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The Thief, the Spider and the Key

C. Joy Wood

"Stop! Thief!" The official growling of the captain of the guard rattled through the square. It echoed over the cobblestone pathways that slowly turned into dirt roads of the lower quarter. Kumo, sitting at her shops double windowed workshop didn't even raise her eyes from the youngest of her charges. Sunny, the mouse-sized spider with golden fuzz was having trouble adjusting to the new food: strawberries. Red, ripe strawberries brought in fresh from the farms outside of the city gates. Strawberries that Kumo had procured that morning from one of the farmer's carts coming from the merchant's gate.

George was giving commentary in the spider's whiz clicking tones. He was her first spider, and the largest of them all. He easily was three times larger than Sunny. And, because he helped her get the strawberries for breakfast, he had been excused from his work on the wedding dress that was currently taking up most of the room in the little workshop. Other black, gold, and brown fuzzed bodies, eight in all, swarmed over the dress and the train adding touches that only their clever knowledge of spider webs could create.

The voice sounded again, this time a bit louder as it bounced off the other shops. Kumo glanced from rolling the strawberry in her fingers toward the shops that straddled the merchant quarter and the lower quarter. The wives of the merchants were laughing over the most recent antics of the Rat. The Rat, as rumor had it, was the cleverest thief in the city. He had robbed no less than five noble's houses and waltzed out with their most precious of objects. Including, it was whispered in hushed laughing tones, one noble's daughter's virtue. Kumo lowered her eyes. Her grandmother would of boxed her ears for listening to such drivel. The thought of such talk being on the street corner made her blush.

The blush was her only feeble excuse why she didn't hear the calls coming closer. Why she didn't look up to see the Rat vaulting from the cobblestone street and toward her. It wasn't until Rat himself had thrown his thin body over the counter and into her workshop that she even realized the chase had reached her. He only gave himself a moment to take in his surroundings, and regain his balance after his rather valiant leap. His eyes, dark and beady never stopped moving over the shop and it's contents.

He had thin, long fingers that scooped up Sunny. Quick wrists that pulled out something and threw it toward the back shadows near the wedding dress. He hissed, so much like his namesake. Kumo barely could grasp the words as she half rose from her seat to stop him. He exited as quickly as he had appeared, running out the back and into the lower quarter.

Kumo stood. She was knocked back almost immediately into her chair as another man entered her shop by way of the window. He wore a guard's green tunic; a sword still sheathed at his hip, and what looked to be the remains of a tattered, green cape. He paused only a moment- sniffing the air like he could catch the scent of the man he was trying to catch. A flash of lightning kissed blue-gray eyes met Kumo's own startled green- before he was running out of the open, swinging door after Rat. "Stop! Thief!" He said, as his battle cry sounded off the back alleys.

George scuttled over to Kumo. He nuzzled her hand with his head and body. His fuzz was soft and silky. It sent little vibrations with his whiz-clicking almost purr. Kumo picked him up and settled him on her shoulder. She moved toward the wedding dress and knelt to pick up the small, golden key that had been so carefully thrown. She mouthed the words Rat had said. *Moonfall. Hour.* She glanced to George then making a decision, she clicked with her tongue to the other spiders to finish the weaving.

They are your Responsibility, Granddaughter. Her Grandmother's voice echoed from times past in her home village. She could remember the sunlight drifting through the circular window behind her grandmother. Her grandmother was a small, fragile shadow against the light. *You were chosen of all your sisters and cousins to take up the mantle of the Spider Princess. What you would have been is no longer. You are only Kumo now. They are small, defenseless children because of the friendship our ancestors shared. For us they are our livelihood, a symbol of our family's heritage. For you, it is Life. Your words, your Life, your very existence is now tied to theirs. They do not understand hate, or fear, or betrayal. You will feed them, care for them, and they will provide you with everything you need.*

Grandmother would roll in her grave to see her standing there with Sunny gone. Sunny weak from the change and the loss of her poison, snatched right under her nose. The cost for spiders to join the family was high. Sunny had made the choice to be bonded with her. Kumo twisted her lips into a snarl, angry at herself and at the Rat for dragging her into his problems. For the second time that day, George was the first to notice they had company.

"Excuse me, Miss..." The voice with a growl was back at the door. The Captain of the Knights himself, had one arm braced on the doorframe. "I don't suppose you saw if the Rat dropped a golden key?" He gave her a winded smile, as if that would some how make her more encouraged to help him.

George gave an angry little whiz-click from the window. He gave a leap and with a string attached to the rafters, swung onto Kumo's shoulder. Kumo shook her head

negatively after George landed. She shifted the key to hide it better in her faded, gray skirts. George scuttled back and forth on her shoulder, his chitterings rising in both pitch and frequency as he gave the Knight a piece of his mind.

"Ah, not welcome am I?" he said. His smile changed to something more amused at George's continued rantings. "I saw the grab something golden off your counter." The Captain shifted his gaze around the shop. He stopped his gaze when it lit upon the wedding dress. "Ah, so you're the mysterious little seamstress her Highness insisted make her wedding dress. Odd, I would of thought that you'd be higher up in the merchants quarter not down here with the riff-raff."

George launched himself from Kumo's shoulder and headed toward the knight. He sailed on mostly invisible strings to get where he was going. The Knight caught the incoming spider easily and held it as carefully as he could. "Hold on there! No need to be so grumpy. I hope your not poisonous..."

Kumo stepped forward. Her bare feet whispered on the sand covered floor. She held out her free hand- palm up- for the spider. "He is not poisonous." She said. Her voice was soft, a tone just loud enough not to be considered silent. "Return him to me. Already one was lost this day."

The Knight watched her hand a long moment. He had to tug a bit on George to get him to stop sucking on his leather gloves. And he was very careful on how he placed George onto her hand. "My apologies, Kumo-Hime." He said, "I didn't mean to rouse the Spider Princess's anger when she has much work to do on the Princess's wedding dress. However I must ask you again if you saw a Key. The Rat stole it from the palace and I am honor bound to find it and return it to His Highness."

"I require it." Kumo said. She lifted George up and put him back on her shoulder. He whurl-clicked something negative as he snuggled under and behind her ear. "I am afraid I must have it to retrieve Sunny." You may come if you wish. Once Sunny is returned to me I care not for the key." She turned to the wedding dress and clicked her tongue three times. The spiders all perked up and stopped working to look at her. Even George paused in his mutterings to tilt his head in her direction. " Kumo went to the door and grabbed a cloak made of spider webs. She settled it over her shoulders. As soon as it had stopped waving delicately in the wind, for surely it had been made out of dense spider webs, the other spiders, eight in all, left what they were doing and scuttled over the floor to cling to the threads. Only George remained on her shoulder.

The worker spiders were all the size of large rats, but resting on the cloak they all appeared to be clever decorations. The Knight watched her prepare to leave before he took off the remains of his cloak and set it to one side. He also took off his badge that proclaimed him one of the city guards and left it resting on top of the cloak. He straightened the hunter green tunic and the sword belt strapped to his side. Kumo only paused a moment longer to make sure her spiders were settled. Then she and the knight

walked out of the door. She didn't lock it either. While the Knight noticed, he didn't make comment.

"I'm Wolf," he said after a few minutes of silence that was neither uncomfortable nor comfortable. They walked down the long alleyway that made up one of many streets in the labyrinth like lower quarter. "They say you are a witch and never speak except to your spiders." Wolf kept his eyes scanning the area as they went deeper into the lower quarter. "Do you even know where we are going?"

"They also say that Wolf chases the Rat no matter where in city he goes. That if the Wolf was a Cat, he'd have caught the Rat long before he got into the palace." said Kumo. She had to raise her voice a bit now that they were not in the cool, quiet confines of her shop and into the afternoon musky heat of the lower quarter. "At least I don't bother to share the gossip that is both incorrect and insipid. And I always know where I'm going."

Wolf rolled his eyes and let the silence lapse into the space between them. Kumo lead them through the maze of too many houses close together. The Lower quarter, like in most cities, was the least favorable place to live. The ground here was lower and often it flooded, and when it didn't flood it was too dry. Wolf watched all too many people come down here and those few who did come back out never were the same. He rubbed his thumb on his sword hilt as Kumo started to slow.

Kumo finally came to a stop outside of a tavern. Wolf glanced up at the sign, barely attached by a bent nail. The sign displayed was a badly painted picture of a crescent moon. Kumo resettled her cape and glanced over to Wolf. He glanced over to her and gave her a toothy smile. She crinkled her nose and shook her head, moving to the front door and opening it. The smells of dinner, some sort of mystery stew wafted out into the open street. The noise from the tavern increased as Wolf entered.

At least four men stopped what they were doing and bolted for the nearest exit. Another three looked ready to pick a fight and the bartender was looking a bit green. Wolf planted his feet and the smile he had given to Kumo turned into a vicious grin. It was Kumo's turn to roll her eyes and move around Wolf and toward the bar.

Behind her the sounds of three bodies slamming into one erupted. Kumo was going to turn around and offer to help but she caught sight of a hand that was reaching out toward her. She sidestepped, as George sprang from her shoulder and landed on the man's face. The man's screams were enough to stop the tavern and make them all stare at the cat-sized spider. Another high-pitched scream as one of the serving wrenches passed out.

"Oh For Heavens Sake! Kumo-Hime! Reign in George before he gives Dae's wife a reason to question his behavior again. That spider of yours leaves hickeys that even the dock tarts are impressed about! And Wolf, Stop playing with the ship hands, their Captain will be mighty pissed if you send 'em back up to the ship in worse condition than

a hangover." Said a large man coming in from the back. One footfall made some of the more creaky boards wiggle and creak in an unsafe manner.

"Sorry Bran, just trying to live up to the tavern's reputation of being one great place to get a fight." Wolf had knocked the brawlers into chairs, but finished knocking the last brawler onto the table itself as he spoke. "Put their rum on my tab to make up for my inability to fight tonight." Wolf turned his attention to Kumo for a moment. His question died on his lips as George resettled on her shoulder and glared at him.

Bran moved a meaty paw onto Kumo's spare shoulder. "Your not supposed to be here unless I send one of the boys for you. What's going on, little princess?"

"Rat dragged me into his games. I'm here to see that he learns not to do it again." Kumo tilted her chin to one side. "He took my newest. He hasn't stopped in yet has he?"

"Not yet. Why don't you have a seat and I'll see if the Urchins can't find something out." Bran patted her shoulder. He moved passed wolf and dropped his voice into a stage whisper. "If you're smart, you'll sit on her."

Wolf grinned after Bran as the big tavern owner moved back into the backroom. He and the head of the thieves' guild were close. It was the way they kept the city safe- for a city that was run in chaos wouldn't be profitable for anyone. It was loose canons like Rat that made the city unbalanced and in danger from outside influence. He planted his body into a stool near where Kumo remained standing.

"Do not stare. It is rude. Ask the questions that radiate off your face, Captain." Kumo glanced out of the corner of her eye toward Wolf. Then she went back to glaring at the doorway of the Tavern.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that the Spider Princess knows the warlord thief. For the sake of argument, however, could you clarify how you came to know of him and why your spider makes people jealous?" Wolf said. He motioned the bartender over and got his own mug of some amber-colored liquid. Then his eyes were all on Kumo, studying her as a person perhaps for the first time in their brief acquaintance.

"I am a healer. One of the more qualified and silent that can work in conditions others may be threatened in." Kumo said. She flicked her gaze to the backroom, then up to Wolf. "Considering that your friends with Bran too, it's surprising we haven't met before." Kumo too found herself watching the captain of the guard as he digested this piece of information and drank his own mug of rum. He seemed to be a nice person, an honorable person. It wasn't fair of her to keep the key from him. But her first duty was to her family- even if it doomed Wolf's career as the captain of the guard. She tilted her face to bury her nose into George's silky fur with its spicy scent.

Kumo's nose felt the tension slide through George's body as Rat entered the Tavern. Timing, it appeared, was Rat's specialty. It appeared the rest of Wolf's questions

would have to wait. "Kumo-Hime... and the Wolf-Captain. How quaint, and waiting for me no doubt?" Rat said as he finished entering the tavern.

"Give the girl the spider, Rat." Wolf set down his mug and put his hand on his sword hilt. He stood and squared his body between the Rat and Kumo. "After the lady leaves we can finally have that little chat about your habit of breaking and entering." Kumo saw the flick of the Rat's wrist. But Wolf had his sword halfway drawn and couldn't deflect the dagger. He fell to a knee, and put his free hand on his hip and around the dagger hilt that protruded from it. Red leaked out from between his fingers. He gave out a mostly growl-filled curse about the Rat's apparent lack of parentage and honor.

"You didn't expect me to fight fair did you?" Rat moved deeper into the tavern. Silver flickered between his fingers in the form of long slender throwing knives. What tavern patrons hadn't fled, quickly made their exits around the tavern. Bran came out from the backroom and stood behind the bar. The only witness to whatever was to come next.

Kumo stepped forward and raised her left arm. George skittered down her arm and leapt off her fingers. Two other spiders detached themselves from the cloak and followed George. They skittered across the floor and around overturned chairs and table legs to get to Wolf. The spider's voices clicking and whirling as they swarmed over Wolf and buried him in their bodies. Kumo didn't spare a glance to Wolf. She held up the key in two fingers of her right hand. "Sunny, my spider, if you please."

"Always so polite." Rat vanished the right hand of throwing daggers with a quick moment as he spoke. Another flick of the wrist and a small bag appeared with a wiggle. He tossed it toward Bran. "Now you, little thief."

"I will not forget this." She said as she tossed him the key. It arched in the air twinkling and sparkling as it went. "You didn't have to harm the Knight."

"No? You don't think he'd of let me walk out of here in one piece did you? I'm no fool, nor would I be a decent thief if I didn't have a back up plan." Rat caught the key in his right hand. His fingers were just curling around it when Kumo spoke again.

"Now."

Kumo's left hand plucked the cloak strings- letting it fall to her shoulders. The six spiders that had stayed on her cloak now sprang into action. With their legs grasping the cloak they jumped and carried the cloak over Kumo's head. The Rat looked up at the cloak. Kumo pulled her right hand back and yanked on the near invisible spider thread that had been tied around the key. The key sailed back toward her. Rat made a desperate lunge for the key and instead found himself wrapped up in the spider-thread cloak. The spiders worked quickly to sew it together. Kumo smiled and wove the key between her fingers. Picking pockets was so much easier if things never got into their pockets.

The Rat snarled, hissing under her cloak turned net. His beady eyes latched onto the key, sparkling in her fingers. "You think you can capture the Rat so easily?" He tore his gaze from the key and snarled a few words. Smoke curled from below his body and with the sudden whoosh of air suddenly filling in a vacuum the Rat vanished.

Kumo stood there a moment, staring at where he vanished. Then she moved swiftly to Wolf's side. Her fingers nimbly yanking out the knife before Wolf could smack her away. George and the worker spiders finished the webbing around the wound. She checked the pressure on the bandage. When she found it satisfactory she gave a sigh of relief and patted her friends on the heads and bodies. "Thank you."

Bran set Sunny down on the bar. She wobbled off the bar and scuttled over the floor to bump heads with George. Bran watched the meeting, but as with the Rat confrontation, he didn't say or do anything. When Kumo picked up George and Sunny and placed them on either shoulder, Bran finally stepped back a pace. Then once he started moving, he kept moving- right back into the backroom.

Wolf watched Bran go. "...Saved by a woman. The others will never let me live this down." He said. His hands trembled as he hefted himself back to his feet using a chair. The two spiders that had stayed near him clung to the bandages as he moved. When he was upright they leapt off him and landed onto Kumo's skirt.

"If you feel so strongly about it, you can have outsmarted the evil Rat. I doubt Bran will say anything to counter it." She said. "Thank you for your assistance getting Sunny back." Kumo offered him a smile. She untangled the spider's thread and offered the key to Wolf.

Wolf looked down at her. For such a little thing she had a lot of guts. He took the key from her palm. He also took a moment to make sure there were not strings attached to it. "I owe you another apology, princess. Will you come with me to return the key to his Highness? I'm sure he'd be interested in a dress maker who has unusual talents."

Kumo clicked softly, calling her other spiders to her. The Spiders near the cloak wavered a few times, pacing back and forth around it but not touching it after the mysterious smoke. She had to whistle for them before they'd leave it. Kumo herself didn't even acknowledge the cloak and made no move to retrieve it for herself. Magic like hers didn't mix well with others. "It is your Duty to return the key. Mine lies in getting Sunny home." Kumo bowed formally to the Wolf, her hands on her thighs. "Thank you very much." She didn't wait for a response; she merely turned and headed for the door.

Wolf stood there a moment, his hands on his ribs. The bandage was soft, and in the places it hadn't quite started to dry was still sticky from the webbing. He narrowed his eyes and started, albeit slowly, after her. He wasn't going to let their debt go unpaid.

As the Tavern door swung shut Bran stepped from the backroom. Behind him, the Rat rested one arm on the doorframe and smirked. "I'll get it boss, tonight."

“Yes. Yes you will.” Bran narrowed his eyes to the closed door and looked to the Rat. The smile they shared promised of more misfortune to come.