

MAYHEM ON THE THAMES
by Brittany N. Williams

They spot the girl on the north side of the river, her mass of tight curls barely tamed and piled atop her head. Her slim shoulders are bare in the cold winter air as she darts through the crowd like a mouse.

Ziza nods in her direction. "I see-uh—"

"Rose," Tam says.

Ziza grunts and shakes her head. They move slowly towards her, fighting against press of human bodies rushing into the city. Or rather away from Southwark. Word travels quickly that life on the south side of the Thames becomes unsafe after sundown.

Nine months and His Majesty King James I knows not of the change.

Ziza and Tam are here to keep it that way.

"You know I can never remember these English names," Ziza says.

Tam snorts. "You never remember any names."

"You're here!" Rose appears at Tam's side with a grin.

Ziza raises an eyebrow. "You're quick." She looks back at where Rose has come from and frowns.

"So I've been told," Rose laughs. "Shall we?" She shuffles her feet and tucks something into her bodice. "You can turn back now if you like. Won't think less of you if you do what with the sun setting and all."

Ziza hears the metallic clanking of coins. She glances at Tam who grins and shrugs. The girl picking pockets is no business of theirs. She already wears too little clothing in the frigid London air.

Let her put the money to good use.

"Show us the way, Rose," Ziza says.

Rose bites her lip but takes a deep breath and nods. The trio winds their way through the people crossing London Bridge.

"I'm glad you've come," Rose says, "the constables are still pretending that nothing is strange on the south of the river. Not that people care what happens on this side of the river when the theaters are closed."

Ziza and Tam fall into step alongside her as they move into Southwark. Ziza frowns as a breeze sweeps up off the Thames and slips its icy way into the folds of her fur cape. She shivers, rubbing her hands together and blowing on her fingertips.

It doesn't help.

This city holds a seeping chill that creeps beneath clothes and skin and settles in your bones.

Ziza hates it.

"Why must London be so cold?"

Tam glares at her before turning back to Rose. Ziza slides her hands around Tam's arm and tucks in close along her side. Tam's unnatural heat seeps into Ziza but the tension in Tam's muscles make it impossible to relax even with the sudden warmth. Ziza squeezes her friend's arm. They're both on edge.

Rose leads them through the winding streets past tall houses and a noisy pub before stopping alongside the rounded white walls of a theater, her nose and cheeks bright red in the chill air. She shifts from foot to foot and frantically runs her hands up and down too thin arms.

The air changes. Ziza feels it, the shift and press of malevolence against her skin. The scent of something otherworldly floats beneath the usual stench of too many human bodies in close proximity. Tam moves. Ziza feels the press of her leg through the fabric of their skirts. She's ready for a fight.

She must notice the shift in the air as well.

Good.

"Why did you seek us out?" Tam says, "You know who we are. What we do."

Ziza lets her take the lead and softens her awareness to take in more of their surroundings. The street here is wide enough for several people to pass together, so an ambush is unlikely.

Still.

Ziza flexes her hand in the fur folds of Tam's cloak, feels the cold bite of iron against her palm.

Rose hems as her eyes dart away. "It'll sound strange but our regulars have not turned up."

"With this cold I am not surprised that even your business has slowed," Tam says, "and more now with this new threat of danger."

Ziza shapes her mouth into a laugh and forces the sound from her lips. It sounds like a bark, loud and harsh. She doesn't care.

Something is close.

"No," Rose says, "we each have at least one man who comes faithfully. Some of us have two who will spite the weather for a night with us. Now they've all just...stopped."

Tam relaxes. "Well it seems that there are things even sex will not convince a man to risk."

"Rose, who are these women?"

There.

Tam tenses. Ziza meets her eyes and they glow gold.

They turn as it steps into their sight. That's it there.

Whatever rounds the corner is female but too tall, broad, and definitely not human. Luminous white eyes peer out from long face. Her thin lips spread nearly ear to ear to expose long, sharp pointed

teeth. Bright, oily red hair hangs around wide shoulders in limp hunks.

"Christabell!" Rose smiles at the creature, "I brought these two to help."

Shiny white eyes stare straight at them.

"This is not your friend, Rose," Tam pulls away from Ziza.

Ziza lets her go and steps the other way. She keeps pace with Tam as they move. "It may look like her but it's not. It's fae."

"What do you mean?" Rose asks.

"This is why your men haven't returned," Tam says, her gold eyes locked on the creature.

"You've terrorized these women long enough, beast," Ziza says, "We'll see that you answer for that."

"You see her for what she is," Rose laughs. "Hear that, redcap," she says, "they can see through your glamour. They know your true shape."

Tam and Ziza stop.

"Traitor," the redcap sneers. "Oath breaker!"

Tam's fingers fly up to unfasten her cloak. She flings the fur to the ground and widens her stance. "Are we betrayed?"

"No," Rose says. "She wears the blood of my sisters. I owe the beast none of my loyalty."

Something prickles along Ziza's skin. The sudden release of magic. She scowls as she throws off her own cloak. It crumples at her feet in a heap of fur.

The redcap tilts her thin head to the side and smiles wide and sharp. "You can join them hob-child."

She dives.

Ziza moves. Tucks herself around Rose and braces as they slam into the ground. The creature sails over them, claws gouging deep scratches into the white walls behind them. Ziza shoves Rose behind her and rolls into a crouch, sweeping her skirt clear of her feet.

"Kill her," Rose hisses. "Chop off her head and don't let her wound you."

Tam grunts and Ziza's eyes dart towards her.

Tam dances around the redcap's wild swings. Each one comes fast, nearly as soon as Tam moves. And she's still unarmed. Ziza's heart thumps in her chest. That shouldn't--

"She's the redcap chieftain," Rose says, "so she's the strongest of her clan."

Tam stumbles and the redcap springs towards her, jaw unhinged in a horrific scream. Ziza throws her hand out and the half-formed blade flies true. The redcap shrieks as it hits and buries itself in the back.

Tam rolls to the side and grunts as the redcap's claws catch her along the arm. She staggers to her feet. Her hand reaches into the folds of her hanfu to pull her weapon. Four large tears gape in her sleeve. But there's no blood.

Still, it's the opening they need.

Ziza runs at the beast and the iron sword springs into her grip. Her first goes wide, leaves her back wide open for an attack. Claws sweep in but Tam knocks them away with the flat of her iron fan. Ziza swings back. Feels bone shift as the heavy pommel of her sword smashes into the redcap's jaw. Ziza spins to her feet. The creature curls in on itself keening horrendously.

Ziza glances back at Rose. The girl crouches against the wall, wide eyes locked on the redcap.

"You think you can kill me with your cold iron?"

The gurgling voice pulls Ziza's attention back to her downed opponent. She no longer sounds human and it's clear why.

The redcap's mouth looks as if it's been burned away, its teeth left exposed in a grotesque skeletal grimace.

"But you've brought me new blood. Strong blood."

Tam's fan falls from her hand, shaking the ground as it hits. She looks at Ziza, her face pale and wet with sweat and collapses.

"Blood I can use." The redcap grins as her skin knits itself back together.

"What did you do to her?" Ziza grabs her blade with both hands and splits it into two.

The redcap laughs, "Worry not, her blood is put to good use."

Ziza locks eyes with the creature, its vaguely human face stretched too thin across a large skull. The hair isn't slick with oil but glistens with wet blood. Ziza watches as it shifts from bright red to a deep purple. The color of Tam's blood.

She dives forward. Keeps her first swing close and tight. It misses and flips her blade, pressing the wide flat side against the redcap's chest and throws her weight forward. The metal hisses when it touches white flesh and the redcap stumbles backwards startled and off-balance. Ziza flicks her wrist and pivots as she swings the blade up and out. Feels the resistance as flesh and bone yield to her sword.

The redcap's severed head hit the packed dirt walkway with a damp thump. It spins for a moment before melting into a black slime that sinks into the earth.

Ziza sidesteps the body as it pitches forward and rushes over to Tam. There's an open wound on her arm and Ziza watches as it suddenly starts gushing blood.

"That," Tam hisses as she rolls onto her back, "was unusual."

Ziza hums as she cuts off a bit of her tunic and uses it to bind Tam's wound.

"We should leave before more show."

The both turn to look at Rose who stands staring down at where Tam's heavy fan is buried in the road.

Rose looks up. "You killed the chieftain, and once the rest realize that they'll come to avenge her."

Ziza shifts her blade between her palms and it absorbs back into her hands. Locks eyes with Tam.

The rest?

Tam snorts, "When I see Cecil, I'm telling him the commission has been raised."

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Robert Cecil meets them in a small, private audience chamber in his London home. He's pale and small with dark circles beneath his eyes. The candlelight casts stark shadows across his pinched face. Ziza fist itches as she looks him over.

Cecil smiles tightly and gestures towards the seats across from his own, "Ladies, I hope your trip today was pleasant."

Ziza ignores him and stands, "It has proven as pleasant as the rest of this occasion is turning out to be."

Tam sits and nods at Rose to do the same.

"So these delightful creatures you send to kill us, Spymaster?" a voice laughs.

Cecil turns white and Rose goes still as death.

A pale Englishwoman materializes before them, icy blonde hair pulled up into intricate loops and curls. "So you have come to bring us to heel with your cold iron weapons?"

"And you, hob-child," she looks at Rose. "What would your grandsire think if he knew how you betrayed your own kind?"

Rose growls, "You're not my queen, Titania, nor were you his."

Titania laughs again.

"A halfling, a mortal, and a demon to bring me to heel? You have brought me a challenge." Titania appears behind Cecil, leans forward to whisper in his ear. "Well-done, Spymaster."

Then she's gone.

"Titania?" Ziza growls. "The fae you hired us to defeat is Titania herself? Their queen?"

Cecil clutches the edge of his desk to hide the shaking of his hands. Tam has a hand clamped on Rose's shoulder but the girl stares at the spot where the fairy queen last stood.

Tam smiles and lets her eyes glow gold. "Well, Cecil, it looks like our commission has just gone up."