

Shearing's Ghost



*J*t was so quiet, mid-day in the high summer and everyone was at rest, or cooling themselves by the river at the far end of the estate. Wynter knew that the gardens would not come to life again till late in the evening, when the temperature would return to bearable. For now she had the entire palace complex to herself, a rare blessing in this complicated world.

She left the horses, happy in their dim stalls, and quickly crossed the wavering heat of the redbrick stable yards. Her footsteps rang back at her from the stable buildings. Little swallows sliced the sunshine around her, darting moments of shadow in the shimmering air, and the sound of contented horses and the sweet and dreamy smell of dung soothed her.

Home, home, *home*. It all sang to her, you're home.

She swerved left, turned at the yellow dovecote and cut a path between the shady trees, angling through the yew walk, heading for the kitchen garden. The air was so much cooler here and thick with resinous scent. Wynter crossed the sleepy sun-hazed paths and colonnades with an undisguised smile on her face, drinking in all the old familiar turns and corners, taking her own sweet time.

All those years in the grey dampness of the North she had silently longed for home, and every night, in response to that unexpressed longing, her heart had conjured this walk for her. Night after night in honey-soaked dreams, she had taken this exact trip from stable to kitchen. And now here she was, real and certain, treading on older feet the happy path of her childhood. She would have liked Razi and Alberon to be here, or the cats maybe, flowing against her ankles as they used to, like warm smoke keeping her company.

Rounding a corner to the limestone courtyard, she was caught unawares by two girls at the well. Unfamiliar faces, or perhaps just grown beyond her recognition. The easy flow of their voices ceased as she came into sight and they turned to look at her. She hoisted the rolls of tools a little higher on her shoulder and continued her walk without any perceptible change of pace or expression.

The path would take her to within six or seven feet of them before it curved away again and they watched her as she approached. They were her age or perhaps a year or two younger, thirteen, maybe, plump-armed and rounded, their faces shaded under the brims of their wide straw hats. The taller girl was a Maid of the Bucket, out to get water. Her pails rested empty on the lip of the well, her yoke balanced on one shoulder. The other girl, younger than Wynter had first thought, maybe only ten, was a goose-herder and she idly batted her striped skirts with a switch as she looked Wynter up and down.

It wasn't the masculinity of Wynter's clothes that intrigued the girls. Women often travelled in britches and short-coats, and it was quite obvious that she'd been travelling – the strong smell of

horse sweat and campfire off her was evidence of that. It wasn't even so much the fact that she was a stranger; palace life was always full of strangers. No, it was her apprentice garb that really grabbed their interest.

She could see their eyes travelling over the uniform, taking in the tightly bound club of hair at her neck and the red tunic embroidered with the carpenter's crest. Both these things told them that Wynter had been four years an authorised apprentice. They slipped a glance at her boots and their eyebrows shot up at the sight of green laces. Only the most talented of apprentices were granted permission for green. They checked for the guild approval pendant and saw it hanging around her neck. This told them that she had earned the right to wages, and not just the bed and board granted to all apprentices.

When they looked her in the eye again, she saw wariness and speculation. *So here is something new*, that look said, *a woman doing well in a man's apprenticeship*. She could sense the cogs turning in their minds as they decided how they felt about that.

Then the older girl smiled at her, a genuine smile that showed dimples, and nodded her head in respectful greeting. Wynter's heart soared like a bird released. Acceptance! She allowed her face to soften slightly and gave them a fleeting smile and a bob of her head as she passed them by.

As soon as her back was turned, Wynter made a triumphant little whooping sound under her breath. The girls' conversation had already bubbled up behind her as she left the yard and rounded a corner out of sight.

Into blessed shade again, the avenue of chestnut trees this time. She looked around in expectation and her grin deepened as

she caught sight of what she'd hoped to see here: Shearing's ghost.

The lanky spirit glimmered in the dappled shadows ahead of her. If anything he was even more ragged than she recalled, his tattered cavalry uniform shredded at shoulder and knee, so worn as to be an affront to his magnificent military record. His head was down in thought as he prowled the trees, and Wynter quickened her pace to catch up to him. He was following the path as he always did, wending his endless journey down the avenue, flickering on and off as he traversed the patches of sunlight.

'Rory!' she called softly, as she trotted towards him, 'Rory! It's me, I'm home!'

Shearing's ghost jumped and spun on his heels as she rapidly closed the distance between them. His pale, transparent figure shimmered like heat haze as he took her in, registered the changes, put the older face and body to the voice and realised it was his young pal and playmate. She saw a delighted smile begin on his pale lips and he half-raised a hand in greeting as she jogged down the leafy path. Then his face fell and his delight was replaced with concern. Wynter's grin began to fade as Shearing's ghost backed away, his hand up to stop her progress. He looked quickly around in obvious panic, checking that no one was watching.

Wynter ground to a halt, suddenly cold. Shearing was afraid. He was afraid to be seen with her! Wynter had *never* seen a ghost behave this way, ghosts didn't generally care what the living thought of them, and Shearing in particular had no truck with politicking; you were his friend or you were not, that was all there was to it. At least, that is how things had been, before she went away.

She stood, still as a statue, while Shearing made certain they were alone. Then he turned to her, his fine face a picture of regret, and held his finger to his lips. *Shhhhhhhhh*, that gesture said, *we are not safe*. And then he faded away, his pitying look an echo in the hazy air.

She wasn't sure how long she stood there, her heart hammering in her chest, but it must have been quite a while, because the Maid of the Bucket caught up with her on her way back into the palace. The girl cleared her throat as she came up the path and it made Wynter startle and turn to look at her.

She stood aside to let the girl pass. As she came abreast of her, the swinging buckets spattering droplets on the toes of her dusty boots, the girl eyed Wynter, obviously puzzled by the sudden change in her demeanour. Where had the cool self-collection gone? And what was it that had so ruffled the stranger's calm? Wynter knew she'd be the subject of even more gossip in the maids' dormitory tonight.

Wynter purposely schooled her face and regulated her breathing. She nodded to the girl and waited until she was out of sight before allowing herself relax once more into agitated thought.

Shearing's ghost had really thrown her. She felt as though the world had just slipped sideways and she was sliding towards the edge of it. What had happened here, that cats wouldn't reply to a civil greeting and ghosts were afraid to converse with a friend?

In the fifteen years of her life Wynter had come to understand and accept that most human beings were unpredictable and untrustworthy, faithful only for as long as the wind fared well. But ghosts? Ghosts and cats had always just gone their own way, and although you could never trust a cat to serve anyone's

purpose but its own, you always knew where you stood with them. The orange cat on the bridge had been frightened and confused by Wynter's greeting, as disconcerted by her attention as Shearing's ghost had been. And this flung everything up into the air, all the foundations of Wynter's life undermined suddenly, leaving her shaky and confused.

She glanced around her, no one in sight, safe for the moment. She took a very deep breath and briefly closed her eyes. She let herself feel the reassuring weight of her father's roll of tools on her shoulder. The awls and adzes and planes and chisels, collected and cared for during his twenty-two years as apprentice and master, and her own roll of tools, not so substantial, only five years in the gathering so far. She settled her feet wider, balancing herself and feeling the solidity of the ground beneath her boots. Good boots, solid riding boots, made to last. She felt the stir of the sluggish air against her face. She listened to the sleepy chirp of sparrows waiting out the heat in the chestnut trees, the steady flutter of the leaves.

A slow trickle of sweat rolled down her shoulder blades, the sharp smell of travelling rose up from her clothes.

She used all these things to ground herself, as her father had taught her, to make herself solid and *here*. What her father called, *in the moment*. She grabbed her mind and corralled it. Stopped it flying off into all the possibilities of what might come to pass. She forbade herself any more speculation on what might have happened while she was away. All these things would be revealed in time, but only through careful and calm investigation. She centred her mind on just being there, breathing in, breathing out, feeling the ground beneath, the trees

above, the weight of the tools on her shoulder.

She opened her eyes, and immediately there were three things Wynter knew for certain. First, she needed food. Second, she needed to find Razi and Alberon, and third, but not least, she needed a bath. Right, she thought, adjusting the tools and releasing her breath in a steady sigh, first things first and all other things would follow. She turned on her heel and calmly made her way to the kitchens.