For Lionel, who found the door to this story and who so often knew more about it than I did, friend and finder of ideas, indispensable on either side of the mirror.

And for Oliver, who again and again tailored English clothes for this story so that the Englishman and the German could tell it together.
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Go Beyond the Mirror...
1. Once upon a Time

The night breathed through the apartment like a dark animal. The ticking of a clock. The groan of a floorboard as he slipped out of his room. All was drowned by its silence. But Jacob loved the night. He felt it on his skin like a promise. Like a cloak woven from freedom and danger.

Outside the stars were paled by the glaring lights of the city, and the large apartment was stale with his mother’s sorrow. She did not wake as Jacob stole into her room, even when he carefully opened the drawer of her nightstand. The key lay right next to the pills that let her sleep. Its cool metal nestled in his hand as he stepped back out into the dark corridor.

There was still a light burning in his brother’s room—Will was afraid of the dark—and Jacob made sure he was fast asleep before unlocking the door to their father’s study. Their mother had not entered there since his disappearance, but for Jacob this was not the first time he had snuck into the empty room to search for the answers she did not want to give.

It still looked as if John Reckless had last sat in his desk chair less than an hour ago, instead of more than a year. The sweater he had worn so often hung over the chair, and a used tea bag was desiccating on a plate next to his calendar, which still showed the weeks of a passed year.

Come back! Jacob wrote it with his finger on the fogged-up window, on the dusty desk, and on the glass panels of the cabinet that still held the old pistols his father had collected. But the room remained silent—and empty. He was twelve and no longer had a father. Jacob kicked at the drawers he had searched in vain for so many nights. In a silent rage, he yanked the books and magazines from the shelves, tore down the model airplanes that hung above the desk, ashamed at how proud he had once been when his father had allowed him to paint one with red varnish.

Come back! He wanted to scream it through the streets that cut their gleaming paths through the city blocks seven stories below, scream it at the thousand windows that punched squares of light into the night.

The sheet of paper slipped out of a book on airplane propulsion. Jacob only picked it up because he thought he recognized his father’s handwriting on it, though he quickly realized his error. Symbols and equations, a sketch of a peacock, a sun, two moons. None of it made any sense. Except for the one sentence he spotted on the reverse side:

THE MIRROR WILL OPEN ONLY FOR HE WHO CANNOT SEE HIMSELF.

Jacob turned around—and his glance was met by his own reflection.

The mirror. He still remembered very well the day his father had mounted it on the wall. It hung between the shelves like a shimmering eye, a glassy abyss that cast back a warped reflection of everything John Reckless had left behind: his desk, the old pistols, his books—and his elder son.

The glass was so uneven one could barely recognize one’s own reflection, and it was darker than other mirrors, but the rose tendrils winding across the silver frame looked so real they seemed ready to wilt at any moment.

THE MIRROR WILL OPEN ONLY FOR HE WHO CANNOT SEE HIMSELF.

Jacob closed his eyes.

He turned back to the mirror.

Felt behind the frame for some kind of lock or latch.

Nothing.

Only his reflection was looking him straight in the eye.

It took quite a while before Jacob understood.

His hand was barely large enough to cover the distorted reflection of his face. But the cool glass clung to his fingers as if it had been waiting for them, and suddenly the room he saw in the mirror was no longer his father’s study.
Jacob turned around.

Moonlight fell through two narrow windows onto gray walls, and his naked feet stood on wooden floorboards covered with acorn shells and the gnawed bones of birds. The room was bigger than his father’s study, and above him cobwebs hung like veils from the rafters of a roof.

Where was he? He stepped toward one of the windows, the moonlight painting patterns on his skin. The bloody feathers of a bird stuck to the rough ledge, and far below he saw scorched walls and black hills with a few lost lights glimmering in the distance. He was in a tower. Gone were the sea of houses, the bright streets—everything he knew was gone. And high among the stars were two moons, the smaller one as red as a rusty coin.

Jacob looked back at the mirror, and in it he saw the fear on his face. But fear was an emotion he had grown to like. It lured him to dark places, through forbidden doors, and away from himself, and even the yearning for his father could be drowned in it.

There was no door in the gray walls, just a trapdoor in the floor. When Jacob opened it, he saw the remains of a burnt staircase melting into the darkness below, and for a moment he thought he spotted a tiny figure climbing up the stones. But a sudden rasp made him wheel around.

Cobwebs fell down on him as something jumped onto his neck with a hoarse growl. It sounded like an animal, but the contorted face flashing its teeth at his throat looked as pale and wrinkled as an old man’s. It was much smaller than Jacob, and as spindly as an insect. Its clothes seemed to be made of cobwebs, its white hair hung down to its hips, and when Jacob grabbed for its thin neck, the creature sank its yellow teeth deep into his hand. Screaming, he punched the attacker off his shoulder and stumbled toward the mirror. The spidery creature got to its feet again, licking his blood from its lips, but before it could reach him Jacob was already pressing his hand on the reflection of his scared face. Immediately, the scrappy figure disappeared, together with the gray walls, and behind him Jacob could once again see his father’s desk.

“Jacob?”

His brother’s voice barely registered over the beating of his heart. Jacob gasped for air and backed away from the mirror.

“Jake? Are you in there?”

He pulled his sleeve over his mauled hand and quietly opened the door.

Will’s eyes were wide with fear. He’d had another bad dream. Little brother. Will always followed him like a puppy, and Jacob protected him in the schoolyard and in the park. Sometimes he even managed to forgive Will that their mother loved him more.

“Mom says we shouldn’t go in there.”

“Since when do I do what Mom says? If you tell on me, I won’t take you to the park ever again.”

Jacob thought he could feel the glass of the mirror like ice on the back of his neck. Will peered past him, but he quickly lowered his head as Jacob pulled the door shut behind them. Will. Careful where Jacob was rash, tender where he was short-tempered, and calm where he was restless. Jacob took his hand. Will noticed the blood on his fingers and gave him a quizzical look, but Jacob just quietly pushed him into his room.

What the mirror had shown him was his. His alone.
2. Twelve Years Later

The sun already stood low over the burnt walls of the ruin, but Will was still asleep, exhausted from the pain that had been shaking him for days.

*One mistake, Jacob, after all those years of caution.*

He got up and covered Will with his coat.

All the years in which Jacob had a whole world to himself. All the years during which that strange world had become home. By the time Jacob was fifteen, he had already snuck behind the mirror for weeks at a time. When he was sixteen, he no longer even counted the months, and still he had kept his secret. Until the one time when he had been in too much of a rush. *Stop it, Jacob! It can’t be changed.*

The wounds on his brother’s throat had healed well, but the stone was already showing on his left forearm. The pale green veins were spreading toward his hand, shimmering in Will’s skin like polished marble.

*Just one mistake.*

Jacob leaned against one of the sooty columns and looked up toward the tower that housed the mirror. He had never gone through it without first making sure Will and his mother were asleep. But since she had died there had just been one more empty room on the other side, and he had been keen to press his hand against the dark glass again and get away. Far away.

*Impatience, Jacob. Say it as it is. After all, it’s one of your most prominent character traits.*

He could still see Will’s face appear behind him in the mirror, distorted by the dark glass. “*Where are you going, Jacob?*” A late flight to Boston, a trip to Europe; there had been so many excuses over the years. Jacob was just as creative a liar as his father had been. But this time his hand had already pressed against the cool glass—and Will had, of course, followed his example.

Little brother.

“He already smells like them.” Fox appeared out of the shadows cast by the crumbled walls. Her fur was as red as if autumn itself had lent her its colors, except where the trap had streaked the hind leg with pale scars. It had been five years since Jacob had freed her, and the vixen had not left his side since. She guarded his sleep, warned him of dangers that his dull human senses could not detect, and she gave advice that was best followed.

*One mistake.*

Jacob stepped through the arched doorway in which the scorched remnants of the castle’s main door were still hanging on the warped hinges. On the steps in front, a Heinzel was collecting acorns from the cracked stones. He quickly scampered off as Jacob’s shadow fell on him. Red eyes above a pointy nose, pants and shirt sewn from stolen human clothes. The ruin was swarming with them.

“Send him back! That’s what we came here for, isn’t it?” The impatience in Fox’s voice was hard to miss.

But Jacob shook his head. “Bringing him here was a mistake. There’s nothing on the other side that can help him.”

Jacob had told Fox about the world he came from, but she never really wanted to hear about it. What she knew was enough: that it was the place to which he disappeared far too often, only to bring back memories that followed him like shadows.

*And? What do you think will happen to him here?*

Fox did not say it, but Jacob knew what she was thinking. In her world, fathers killed their own sons as soon as they discovered the stone in their skin.

He looked down toward the foot of the castle hill, where the red roofs were fading into the twilight. The first
Lights were coming on in Schwanstein. From a distance, the town looked like one of the pictures printed on gingerbread tins, but over the past years, railway tracks had begun to cut through the hills beyond, and gray smoke rose from the smokestacks of factories into the evening sky. The world behind the mirror wanted to grow up. However, the petrified flesh growing in his brother had not been sown by mechanical looms or any of the other modern achievements but by the old magic that still dwelled in its hills and forests.

A Gold-Raven landed next to Will on the cracked tiles. Jacob shooed it away before it could croak one of its sinister spells into his brother’s ear.

Will groaned in his sleep. The human skin did not yield to the stone without a fight. Jacob felt the pain as his own. Only his love for his brother had made him return to the other world, even though he’d done so less and less frequently over the years. His mother had threatened him with social services, she had cried, but she had never suspected where he vanished to. Will, however, had always wrapped his arms around Jacob, eagerly asking what he had brought for him. The shoes of a Heinzel, the cap of a Thumbling, a button made of elven glass, a piece of scaly Waterman skin—Will had hoarded Jacob’s gifts under his mattress, and soon he began to regard the stories Jacob told him as fairy tales his brother invented only for him.

Now he knew how true they had all been.

Jacob pulled the coat over his brother’s disfigured arm. The two moons were already in the sky.

“Keep an eye on him, Fox.” He rose to his feet. “I’ll be back soon.”

“And where are you going, Jacob?” The vixen jumped into his path. “Nobody can help him.”

“We’ll see.” He pushed her aside. “Don’t let Will climb into the tower.”

She looked after him as he walked down the steps. The only footprints on the mossy steps were his own. No human ventured up here. The ruin was thought to be cursed, and Jacob had heard dozens of stories about its demise, but after all these years he still didn’t know who had left the mirror in its tower, just as he had never found out where his father had vanished to.

A Thumbling jumped at his collar. Jacob managed to grab him before he could steal the medallion he was wearing around his neck. On any other day, Jacob would have followed the little thief at once. Thumblings could hoard considerable treasures in the hollow trees where they built their nests. But he had already lost too much time.

One mistake. Jacob.

He would make it right again. But Fox’s words followed him as he climbed down the steep hill.

Nobody can help him.

If she was right, soon he would no longer have a brother. Neither in this world nor in the other.

One mistake.
The field over which Hentzau and his soldiers were riding still reeked of blood. The rain had filled the trenches with a muddy sludge. Behind the walls both sides had built for their protection lay abandoned rifles and bullet-riddled helmets. Kami’en had the horse cadavers and the human corpses burnt before they began to rot, but the dead Goyl still lay where they had fallen. In just a few days, they would be all but indistinguishable from the rocks that protruded from the trampled earth, and the heads of those who had fought valiantly had already been sent to the main fortress, as was Goyl custom.

Another battle. Hentzau was tired of them, but he hoped that this would be the last one for a while. The Empress was finally ready to negotiate, and even Kami’en wanted peace. Hentzau covered his mouth as the wind blew the ash down from the hill where they had burnt the corpses. Six years aboveground, six years without the shelter of the rock between him and the sun. His eyes ached from all the light, and the air was again growing colder with every day, making his skin as brittle as chalk. Hentzau’s skin resembled brown jasper—not the finest color for a Goyl. Hentzau was the first jasper Goyl to have risen to the highest military ranks. But then again, before Kami’en the Goyl had never had a King, and Hentzau liked his skin. Jasper provided much better camouflage than onyx or moonstone.

Kami’en had set up camp not far from the battlefield, in the hunting lodge of an imperial general who, together with most of his officers, had died in the battle.

The sentries guarding the destroyed gate saluted as Hentzau rode past them. The King’s bloodhound. That’s what they called him. His jasper shadow. Hentzau had served under Kami’en since they had first challenged the other chiefs. It had taken two years for them to kill them all, and for the Goyl to get their first King.

The drive leading up to the lodge was lined with statues, and not for the first time did Hentzau note with amusement how humans immortalized their gods and heroes with stone effigies while loathing his kind for their skin. Even the Doughskins had to admit it: Stone was the only thing that lasted.

The windows of the lodge had been bricked up, just as in all the buildings the Goyl had occupied, but only when he descended the steps to the cellars did Hentzau finally feel the soothing darkness that could be found belowground. Just a few gas lamps lit the vaults that now housed, instead of supplies and dusty trophies, the general staff of the King of the Goyl.

Kami’en. In their language, it meant nothing more than “stone.” His father had governed one of the lower cities, but fathers did not count among the Goyl. It was the mothers who raised them, and by the age of nine Goyl were considered grown up and had to fend for themselves. At that age, most of them went to explore the Lower World, searching for undiscovered caves until the heat became too much even for their stone skins. Kami’en, however, had been interested only in the world above. For a long time, he had lived in one of the cave cities that had been built above-ground after the lower cities had become too crowded. There, he had survived two attacks by the humans, and that’s when he began to study their weapons and their tactics, snuck into their towns and military camps. He was nineteen when he conquered his first human city.

The guards waved Hentzau in. Kami’en was standing in front of a map showing his conquests and the positions of his enemies. The figurines representing their troops had been made to his specifications after he’d won his first battle. The Goyl were carved from carnelian, the imperials were cast in silver, Lotharaine wore gold, the eastern lords donned copper, and Albion’s troops marched in ivory. Soldiers, gunners, snipers, riders for the cavalry. Kami’en scrutinized them as if he were searching for a way to beat them all at once. He was wearing black, as he always did when he was out of uniform, and more than ever his pale red skin seemed to be made of fire. Never
before had carnelian been the color of a leader. Onyx was the color of the Goyl elite.

Kami’en’s mistress was wearing green, as usual, layers of emerald velvet that enveloped her like the petals of a flower. Even the most beautiful Goyl woman would have paled next to her, like a pebble next to polished moonstone, but Hentzau always impressed upon his soldiers not to look at her for too long. Her beauty was like a spider’s venom, and not for nothing were there many stories of Fairies who, with a single glance, had turned men into thistles or helplessly wriggling fish. She and her sisters had been born of water, and Hentzau feared them as much as he feared the seas that gnawed at the rocks of his world.

The Fairy gave him a cursory glance as he entered. The Dark Fairy. The darkest of them all. Even her own sisters had cast her out. Many believed that she could read minds, but Hentzau didn’t think so. She would have long killed him for what he thought about her.

He turned his back on her and bowed his head to his King. “You summoned me.”

Kami’en took one of the silver figurines and weighed it in his hand. “I need you to find someone for me. A human who is growing petrified flesh.”

Hentzau cast a quick glance at the Fairy.

“What should I start?” he replied. “There are already thousands of them.”

Man-Goyl. In the past, Hentzau had used his claws for killing, but now the spell of the Fairy let them sow petrified flesh. Like all Fairies, she could not bear children, so she gave Kami’en sons by letting every strike of his soldiers’ claws turn one of his human enemies into Goyl. Nobody fought with less mercy than a Man-Goyl fighting against his former race, but Hentzau despised them just as much as he despised the Fairy who had created them with her sorcery.

A smile had snuck onto Kami’en’s lips. No. The Fairy could not read Hentzau’s thoughts, but his King could.

“Don’t worry. The one I want you to find can be easily distinguished from the others.” Kami’en placed the silver figurine back on the map. “The skin he is growing is jade.”

The guards exchanged a quick look. Hentzau, however, just sneered. Lava-Men who boiled the blood of the earth, the eyeless bird that saw all, and the Goyl with the jade skin who gave invincibility to the King he served… stories told to children to fill the darkness underground.

“And which scout told you that?” Hentzau rubbed his aching skin. Soon the cold would have given it more cracks than fractured glass. “Have him executed. The Jade Goyl is a myth. Since when do you confuse myths with reality?”

The guards nervously ducked their heads. Any other Goyl would have paid for that remark with his life. Kami’en, however, just shrugged.

“Find him!” he said. “She dreamed of him.”

She. The Fairy smoothed the velvet of her dress. Six fingers on each hand. Each one for a different curse. Hentzau felt the rage rise in him. It was the rage they all bore in their stony flesh, like the heat in the depths of the earth. He would die for his King if necessary, but to have to search for the daydreams of his mistress was something else.

“You need no Jade Goyl to make yourself invincible!”

Kami’en eyed him like a stranger.

Your Majesty. Hentzau now often caught himself not wanting to call him by his name.

“Find him,” Kami’en repeated. “She says it’s important, and so far she’s always been right.”

The Fairy stepped to his side. Hentzau pictured himself squeezing her pale neck. But not even that gave him comfort. She was immortal, and one day she would watch him die. Him and the King. And Kami’en’s children and his children’s children. They all were nothing but her mortal stone toys. But the King loved her. More than his two Goyl wives, who had given him three daughters and a son.

Because she has hexed him! Hentzau heard a whisper inside him. But he bowed his head and pressed his fist over his heart. “Whatever you command!”

“I saw him in the black forest.” Even her voice sounded like water.

“That’s more than sixty square miles!”

The Fairy smiled. Hentzau felt rage and fear choking his heart.

Without another word, she undid the pearl clasp with which she pinned her hair like a human woman, and brushed her hand through it. Black moths fluttered out from between her fingers; the pale spots on their wings looked like skulls. The guards quickly opened the doors as the insects swarmed toward them, and even Hentzau’s soldiers, who had been waiting outside in the dark corridor, recoiled as the moths flew past. They all knew that their sting penetrated even Goyl skin.

The Fairy put the clasp back in her hair.

“Once they find him,” she said, without looking at Hentzau, “they will come to you. And you will bring him to me. Immediately.”

His men were staring at her through the open door, but they quickly lowered their heads as Hentzau turned
Damn her and the night she had suddenly appeared among their tents. The third battle, and their third victory. She had walked toward the King’s tent as if the groans of their wounded and the white moon above their dead had summoned her. Hentzau had stepped into her path, but she had just walked through him, like liquid through porous stone, as if he, too, were already among the dead, and she had stolen his King’s heart to fill her own heartless bosom with it.

Even Hentzau had to admit that the best weapons combined did not spread as much fear as her curse, which turned the flesh of their enemies into stone. Yet he was certain they would have still won the war without her, and that victory would have tasted so much sweeter.

“I will find the Jade Goyl without your moths,” he said. “If he really is more than just a dream.”

She answered him with a smile, which followed him back into the daylight that clouded his eyes and cracked his skin.

Damn her.
4. On the Other Side

Will’s voice had sounded so different, Clara had barely recognized it. Nothing for weeks, and then this stranger on the phone who wouldn’t really say why he had called.

The streets seemed even more congested than usual, and the trip was endless, until she finally stood in front of the old apartment building where he and his brother had grown up. Stone faces stared down from the gray facade, their contorted features eroded by exhaust fumes. Clara couldn’t help but look up at them as the doorman held the door for her. She was still wearing the pale green surgical gown under her coat. She had not taken the time to change. She had just run out of the hospital.

Will.

He had sounded so lost. Like someone who was drowning. Or someone who was saying farewell.

Clara pulled the grilled doors of the elevator shut behind her. She’d worn the same gown the first time she’d met Will, in front of the room where his mother had lain. Clara often worked weekends at the hospital, not only because she needed the money. Textbooks and universities made you forget all too easily that flesh and blood were actually very real.

Seventh floor.

The copper nameplate next to the door was so tarnished that Clara involuntarily wiped it with her sleeve.

RECKLESS. Will had often made fun of how that name did not suit him at all.

Unopened mail was piled up behind the door, but there was light in the hall.

“Will?”

She opened the door to his room.

Nothing.

He wasn’t in the kitchen, either.

The apartment looked as if he hadn’t been there in weeks. But Will had told her he was calling from here. Where was he?

Clara walked past his mother’s empty room, and that of his brother, whom she had never met. “Jacob is traveling.” Jacob was always traveling. Sometimes she wasn’t sure whether he actually existed.

She stopped.

The door to his father’s study was open. Will never entered that room. He ignored anything that had to do with his father.

Clara entered hesitantly. Bookshelves, a glass cabinet, a desk. The model planes above it wore dust on their wings, like dirty snow. The whole room was dusty, and so cold that she could see her breath.

A mirror hung between the shelves.

Clara stepped in front of it and let her fingers run over the silver roses that covered the frame. She had never seen anything so beautiful. The glass they surrounded was dark, as if the night had spilled onto it. It was misted up, and right where she saw the reflection of her face was the imprint of a hand.
The light of the lanterns filled Schwanstein’s streets like spilled milk. Gaslight, wooden wheels bumping over cobblestones, women in long skirts, their hems soaked from the rain. The damp autumn air smelled of smoke, and soot blackened the laundry that hung between the pointy gables. There was a railway station right opposite the old coach station, a telegraph office, and a photographer who fixed stiff hats and ruffled skirts onto silver plates. Bicycles leaned against walls on which posters warned of Gold-Ravens and Watermen. Nowhere did the Mirrorworld emulate the other side as eagerly as in Schwanstein, and Jacob, of course, asked himself many times how much of it all had come through the mirror that hung in his father’s study. The town’s museum had many items on display that looked suspiciously like objects from the other world. A compass and a camera seemed so familiar to Jacob that he thought he recognized them as his father’s, though nobody had been able to tell him where the stranger who had left them behind had vanished to.

The bells of the town were ringing in the evening as Jacob walked down the street that led to the market square. A Dwarf woman was selling roasted chestnuts in front of a bakery. Their sweet aroma mixed with the smell of the horse manure that was scattered all over the cobblestones. The idea of the combustion engine had not yet made it through the mirror, and the monument on the square showed a King on horseback who had hunted Giants in the surrounding hills. He was an ancestor of the reigning Empress, Therese of Austry, whose family had hunted not only Giants but also Dragons so successfully that they were considered extinct within her realm. The paperboy who was standing next to the statue, shouting the news into the gathering dusk, had definitely never seen more than the footprint of a Giant or the scorch marks of Dragon fire on the town walls.

This world was at war, and it was not being won by humans. Four days had passed since he and Will had run into one of their patrols, but Jacob could still see them come out of the forest: three soldiers and an officer, their stone faces wet from the rain. Golden eyes. Black claws that tore into his brother’s throat… Goyl.

“How far are the Goyl?” Jacob took a newspaper.

“Less than five miles from here.” The boy pointed southeast. “With the wind right, we could hear their cannons. But it’s been quiet since yesterday.” He sounded almost disappointed. At his age, even war sounded like an adventure.

The imperial soldiers filing out of the tavern next to the church probably knew better. The Ogre. Jacob had been witness to the events that had given the tavern its name and had cost its owner his right arm. Albert Chanute was standing behind the counter, wearing a grim expression, as Jacob entered the dingy taproom. Chanute was such a gross hulk of a man that people said he had Troll blood running through his veins, not a compliment in the Mirrorworld. But until the Ogre had chopped off his arm, Albert Chanute had been the best treasure hunter in all of Austry, and for many years Jacob had been his apprentice. Chanute had shown him everything he had needed to gather fame and fortune behind the mirror, and it had been Jacob who had prevented the Ogre from also hacking off Chanute’s head.

Mementos of his glory days covered the walls of Chanute’s taproom: the head of a Brown Wolf, the oven door from a gingerbread house, a cudgel-in-the-sack that jumped off the wall whenever a guest misbehaved, and, right
above the bar and hanging from the chains with which he used to bind his victims, an arm of the Ogre who had ended Chanute’s treasure-hunting days. The bluish skin still shimmered like a lizard’s hide.

“Look who’s here!” Chanute said, his grouchy mouth actually stretching into a smile. “I thought you were in Lotharaine, looking for an hourglass.”

Chanute had been a legendary treasure hunter, but Jacob had meanwhile gained an equally famous reputation in that line of work, and the three men sitting at one of the stained tables curiously lifted their heads.

“Get rid of them!” Jacob whispered across the counter. “I have to talk to you.”

Then he went up to the room that had for years now been the only place in either this world or the other that he could call home.

A wishing table, a glass slipper, the golden ball of a princess—Jacob had found many things in this world, and he had sold them for a lot of money to noblemen and rich merchants. But it was the chest behind the door of his simple room that held the treasures Jacob had kept for himself. These were the tools of his trade, though he had never thought they’d one day have to help him save his own brother.

The first item he took out of the chest was a handkerchief made of simple linen, but when it was rubbed between two fingers, it reliably produced one or two gold sovereigns. Jacob had received it years earlier from a Witch in exchange for a kiss that had burned his lips for weeks. The other items he packed into his knapsack looked just as innocuous: a silver snuffbox, a brass key, a tin plate, and a small bottle made of green glass. Each of these items had saved his life on more than one occasion.

When Jacob came back down the stairs, he found the taproom empty. Chanute was sitting at one of the tables. He pushed a mug of wine toward him as Jacob joined him.

“So? What kind of trouble are you in this time?” Chanute looked longingly at Jacob’s wine; he only had a glass of water in front of him. In the past, he’d often been so drunk that Jacob had started hiding the bottles, though Chanute would always beat him for it. The old treasure hunter had often beaten Jacob, even when he was sober—until Jacob had one day pointed his own pistol at him. Chanute had also been drunk in the Ogre’s cave. He would have probably kept his arm had he been able to see straight, but after that he had quit drinking. The treasure hunter had been a miserable replacement father, and Jacob was always on his guard with him, but if anyone knew what could save Will, then Albert Chanute most definitely did.

“What would you do if a friend of yours had been clawed by the Goyl?”

Chanute choked on his water and eyed him closely, as if to make sure Jacob was not talking about himself.

“I have no friends,” he grunted. “And you don’t, either. You have to trust friends, and neither of us is very good at that. So, who is it?”

Jacob shook his head.

“Of course. Jacob Reckless likes it mysterious. How could I forget?” Chanute’s voice sounded bitter. Despite everything, he thought of Jacob as the son he had never had. “When did they get him?”

“Four days ago.”

The Goyl had attacked them not far from a village where Jacob had been looking for the hourglass. He had underestimated how far their patrols were already venturing into imperial territory, and after Will had been clawed, he’d been in such pain that the journey back took them days. Back where? There was no “back” anymore, but Jacob had not had the courage yet to tell Will.

Chanute brushed his hand through his spiky hair. “Four days? Forget it. He’s already half one of them. You remember the time when the Empress was collecting all their colors? And that farmer tried to peddle us a dead moonstone he had covered in lamp soot as an onyx Goyl?”

Yes, Jacob remembered. The stone faces. That’s what they were still called back then, and children were told stories about them to teach them to fear the night. When Chanute and he were still traveling together, the Goyl had only just begun to populate the caves aboveground, and every village used to organize Goyl hunts. But now they had a King, and he had turned the hunted into hunters.

There was a rustling near the back door, and Chanute drew his knife. He threw it so quickly that it nailed the rat in mid-jump against the wall.

“This world is going down the toilet,” he growled, pushing back his chair. “Rats as big as dogs. The air on the street stinks like a Troll’s cave from all the factories, and the Goyl are standing just a couple of miles from here.”

He picked up the dead rat and threw it onto the table.

“There’s nothing that helps against the petrified flesh. But if they’d gotten me, I’d ride to one of them Witches’ houses and look in the garden for a bush with black berries.” Chanute wiped the bloody knife on his sleeve. “It’s got to be the garden of a child-eater, though.”

“I thought the child-eating Witches all moved to Lotharaine since the other Witches started hunting them.”
“But their houses are still there. The bush grows where they buried their leftovers. Those berries are the strongest antidote to curses I know of.”

Witch-berries. Jacob looked at the oven door on the wall. “The Witch in the Hungry Forest was a child-eater, wasn’t she?”

“One of the worst. I once looked in her house for one of them combs that you put into your hair and they turn you into a crow.”

“I know. You sent me in there first.”

“Really?” Chanute rubbed his fleshy nose. He’d convinced Jacob that the Witch had flown out.

“You poured liquor on my wounds.” The imprints of her fingers were still visible on his throat. It had taken weeks for the burns to heal.

Jacob threw the knapsack over his shoulder. “I need a packhorse, some provisions, two rifles, and ammunition.”

Chanute didn’t seem to have heard Jacob. He was staring at his trophies. “Good old times,” he mumbled. “The Empress received me personally three times. How many audiences have you clocked up?”

Jacob closed his hand around the handkerchief in his pocket until he felt two gold sovereigns between his fingers. “Two,” he said, tossing the coins onto the table. He’d had six audiences with the Empress, but the lie made Chanute very happy.

“Put that gold away!” he growled. “I don’t take no money from you.” Then he held out his knife to Jacob. “Here,” he said. “There’s nothing this blade won’t cut. I have a feeling you’ll need it more than I will.”
6. Lovesick Fool

Will was gone. Jacob saw it immediately as he led the packhorse through the collapsed gate of the ruin. It lay as deserted as if his brother had never followed him through the mirror and all was fine and this world was still his, all his. For one moment he caught himself feeling relieved. _Let him go, Jacob._ Why not just forget he ever had a brother?

“He said he’d come back.” Fox was sitting between the columns. The night turned her fur black. “I tried to stop him, but he’s just as pigheaded as you.”

_Alt..._ _other mistake, Jacob._ He should have taken Will with him to Schwanstein instead of hiding him here at the ruin. Will wanted to go home. Just go home. But he’d take the stone with him.

Jacob led the packhorse to the other two horses already grazing behind the ruin. He walked toward the tower. Its long shadow wrote a single word on the shattered flagstones: Back.

_A threat for you, Jacob, but a promise for Will._

Ivy grew up the scorched walls so densely that its evergreen vines hung like a curtain over the doorway. The tower was the only part of the castle that had survived the fire nearly unscathed. The inside was swarming with bats, and the rope ladder Jacob had installed years earlier shimmered through the darkness. The Elves always left their dust on it as if to remind him that he had once come down here from another world.

Fox looked at him apprehensively as he reached for the ropes.

“We leave as soon as I get back with Will,” Jacob said.

“What? For where?”

But Jacob was already climbing up the swaying ladder.

The tower room was bright with the light of the two moons, and his brother was standing next to the mirror. He was not alone.

The girl stepped out of his embrace as soon as she heard Jacob behind her. She was prettier than in the photos Will had shown him. _Lovesick fool._

“What’s she doing here?” Jacob felt his own rage like frost on his skin. “Have you lost your mind?”

Jacob brushed the elven dust from his hands. It worked like a sleeping potion if you weren’t careful.

“Clara.” Will took her hand. “This is my brother. Jacob.”

He said her name as if he had pearls on his tongue. Will had always taken love too seriously.

“What else has to happen before you realize what kind of a place this is?” Jacob barked at him. “Send her back. Now.”

She was afraid, though she tried hard to hide it. Afraid of the place that could not be, the red moon above her—and of you, Jacob. She seemed surprised he actually existed. Will’s older brother, as unreal as the place she found herself in.

She took Will’s blemished hand. “What is that?” she asked in a halting voice as she stroked the stone. “I have never seen a skin condition like this.”

_Of course. A medical student…. Look at her, Jacob! She’s just as lovesick as your brother._ So lovesick that she even followed him into a whole other world.

From the rafters above came a scraping sound, and a scrawny face peered down at them. The Stilt who had bitten Jacob on his first trip behind the mirror could not be driven from the tower, but its ugly face quickly disappeared behind the cobwebs as Jacob drew his pistol. For a while Jacob had borrowed guns from his father’s collection, but at some point he’d had a gunsmith in New York put the workings of a modern pistol inside one of the old-fashioned...
shells.

Clara stared, dumbfounded, at the glinting muzzle.

“Send her back, Will.” Jacob tucked the pistol back into his belt. “I won’t tell you again.”

Will had by now encountered things that were more frightening than a big brother, but finally he did turn around. He brushed the fair hair from Clara’s forehead.

“He’s right,” Jacob heard Will whisper. “I’ll come after you soon. It will heal. You’ll see; my brother will find a way.”

Jacob had never understood where all that trust came from. Nothing had ever been able to shake it, not even all the years during which Will had barely seen him.

“Let’s go.” Jacob turned around and went toward the hatch.

“Go back, Clara. Please,” he heard Will say.

But Jacob had already reached the bottom of the rope ladder by the time his brother finally caught up with him. Will climbed so slowly, it seemed he never wanted to reach the bottom. Then he stood there, looking at the elven dust on his hands. Deep sleep, enchanting dreams—not the worst gift, but Will wiped the dust from his fingers as Jacob had shown him. Then he touched his neck. The first traces of pale green were already showing there, too.

“You don’t need anybody, right, Jake?” His voice nearly sounded envious. “You were always like that.”

Jacob pushed aside the ivy.

“If you need her so much, you should leave her where she’s safe.”

“I just wanted to give her a call. She hadn’t heard from me in weeks. I didn’t think she’d follow me.”

“Really? And what were you waiting for then up there?”

Will had no answer for that.

Fox was waiting by the horses, and she didn’t like it at all that Jacob had brought Will back. Nobody can help him. Her gaze still said it.

We’ll see, Fox.

The horses were agitated. Will soothingly patted their nostrils. His gentle brother. Will would always bring home every stray dog and cry bitter tears over the poisoned rats in the park. But what was growing in his flesh was anything but gentle.

“Where are we riding to?”

He looked up at the tower.

Jacob gave him one of the rifles from the panniers of the packhorse.

“To the Hungry Forest.”

Fox lifted her head.

Yes, Fox, I know. Not a very pleasant place.

His mare shoved her head into his back. Jacob had paid Chanute a whole year’s earnings for her, and she was worth every farthing. He tightened the strap on her saddle as Fox uttered a warning growl.

Steps. Hesitant. Then they stopped.

Jacob turned around.

“No matter what kind of place this is”—Clara was standing between the blackened columns—“I will not go back. Will needs me. And I want to know what happened.”

Fox eyed her incredulously, like a strange animal. The women in her world wore long dresses and kept their hair pinned up or plaited, like peasant girls. This one was wearing trousers, and her hair was as short as a boy’s.

The howl of a wolf pierced the darkness, and Will pulled Clara away. He talked at her, but she just took his arm and traced the stone veins in his skin with her fingers.

You’re no longer the only one looking after Will, Jacob.

Clara looked at him, and her face briefly reminded Jacob of his mother. Why hadn’t he ever told her about the mirror? What if the world behind it could have wiped at least some of the sadness off her face?

Too late, Jacob. Much too late.

Fox hadn’t taken her eyes off the girl. Jacob sometimes forgot she was one, as well.

A second wolf howled. They were usually quite peaceful, but there was always a chance that there was a brown one among them, and those did like to eat human flesh.

Will listened anxiously into the night; then he again pleaded with Clara.

Fox lifted her muzzle. “We should leave,” she whispered at Jacob.

“Not before he sends her back.”

Fox looked at him. Eyes of pure amber.
“Take her along.”
“No!”

She’d only slow them down. Fox knew as well as he that his brother was running out of time, though Jacob hadn’t explained that to Will yet.

Fox turned.

“Take her along!” she said again. “Your brother will need her. And you will, too. Or don’t you trust my nose anymore?”

With that, she disappeared into the night as if she was tired of waiting for him.
7. The House of the Witch

A thicket of roots, thorns, and leaves. Giant trees, and saplings stretching toward what scant light trickled through the thick canopy. Swarms of will-o’-the-wisps above putrid ponds, and clearings where toadstools drew their poisonous circles. Jacob had last been in the Hungry Forest four months earlier, to find a Man-Swan wearing a shirt of nettles over his feathers. But after three days he’d abandoned the search, for he had not been able to breathe under the dark trees.

It took them until midday to reach the edge of the forest, because Will had been in pain again. The stone had now spread all over his neck, though Clara pretended not to see it. Love makes you blind—she seemed intent on proving that proverb. She never budged from Will’s side; she wrapped her arms around him whenever the stone grew a little further and he doubled over in the saddle with pain. But when she felt unobserved, Jacob saw his own fear on her face. When she asked him what he knew about the stone, he gave her the same lies he had given his brother: that it was only Will’s skin that was changing, and that it would be simple enough to heal him in this world. She hadn’t taken much convincing. Both she and Will were only too happy to believe whatever comforting lies he told them.

Clara rode better than he’d expected. Jacob had bought her a dress from a market they had passed along the way, but she made him swap it for a man’s clothes after trying in vain to mount her horse in the wide skirt. A girl in men’s clothes, and the stone on Will’s skin—Jacob was glad when they finally left the villages and highways behind and could ride under the trees, even though he knew what would be awaiting there.

Barkbiters, Mushroom-Wights, Trappers, Crow-Men. The Hungry Forest had many unpleasant inhabitants, though the Empress had been trying for years to clear it of its terrors. Despite the dangers, there was a lively trade in horns, teeth, skins, and other body parts of the Hungry Forest’s creatures. Jacob had never earned his money that way, but there were many who made quite a decent living of it: fifteen silver dollars for a Mushroom-Wight (a two-dollar bonus if it spat real fly-agaric poison), thirty for a Barkbiter (not a lot, considering the hunt could easily leave the hunter dead), and forty for a Crow-Man (who at least only went for the eyes).

Many trees were already shedding their leaves, but the canopy above them was still so dense that the day beneath it dissolved into a checkered autumnal twilight. They soon had to start leading the horses on foot, for they kept getting caught in the thorny undergrowth. Jacob had instructed Will and Clara not to touch the trees. However, the shimmering pearls that a Barkbiter had left sprouting as bait on an oak limb made Clara forget his warnings. Jacob barely managed to pluck the foul creature from her wrist before it could crawl up her sleeve.

“This here,” he said, holding the Barkbiter in front of Clara’s face, close enough for her to see the sharp teeth above the scabbed lips, “is just one of the reasons why you shouldn’t touch the trees. His first bite will make you drowsy. A second one, and you’ll be completely paralyzed. But you will still be fully conscious while his entire clan starts to gorge itself on your blood. Trust me, it’s not a pleasant way to die.”

Do you see now that you should have sent her back? Will read the reproach on Jacob’s face as he pulled Clara to his side. But from then on she was careful. It was Clara who pulled back Will in time when she saw the glistening net of a Trapper stretched across their path, and it was she who shooed away the Gold-Ravens trying to squawk dark curses into their ears.

And yet…. She belonged here even less than his brother did.

Fox gave him a look.

Stop it, her eyes said. She is here, and I am telling you again: He will need her.

Fox. His furry shadow. The will-o’-the-wisps, drifting in thick iridescent swarms among the trees, had often led even Jacob astray with their alluring hum. But Fox just shook them from her fur like troublesome flies and ran on
unwaveringly.

After three hours, the first Witch’s tree appeared between the oak and ash trees, and Jacob was just about to warn Will and Clara about their branches and how they loved to poke at human eyes, when Fox suddenly stopped.

The faint sound was nearly drowned out by the hum of the will-o’-the-wisps. It sounded like the snip-snap of a pair of scissors. Not a terribly threatening sound, and Will and Clara didn’t even notice it. But the vixen’s fur bristled, and Jacob put his hand on his saber. He knew of only one creature in this forest that made such a sound, and it was the only one he definitely did not want to run into.

“Let’s get a move on,” he whispered to Fox. “How much farther to the house?”

Snip-snap. It was coming closer.

“It’s going to be tight,” Fox whispered back.

The snipping stopped, but the sudden silence was no less ominous. No bird sang. Even the will-o’-the-wisps had vanished. Fox cast a worried glance at the trees before she scampered ahead again, so briskly that the horses barely managed to keep up with her through the dense undergrowth.

The forest was growing darker, and Jacob pulled from his saddlebag the flashlight he had brought from another world. More and more often they now had to skirt around Witch’s trees. Hawthorn took the place of ash and oak. Pines sucked up the scant light with their black-green needles, and the horses shied when they saw the house appear between the trees.

When Jacob had come here some years earlier with Chanute, the red roof tiles had shone through the undergrowth so brightly, it had looked as if the Witch had painted them with cherry juice. Now they were covered in moss, and the paint was peeling off the window frames. But there were still a few pieces of gingerbread stuck to the walls and the steep roof. Sugary icicles hung from the gutters and the windowsills, and the whole house smelled of honey and cinnamon—as befitted a trap for children. The Witches had tried many times to banish the child-eaters from their clans, and two years ago they had finally declared war on them. The Witch who had plagued the Hungry Forest was now supposedly living out her life as a warty toad in some silty pool.

The wrought-iron fence that surrounded her house still had some colorful candy stuck to it. Jacob’s mare trembled as he led her through the gate. The fence of a gingerbread house would admit anyone but would not let anybody out. During their visit, Chanute had taken care to leave the gate wide open, but now Jacob was more worried about what was following them than about the abandoned house. As he closed the gate behind Will, the snipping could again be heard clearly, and this time it sounded almost angry. But at least it didn’t come any closer. Fox shot Jacob a relieved glance. It was just as they had hoped: Their pursuer had been no friend of the Witch.

“But what if he waits for us?” Fox whispered.

Yes, what then, Jacob? He did not care, just as long as the bush Chanute had described to him was still growing behind the house.

Will had led the horses to the well and lowered the rusty pail to draw water for them. He eyed the gingerbread house as if it were a poisonous plant. Clara, however, was running her fingers over the icing as if she could not believe what she saw.

_Nibble, nibble, little mouse, who’s been nibbling at my house?_

Which version of the story had Clara heard?
Go Beyond the Mirror...

Reckless
by
Cornelia Funke

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