**Firefly Phantasmata**

In a world where joy sustains the life of the Fae, faeries attempt to prevent one angry beast from destroying this vital element. Little do they know that joy will always maintain itself.

Peony and I conversed over a lunch of dandelion greens. After following a firefly Peony saw her joy. The firefly showed her a phantasma in which she was a Ma caring for newly blossomed Fae babies.

Peony told me all about her joy at rapid fire, “Little round younglings are so demanding, but now I know I live to meet their needs.”

As she finished the statement, the tip of her nose curled up. The scent of decomposing fish and perspiration fell upon us. Hesperus was approaching the shore.

We slipped out of my nest to hide in the bottom of the fishing boat that I had built it in. We tried not to listen as Hesperus slaughtered his meal. It was hopeless, there was no avoiding the snap and crack of sinew and bone as his bearlike claws tore the animal apart. It seemed like eons before he found the part he wanted.

The color left Peony’s face as she whispered, “Why must he eat animals? It’s practically cannibalism. Animals and beasts like he are one in the same.”

I responded as quietly as possible fearing he might hear me and sprinkle me as seasoning over his meat, “He is truly an anomaly. No other beast does such a thing. He knows nothing of joy.”

With the mention of joy Peony brought her knees to her chest and spoke tearfully, “You haven’t heard have you?” She paused, “He’s killed four of the seven fireflies our realm contains. He doesn’t believe in joy at all! He’s determined to kill every last one.”

Twisting toward her in shock my fears fell out of my mouth, “If he does we’ll all die!”

Suddenly we saw the T-bone from Hesperus’ steak whiz through the air and plop into the river. The squish of mud below his standing paws let us know he was finally removing his great build of lurching filth from our shore. With his departure the smell of death left us. The sun set as both Hesperus and Peony left, I began preparing my nest for the evening. While collecting milkweed I recalled my own firefly phantasma.

*To see myself scavenging, to know what work brought me joy, was the greatest gift I had received.*

One of my Ma’s once told me that joy is the fruit that feeds the wild of life and without it, growth along with faeries would cease.

 I felt a pain in my heart as I curled into my nest for the night, *how could Hesperus kill the only bearers of joy in our realm? What had poisoned his soul?*

I dreamt of death, seedlings trampled underneath beastly feet, animal flesh strewn about, fires filling the sky with a strangling smoke. As I witnessed the light leave the wings of one of my kin, I woke. Hesperus’ huge hairy feet sat inches outside my nest. The smoke in my dream was in fact the wretched scent of his unbathed coat. He was using the shroud of night to hide him as he set out to slaughter a river dwelling firefly.

Peonys’ words rung in my ears *he’s killed four of the seven.* My mind surfed waves of fear and plotting, *I might vomit my dandelion lunch*.

I stealthily found my way round the feet of Hesperus and flew to the siren’s moon-bathing on the sandbar.

I informed their queen of his whereabouts, “He’s coming right now in the northwest direction! His great girth could serve as several meals for your people!”

Her cold eyes pierced me and she bemoaned, “The blood of that beast is spoiled with guilt. He took his mother’s life simply by leaving her womb. It’s no wonder his father left him that very day. He knew, like I do, that nothing good can come of a soul that takes a life in order to manifest its own.”

I was stricken with grief. *Hesperus’ mother died while giving birth to him and his father abandoned him as a result?* I felt heat behind my eyes. *Were those tears?* I’d never cried before. There was less joy in our world already, I had to do something fast.

 I flew to Peony. Shaking her awake, I spoke sporadically, “ I think I may have cried! We have to do something! Hesperus is an orphan. His mother died giving birth to him. His father abandoned him that same day out of hatred.”

I watched a spark light in Peonys’ eyes. She shook my hands off her shoulders and began filling a basket with the materials for nurturing younglings.

I screamed at her,“This is no time for work! Hesperus is in my boat as we speak, searching out one of the last fireflies!”

Without a word Peony gestured for me to follow her. She put her hand on her heart and said,“I sense him.”

Flying like comets we found ourselves hovering above Hesperus in no time.

Peony flew to my side and whispered in my ear, “I will be the Ma he never had.”

 Peony handed me her basket and removed from it a small vial of flower petal salve used to calm the nerves of fussy baby Fae. She swooped down and attempted to apply this to the cheeks of Hesperus as she cooed a lullaby mimicking the sound of windchimes. Wincing in pain at the sounds of her song he covered his ears with his paws. Keeping one paw on an ear he slapped Peony out of the air with the other, sending her careening toward the water.

The stars seemed to melt and illuminate the night sky. White light shone all around. Peony recovered her balance and flew to my side. One of the last fireflies was showing Hesperus a very engrossing vision. This had never happened before. Only faeries had communicated with the light-bearers in this way. We could not see what he saw but we watched it sink into him. Reborn in joy, he lit up with a smile.