**Feast of the Fifolet**

**By Cerece Rennie Murphy**

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Mallette rushed forward with the promise of blood so near she could taste it. The damp swell of night stretched across the shallow pools and marshlands of her home like a thick cloak, muting her sense of things near and far, yet Mallette had no trouble finding her way. Her slender wings slid through vines that tickled and scraped. Frightful creatures lurked by the riverbank, their eyes sliding back and forth with the surface of the water, but there was nothing more terrible than her tonight; no one else who dared hasten towards the echoes of agony that shook the forest.

The cries brought her to where the twisted limbs of the Mother Tree curled along the forest floor stretching nearly a hundred feet. Her bark was as velvety as the philodendron that peeks out from beneath the bush to catch the sun, with a canopy so wide it might one day shelter all the earth, given the chance. If Mallette had her way, the Mother Tree would live to see the next millennia and the one after that.

She slowed her pace and approached with reverence.

The hunter who was now her prey waited at the base of the tree, cursing and wailing in pain. Fear cut through his cries like a blunt ax as she drew near. His eyes squinted and bulged, desperate to make sense of the approaching bluish orb against the dark of the forest. Because he could not stand, Mallette kept herself low to the ground as she flitted about –- searching his face. His smell was familiar. She thought she knew him, yet with his features so contorted Mallette could not be sure.

His eyes crossed themselves as he struggled to track her movements. Beyond the terror and pain, she saw wonder. He had no idea who or what she was, and Mallette felt no compulsion to soothe his curiosity.

Instead, she darted away, past the open lacings of his trousers and the fresh smell of urine, to inspect the swollen flesh that bulged between the roots of the tree, where his foot lay twisted and crushed.

“Thank you, Mother!” she whispered. “Thank you for delivering our enemy to me.”

The permission to do this, to reveal herself fully and set this plan in motion, had taken years to bring to fruition. In that time, many of her kindred had died eating the sorrow this hunter and those like him had wrought. After tonight, Mallette promised herself that—at least in her forest—there would be no more.

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With shaking hands, he reached out to her. “Help me, please!”

The hard lines of his face flattened, and, for an instant, she could see him clearly. A familiar burning rose in her stomach. Mallette *did* know this man.

The tremor in his voice surprised her. An hour ago, the mob to which he belonged had been so boisterous they’d woken every sleeping animal in the forest and driven away those with the right to hunt by night. Mallette expected *some* crying. His foot was shattered. Still, she wouldn’t have thought one so capable of cruelty could be broken so easily.

*Perhaps he has no spirit at all,* she mused. *Perhaps that is why he can cause so much pain yet endure so little.*

Given her own dilemma, she might have found some pity for the man, but the sour smell of alcohol drove her compassion to retreat–-that, and the charred body swinging just over his head.

Many men had come before these. Most did not have the wisdom to see the world beyond their own making, but those who did called her kind the Fifolet, spirits of the light.

Scared of what they did not know or could not control, the people told stories—wild stories of light-filled mermaids who lured men to the water’s edge, only to feed them to their crocodile children. There were also myths conjured from their own minds about fairies who could transport mortals to a world of buried treasure, from which they would never return. Of course, none of these stories ever bordered truth, because those who fashioned them never ventured to learn or ask. They preferred their own legends to the reality of a story in which they had almost no part to play.

Born with the trees themselves, the Fifolet were brought into life by the Mother Tree to guard the sacred forests of the earth and care for the animal and plant life within. Spirits of the light existed long before Men came and, Life-willing, they would outlast them still.

Mallette drew closer and unfurled her wings just enough to hide her form yet keep her light and give her throat more air with which to form the words he would understand. Sweat drenched his face and his clothes held a foul stench Mallette felt sure would never dissipate.

“Please,” he begged. “I can’t move.”

“Where are the others?” The words crackled painfully in her throat, though she’d practiced their strange-language many times.

“Please,” he cried. “They left me here when the tree… attacked me.”

*Are there any tyrants who are not cowards?* She wondered.

“You have to help me. I got a family.”

Sparks of light burst from her wings before she could rein in her rage. She had eaten the refuse of his cruelty for years, yet now he sought mercy. She could not fathom the depths of his hypocrisy – a mirror of malice that never reflected back to its master.

Her eyes drifted upwards. “So did he,” she replied. “A woman and two more, one still suckling the bitter taste of fear at his mother’s breast. So afraid. They came running this way not two days ago. The crocodiles closed their mouths to let them pass. We drank his tears after he fell to his knees praying to his God and mine that his family would find safe passage. His name was Henry.”

The man’s eyes widened with new awareness. He tried to pull away, but the Mother Tree’s roots held firm. He whimpered where he lay.

“You don’t know nothing about it,” he cried, weak yet defiant. “Theys my property and if you know what’s good for ya, you’ll tell me where they went or you’ll find the same kind of trouble Henry did. You got no right messin’ with my livelihood.”

“You are a strange breed, Aemon,” Mallette replied. “In my world, to have something is to keep it safe from harm. Do you always destroy what is yours?”

“What?” Aemon stammered, straining to see through the light that dimmed as Mallette spread her wings. “How do you know my name?”

“Would that I didn’t, that I’d never laid eyes on your face. But, no. You come here too often. We of the light all know your name. With our dying breaths, we have cursed you for poisoning our lands.”

“What’re you talking about? I never seen you before in my life!”

“Of course not! You lack the wisdom to see anything beyond your own world. Everything must be big, loud, and bright for you to take notice, but we know you. We have scraped the blood-boiled char off the trunks of our sacred trees with our teeth. Swallowed the bones and entrails of your victims as we tried to keep the poison sorrow from killing the ground beneath! For centuries, your kind have left us nothing but bitterness to swallow, until our bellies refused sustenance and our teeth rotted. Every time you came to this place, you did this.

“Before you, there were children and breadcrumbs, strawberry stumps and winterberries. The land was sweet and there was nothing to prune beyond the Shadow Moss and creeping vines that are too greedy for their own good. Until you. Now there are too few of us left to manage our own sacred duty. Rot and disease spread through the forest with not enough of us to stop it. Not enough to save each acorn, sapling, and root. All of this, because of men like you.”

“There’re trees everywhere! Christ! You can’t walk two feet without seeing one.”

“You think this now because you cannot see the future as I can. Because you do not know the consequences of what you do today.”

Aemon’s face crumpled with exhaustion. “I’m… I’m sorry. Okay? I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just need to get home. Help me?” The stillness of the forest was heavy as Aemon waited for his pleas to be answered. When Mallette did not move, Aemon’s contrition quickly hardened into anger. Blue eyes blazed within a face that was tight and red with rage as he spat and bellowed. “My friends are coming back for me, you know. And when they do, they’re gonna kill you and all your little fairy friends! We’re gonna burn this goddamn forest to the ground! You hear me!”

Mallette’s smile was small, sad, as a tear rolled down her cheek. This was the Aemon she had seen throughout the long years of change. She had not been wrong. This was the essence of the man she knew.

“Toby! Judge! Brett! Help!” he screamed.

Mallette snatched the sound from the air as he made it and held it in the palm of her hand.  *They will come for you yet, Aemon, but only when we are done.*

Around them, the leaves of the Mother Tree glowed and quivered.

Aemon couldn’t hear the voices echoing through the forest, but Mallette could.

 “He wants to burn us,” they hissed in their own sacred tongue. “Burn the forest as he does his own kind, the dark ones like us.”

“He will kill us.”

“He will kill us, but will we become killers, too?”

The children of light came slowly from the shadows.

Mallette’s plan had not been popular. When the creatures of the forest refused to fill their bellies with the likes of him, she feared that she would need to eat him all by herself, a man nearly twenty times her size. But she would’ve done it. Unlike most of her surviving kindred, she had all her teeth. Her habit of cleaning them on the ivy that crawled along the forest floor kept them healthy and made them harder than they had been when she first came fully formed into being.

But now she knew she would not be alone.

Aemon still could not see her face. She was only light to him, a flame given human shape, hovering out of reach. But her true color was midnight: black hair, black eyes, black skin, blacker than any human could ever hope to be. Her wings carried her light. With them unfurled only moonlight could reveal her form, unless she chose to cast the infinite prism inside her out–-as she and the other Fifolet did for Aemon now.

The lights gathered as he scrambled to get away, to pull his foot free, but it was no use. Realization slowly transformed the fury on his face into understanding that no matter what he threatened, there would be no escape. Mallette’s broad lips lifted again into the smallest, most terrifying smile.

Faces blacker than shadow emerged from within the dancing lights with large eyes wreathed in a celestial glow.

Her kindred whispered to him in the voices of children. “Will you kill us all?” they cried. “Burn the forest that feeds you?” Translucent lids fluttered and blinked.

Tears ran down his cheek. “No,” he replied. “I swear. I only want to go home. Please, let me be.”

Mallette said nothing as the Fifolet began to swarm. They could smell the truth for themselves.

“Lies!” one hissed.

Orbs of light circled around Aemon’s head. Their words echoed in his ears like the buzzing of angry bees. “Many lies,” they said. “He will be too bitter to eat.”

“Yet, we must!” another answered. “To save what is left of the forest from sorrow.”

Aemon hung his head in a fit of sobs. “But my family. They need me! They don’t deserve this.”

The Fifolet turned to Mallette.

“Who will we become if we do this?” they asked.

“Who are we if we do nothing?” she replied. “This man has brought this fate upon his family. Now he asks us to take on the burden he has treated so carelessly as our own.  Should we think more of them than he does?”

“But they do not come to the clearing. They have not burned the bodies. Are they not innocent?”

“No more than we who witness and do nothing. Justice is useless to the dead. Nothing can bring them back. We can only keep the sorrow from spreading. His kin will carry his sorrow as we do.”

*“And save the Tree.”*

*“And save the Tree.”*

*“And save the Tree.”*

The light receded as the Fifolet unfolded their wings, leaving Aemon in darkness.

The first bite was sickening, a greasy mix of fear, shame, and ash, but then Mallette remembered the burned man’s tears. The memory of his hope for his family and the knowledge that they would be safe eased the first chunk of flesh down her throat.

Beneath the sound of Aemon’s screams, the animals of the forest were quiet and the Mother Tree twisted her great eyes away in sadness.

Taking no part in the matter, the crocodiles lined the riverbank in plain view at the men who hid at the forest’s edge. This too was part of Mallette’s plan. She knew Aemon’s mob would return and when they did, faced with a power greater than their own, they would do nothing to help their friend. The animals of the forest watched the men run away with their torches unlit and their pick axes limp at their sides.

When it was over, the crocodiles would drag away whatever bones remained, while the Mother Tree hoped that the memory of the Feast of the Fifolet would ensure that no one would ever defile their forest again.