owned a sixth. Oh, she would show them now, those snotty professors in her English department, never inviting her to their brunches and Christmas parties. She could even leave this college, its

dinky campus cowering beneath Northwest clouds and overgrown maples. That's right, goodbye, minor leagues. After this, she'd have offers from Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford!

The phone rang, and her heart clutched up in dread. Maybe one of her experts was calling back to say, "Sorry, I was wrong. It's a fake."

Gwen answered. "Hello?"

"Gwinnebago! How's Girthmore College?"

Gwen wilted in relief, along with some annoyance. "Uncle Bert. Um, things are good, but right now I—"

"Don't worry, Gwen, I won't take up much of your time. I only wanted to invite you to our séance tonight. My group's hosting a French medium. We're hoping to contact Marie Antoinette!"

Gwen winced. Her Uncle Bert, the only other academic in the family, was a parapsychologist, and frequently embarrassed his friends and relatives with his enthusiasm about ghosts, telekinesis, and other impossible things. He insisted he'd held numerous conversations with souls from beyond, a claim that had Gwen and other family members worrying that he probably required psychiatric medication. But he seemed mentally acute in every other way, so they kept putting off the issue—and dodging his séances.

"Thank you for thinking of me, Bert, but I have a lot of grading to finish tonight. Maybe next time?"

"Ah, too bad. Yes, next time I'll give you more advance notice and save you a seat! We'd love to see you." Uncle Bert paused. "Do you have a lover in the house, Gwen? I'm sensing a vibe of delight from you, an aura with an 'enamored' quality."

"Uncle Bert! No." Gwen felt her face get hot, and not merely because it was a muggy May afternoon. "I'm...working on a very satisfying lit project right now. That's all. Nothing that would interest anyone else." She added the last sentence quickly, not ready to share her discovery yet, especially with someone as unpredictable as Uncle Bert.

He chuckled. "Sure, Gwen. If you want to call it a project, that's what we'll call it." He sounded like he was winking.

"I should get back to work now. Goodbye, Uncle Bert."

"Later, dear." Still cackling at his own joke, Bert hung up.

Gwen set down the phone and turned away, instantly brightening at the sight of her new acquisition. She lifted it from her dining room table and kissed its front cover. “Oh, you are a thing of beauty.”

She looked around her small house with regret. Living alone—twenty-nine years old and single—she had no one to share her good news with. Her parents lived in California and endlessly mired themselves in badly planned do-it-yourself home improvements. Her sister and brother-in-law, in the Portland area, had a new baby, as did the local couple who Gwen considered her best friends. Even if any of her nearest and dearest had time for her exciting news, they wouldn’t totally grasp what was exciting about it. Still, she itched to tell someone, and would make an intrusive phone call if she had to.

The sound of a lawn mower rattled to her ears from her open kitchen windows. Carrying the book, Gwen darted into the kitchen and peeked out.

Paul Chang pushed the gas-powered mower across her backyard, his shaggy black hair fastened in a loose ponytail. He wore grass-stained jeans and a red plaid shirt with the sleeves ripped off. Gwen smirked. Silly young dude was probably trying to look like the Incredible Hulk—like he was just so muscular his shirt wouldn’t even contain his biceps.

All right, he did have good muscle tone, but you’d expect that from someone who hauled around yard waste carts all day. Still, her heart lightened with excitement. Gwen had bumped into him in a bookstore downtown a month ago, and they’d had a surprisingly fun conversation about comic-book heroes who were based on ancient myths. Therefore Paul might in fact appreciate a rare mythology book.

And it was just common courtesy that made Gwen stop before going out and peer into the small oval mirror next to her kitchen door. She removed her glasses since she wasn’t reading at the moment, and made sure her dark brown bangs weren’t frizzing out, and that the rest of her hair lay smooth down her back. Baring her teeth, she checked for any blueberry fragments from that muffin she’d scarfed down as lunch. Finding none, she straightened her Wonder Woman T-shirt and darted outside in search of Paul.

She followed the noise of the mower around to the side of the house. “Paul! Come look at—hey! No! Don’t cut those!”

CHAPTER TWO

SCOWLING, GWEN SHOVED THE RARE BOOK BE-
neath her arm, waiting impatiently for him to acknowledge her.

Paul turned, shut off the mower, and pushed his sunglasses up onto his head. He squinted at her through thick eyelashes. "Sorry, did you say something?"

"The daisies! Why are you mowing them?"

He cast a confused glance along the ground. "These tiny ones?"

"Yes! They're beautiful. Why would you cut them down?"

"They're in the grass. You wanted the grass cut, right?"

"Yes, but not the daisies. They make this gorgeous spangled carpet of—" She stopped before she started comparing her lawn flora to some scene from a fantasy movie. "Don't cut those," she repeated.

Paul blinked at her. "Then you want to let the grass grow on this side? Because I can't exactly mow the grass and dodge the daisies. I'm not getting down there with a teeny pair of scissors."

Gwen clenched the book tighter against her side. Forget showing antique treasures to this jerk. "Just don't cut this side," she said through her teeth.

"Fine." His voice gentled. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't know. They'll grow back, really. Mowing's probably even good for them, now and then." His mouth eased into a smile, complete with a gleam of gorgeous white teeth.

Paul Chang's smile, when he used it, probably did melt most women's tempers. But Gwen felt herself above such tricks and refused to let it soothe her. "Fine," she grumbled, and headed back toward the house.

"Was there something else you were going to say?" he called after her.

"Never mind!" She shut the kitchen door, harder than necessary.

Sinking into a seat at the table, she opened *Fantastic Mythologies*. The brilliant colors and flowing lines of Shaw's artwork acted as the balm she re-

quired, spreading wonder and peace into her mind.

Martha Carleton Shaw was her favorite artist of all time, not only for the romance and lifelike detail she poured into her paintings, but because Shaw's vision had inspired fantasy and science-fiction artwork for over a century now. Not bad for a Victorian-era woman, Gwen thought with admiration.

Myths had served as the inspiration for human storytelling since the dawn of history. Even when Gwen taught college students the works of Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, or Jane Austen, she found ways to bring mythology into the analysis. But sci-fi and fantasy contained, in her opinion, the strongest and most fascinating reworkings of myth. Her favorite courses—when the department allowed her to teach them—focused specifically on those. Sure, she heard the mutters of “Trekkie” or “Tolkien freak” among the faculty, but the students loved that stuff. Hell, those professors were just jealous none of *their* courses were so popular.

So to acquire a book that combined two of her central loves in one—the groundbreaking artwork of Shaw, depicting ancient myths from around the world—would have been a treat by itself. But to have it be a pricelessly rare book too...

“Oh, how I love you,” she promised the volume, as she turned a delicate page and beamed at a two-page spread depicting Valhalla, all golden pillars, studly warriors, and fair Valkyries.

“Now, which is better?” she mused aloud. “Lending you to museums for an obscene fee, or hoarding you and enjoying you every night in the comfort of my own home?”

Naturally she expected no answer, so it came as a great surprise when someone caressed her arm with a freezing hand.

Gwen jumped, thinking in the split second before she looked up, *Did Paul get his damn hands wet in the hose and then sneak in here for some reason?*

But when she did look up, it was certainly not Paul she beheld.

It was a young woman, tall and perhaps once pretty, but now looking as if she'd been dragged through several thorny hedges upside-down. She wore a long gown of faded purple, its buttons ripped open to the top of her bosom. Her long brown hair teetered halfway in its up-do; several locks had come loose and hung about her face and shoulders. Her skin was deathly

white, and marred with cuts and scrapes, but her eyes gazed in avid delight at Gwen. All around her body, she gleamed faintly, with a bluish light. And Gwen could see straight through her, to the bookcases and the solar-system mobile in her living room. Gwen's hands and lips went numb as she processed what she was seeing. "My god," she whispered.

"So you're my new owner," the ghost said. "Oh, this is going to be such fun!"

CHAPTER THREE

GWEN FOUND HER VOICE, AND HER STRENGTH too, jumping to her feet so fast that she knocked her chair over. “Paul!” She turned to the window. “Paul, get in here!”

“He just left,” the ghost remarked. “Alas. We could have gotten started at once.” She spoke with a ladylike manner, using a high pitch and demure word choice that didn’t entirely match the keen gaze she fixed on Gwen.

“Started at what?” Gwen continued sending frantic glances out the window for Paul, or anyone really.

“We’ll come to that. First, shan’t we introduce ourselves?” Clutching an edge of her bedraggled skirt, the young lady dropped a curtsy. “I am Dorcas Schmelbeck.”

Gwen paused. “Dorkus? Your name’s Dorkus?”

“I know.” The ghost heaved a sigh. “Such a common name. Which is why I’ve chosen my own, and ask you to use it, if you will. Please call me Violetta.”

Having remembered there was, in fact, an old-fashioned name spelled “Dorcas,” Gwen failed to suppress a hysterical snort of laughter at her own misinterpretation. When the young woman glared at her, she followed it up with a cough, and said, “Violetta, of course. I’m, uh, Gwen Walberg.”

And I’m introducing myself to a ghost. What the hell?

The ghost contorted her bluish lips in what was probably meant to be a charming smile. “A pleasure to meet you, Gwen.”

Gwen righted the chair and moved behind it, clutching its back. “What are you doing here?”

“Why, you bought me.” Violetta waved her hand toward *Fantastic Mythologies*, open on the table. “I always follow the book. Free gift with purchase, I believe you say these days.”

“You haunt the book?”

"I once owned the book, thank you. My name is written in it, if you care to look."

Gwen remembered now. "Violetta. Your name and a lot of pink hearts."

"This was my favorite book." Violetta reached out a transparent finger, which somehow made contact with the volume, and began turning pages. "So romantic! Such virile, exciting heroes. Such beautiful ravished maidens."

Gwen considered correcting her, for surely she meant "ravishing," not "ravished." But, on second thought, getting ravished was actually part of many myths, and besides, Gwen had more important questions to address.

She cast her mind back to discussions of the paranormal with Uncle Bert—whose claims of chats from beyond the grave she was now wholly ready to reconsider. "So...who are you, and what do you want from me?"

Violetta sighed and paced across the floor, dragging her ethereal skirt behind her. "Ah, my life is a sad tale."

Gwen groaned quietly. This sounded like it was going to take a while.

"I was born in New York in 1860, the only daughter of a prosperous tradesman's family. All eight of my brothers were kept busy in the trade, and I was left with nothing to do but languish at home with my books. Books were my passion—tales of romance especially. Indeed, one could say that my adoration of such stories was my downfall."

"Bummer," Gwen said, hoping that was an appropriate response.

"My sweet young life was cut tragically short at the age of nineteen, on a beautiful starry night." Violetta paused to lift her face to the ceiling, and splayed a tragic hand over her bosom.

Gwen compressed her lips to keep from asking if she'd been thrown from a horse or what exactly. Surely Violetta was about to tell her.

"My eldest brother had recently married, and his bride had moved into our house, and that evening they retired to his rooms to do naughty things together."

Gwen's eyebrows shot up. "Uh..."

Violetta sent her an arch glance. "You know—drinking whiskey, playing cards. Possibly even looking at French photographs." She spoke the last two words in a stage whisper.

"Mm-hm." Gwen successfully maintained a straight face. "I've heard of

those photographs.”

“With eight brothers, my dear, I have heard all manner of shocking things. I daresay I am quite corrupted, as you shall see.” She began to pace the room again, looking like one of those women in Jane Austen films who are always doing slow laps around the garden while sharing gossip with each other. “My brother’s bride had confided in me that she would be playing a particular card game with him that evening, one which involved removing a piece of clothing for each losing round. I, with my wicked nature, burned with desire to see this activity at first hand.”

“Strip poker?” Gwen’s academic mind took a sudden interest. “They had strip poker back then?”

Violetta shot her a glare.

“Sorry,” Gwen said. “Go on.”

Violetta reassembled her expression of ladylike melancholy. “Alas, I could see nothing at all through the keyhole to his rooms, so I had no choice but to slip outdoors and climb from one balcony to another in order to peek through his windows.”

“No choice. Of course.”

“I caught only the quickest glimpse of my brother peeling the chemise off my sister-in-law, between scorching kisses, when...” Violetta paused, drawing a fluttering breath, as if she needed a moment to recover from that scene. “When disaster befell me. For, you see, my brother lived on the fourth floor of our house.”

Gwen winced. “Uh-oh.”

“Yes. When I lost my footing and fell to the pavement, I knew I would shortly die.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Ah, but I didn’t die, not then!”

“No?”

“No, but most unfortunately, I had fallen directly into the path of a coach with four horses, galloping up our street.”

Gwen winced again. “Yikes.”

“When their hooves trampled me and the wheels rolled over me, I thought surely I could live no longer. And yet it was not the end!”

“Ouch. It wasn’t?” Gwen clutched the chair tighter. She’d cheerfully munched popcorn during films with more gruesome details than those—often featuring arrows stuck into the face, in fact—but found herself unsure how to react to an actual ghost describing her own death.

“The driver did not stop to check my condition, if indeed he noticed running me over, the horrid scoundrel. Mortally wounded, I tried to crawl back to my house, but in my pain I was disoriented and wound up on the wrong side of the street. Which was quite tragic, for upon the other side of our street lay the river!”

“Please tell me you didn’t fall into the river,” Gwen said.

“Alas, yes! Thinking the railing was our own front gate, I pulled myself over it, and the next thing I knew, I was tumbling down cruel, sharp rocks and plunging into icy rapids!”

Gwen pressed her lips together. *Don’t laugh, don’t laugh, it isn’t funny...* She took a deep breath. “So, you drowned, ultimately.”

“Ah, but I didn’t! I clutched a drifting branch that kept me afloat, and scarcely knowing what was happening, I found myself swept out to sea!”

“To sea? Seriously?”

“Quite. And I suppose it possible that I could have drifted safely to shore, but...” Closing her eyes, Violetta passed a hand across her forehead, looking to be in need of a fainting couch. “That was when the sharks found me.”

Gwen’s self-control fell to pieces. She burst into laughter.

When Violetta opened her eyes and sent her a scowl, her fists seizing up in her skirts, Gwen suppressed her hysteria.

“I’m sorry,” Gwen said. “Really. So, I hope that was the end of your... suffering?”

“Yes.” Violetta sighed, released her skirts, and swept back toward the book. “My sad spirit took flight and settled in the pages of this dear volume, and since then I have awakened from time to time, with each new owner, and sought to continue enjoying my life’s passions, even in death.”

“What life’s passions?” Gwen asked, suspiciously.

“Why, lovers, of course. Since I cannot be one myself, I seek to enjoy those still living. How I do adore to watch them, and touch them!” Violetta

swooped forward and ran her palm down Gwen's cheek.

It felt like being caressed with a dead fish. Gwen yelped, flattening herself against the wall.

Looking annoyed, Violetta reared up, folding her arms. "However, I can't feel much when I do touch anyone, and no one seems to enjoy my touch."

Gwen sagged in relief. "I understand. That's too bad. And since there are no lovers here, just me, it's probably best if you go to sleep, or go toward the light or whatever, and uh..."

Violetta burst into a peal of laughter that carried a sadistic edge. "Oh, no, my dear thing. You may own me in one fashion, but I most definitely tell *you* what to do, not vice versa. And what I want you to do is take a lover."