

A Place to Begin

Richard Parks

Weird Tales

Spring, 2001

Richard Parks is a Mississippi native, married, no children, three cats. He says, "Whether it's something in the environment or the local gene pool, Mississippi has always produced more than its share of scoundrels, myth-makers, and storytellers. I don't know why, but we can't help it." In his day job he's a computer network administrator. He sold his first story to *Amazing SF* back in 1980. After a hiatus, he sold his second to *Asimov's SF* in 1993. He was a frequent reviewer in the 1990s for *SF Age*. Since then he's placed stories in *Science Fiction Age*, *Asimov's*, *Dragon*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Weird Tales*, as well as in numerous anthologies. He published a number of fantasy stories this year, giving us several fine ones to choose from for this anthology.

"A Place to Begin" is set in an oriental fantasy China, another of the traditional settings of fantasy. It appeared in *Weird Tales*, the oldest and still one of the best fantasy magazines. It is a transformed retelling of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," with added depth and finely tuned prose.

Long ago, when the wind spoke with a voice you could understand, in a village by the sea there lived a poor girl of almost infinite potential. Her name was Umi, which meant "ocean." She had a sweet face, and hair long and glossy black, but so did most of her friends. Umi was hardly worth anyone's notice, to her own way of thinking.

So it was to Umi's great surprise that she returned from gathering wood late one evening to find her mother and father in intense but polite conversation with the most powerful sorceress on the island.

"Umi, this is Lady White Willow. She has come to take you into her service," her father said. "It is a great honor." Her mother said nothing, but merely looked sad.

The next morning Umi made a bundle of her few possessions, bowed to her mother and father, and followed the sorceress, leaving her family, her friends, and the village that had been her home. She never saw any of them again.

As they made their way out of the village, the folk there either bowed to White Willow as they would a priest or noble, or just avoided her gaze altogether, hurrying out of her path as decorously as possible. Umi couldn't decide if there was more respect or fear in their deference; there seemed to be a good measure of both.

Umi studied her companion as best she could while they walked. The sorceress's name fit her well. White Willow was tall and slim, and her hair was white as mountain snow. Umi tried to judge her age and failed. Despite the testament of her hair, White Willow did not look any older than Umi's own mother. Her robes were of fine silk, and silk wrappings cushioned the thongs of her sandals. She carried a stout stick, but so far had merely used it to help balance herself as the road turned into a mountain path as they traveled away from the sea.

"You're staring at me," White Willow said, finally. It was the first time she'd spoken to Umi directly.

"I'm sorry," Umi said, "but I've never met a sorceress before."

"Nor been bound in service to one, I suppose. Are you angry with your parents for selling you to a stranger?"

Umi shrugged. "It is often the lot of girls from poor families. Some fare worse, I hear. No doubt Father did what he thought best."

White Willow smiled then. "Strange how that seems to happen most often when gold and silver are involved. Well, then – are you afraid of me?" she asked. There was a pleasant tone in her voice that, for some reason, did not reassure Umi in the least.

"Yes, White Willow *sama*," Umi said. Indeed, she was even too afraid to lie about it.

The sorceress nodded in satisfaction. "That's as it should be, but don't worry – I will be fair to you. If you are obedient and work hard, I will not mistreat you. If you prove to be lazy or obstinate I promise you will regret it. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Lady. I will try to please you."

"Well, then. Let us hope you succeed."

White Willow's home was on a small plateau on the side of a great mountain, a place so flat and green it was as if the forces of nature themselves had chosen to rest there before finishing the mountain they'd started. The plateau was high but not so high that trees would not grow; White Willow's home was a rambling collection of buildings nestled into birch, maple, and stone. It seemed part fortress, part temple, part woodland glade, and part cave and den all at once.

At first glance it was hard for Umi to tell where the house ended and the mountain began again. After a few weeks it was even more difficult, as spring had come to the land and new leaves were everywhere, hiding stone and timber.

Umi explored whenever her duties allowed, which was fairly often. White Willow required little of her except to sweep a certain stone path once a day, and fetch two pails of water from a nearby mountain stream at the end of that path, one in the morning and one at evening. An elderly woman name Kyuko did all the cooking, another slightly younger lady who may have been the cook's daughter served as White Willow's personal body servant. There were three thick-bodied men of indeterminate age who saw to the gardens and buildings and did most of the heavier work, including hauling

water for the baths. This in itself seemed strange to Umi, since in her own village most of the women worked like donkeys, as hard as or harder than the men.

It was very light work, compared to what Umi was used to. She saw no reason to complain on that score, and didn't. Yet it was hard not to wonder why White Willow had brought her into service in the first place, to use her so little.

In time, Umi found it beyond her ability not to wonder about it. When the opportunity presented itself, she asked her mistress about it. White Willow had merely looked at her for a moment and said, with no trace of anger or any other emotion Umi could detect, "Starting tomorrow, sweep the maple grove path twice, morning and afternoon too." Not being a particularly foolish girl, Umi did not ask again. Yet still she wondered.

Spring turned into summer as Umi became more at ease in her new home. The questions in her mind were still present, but it was as if the warming days had lulled them to sleep, even as they soon coaxed a nap out of Umi on a particularly languid afternoon, when the sun was bright and fierce and the shadows of the maple grove were a welcome haven. She finished her sweeping and then rested against a tree. When she opened her eyes again it was nearly dark.

"Mistress will be wanting her water..."

Umi hurried to fetch the pail, then ran up the path to the place where the stream bubbled out of a fissure in the mountain slope and into a shallow rock basin, a quiet place of ferns and shadow. Umi filled the pail, then hesitated. The run and her long nap had left her very thirsty, yet White Willow had warned her against drinking from that particular stream.

"Perhaps it's poison," she said to herself. The water certainly didn't seem tainted: there was no scent to it at all, and indeed it looked so cold and fresh Umi couldn't resist. Rather than disobeying White Willow directly, she took a drink from the pail itself. The water was as cool and sweet as it looked.

"That was reckless of you."

Umi couldn't see who had spoken. For a moment her vision had blurred; indeed she was afraid then that the water *had* been poisoned. Yet she felt no pain, and in a few moments she could see again.

In truth, she could see better than ever.

Suddenly, and even in the fading light, the leaves on the maples and the ferns growing by the basin looked extremely bright, as they might after a spring rain. Now Umi noticed that there were characters written on the stone basin, though she could not read them.

"Why didn't I notice this before?"

"Because this is the *Miru no Mizu*, the Water of Sight, and you drank it, silly girl. Or did you think White Willow uses it to bathe her feet?"

Now Umi followed the sound and saw something else she had never noticed before. There was a niche carved into the rock a scant few feet from the fissure, and in that sat a small bamboo cage, and in *that* sat a small bird. Its feathers were blue and red and gold; it was the prettiest thing Umi had ever seen. Yet when she looked at it closely the feathers and bright colors faded, and something very different sat on the perch. It was horned and taloned and it smiled at her with pointed teeth. Its skin was as red as fire.

Frightened, Umi stepped back. "You're not a bird!"

"Of course not, you ignorant child. Do birds commonly speak, even in this place of magic? I'm a *shikigami*. A creature summoned by White Willow to do her bidding."

"You look like a devil," Umi said.

"Is it so? I may resemble an *oni*, but who has heard of one as small as I? Perhaps we're a related folk, I do not know. That does not make me a devil. I looked like a bird a moment ago," the creature pointed out. "That does not mean I *was* a bird."

Umi could see the truth in that, but she was still careful to keep her distance. The cage looked strong, but the creature inside looked strong, too. "I must go," Umi said. "White Willow is waiting for me."

The creature smiled again. "Do what you must, but a word of caution, girl: until the water leaves your body many things will look quite different, perhaps startling, to you. Do not let White Willow catch you noticing any of it, or she will know you've disobeyed her."

Umi saw the sense in that. "Why are you helping me?"

The creature didn't look at her when it answered. "Because this time I choose to. Ask me again when the answer is different."

Umi didn't understand what it meant, but she had no time to ask. She took up her pail and hurried back down the path to White Willow's house.

"You are late, Umi."

The sorceress sat on a blue silk pillow while her servant unbraided and combed out her long white hair. Umi stood in the open doorway with her pail. There was movement at the edges of her vision, colors, devices, *things* that she had never noticed before. She tried not to pay attention to them now, but that was surprisingly easy. Umi used most of her concentration trying not to tremble.

It wasn't simple fear at White Willow's obvious displeasure that shook her so; it was the sight of White Willow herself. She didn't look so greatly different now. She was still a human woman, her hair still long and white as the snow on their mountain's top. No, what Umi saw now were things just below the surface of White Willow's face, things hidden to Umi before now.

The first was time, or more correctly, *age*. White Willow had the surface appearance

of a fairly young woman, but Umi now understood this was not true – the sorceress was very, very old. Her unlined face now seemed as cold and lifeless to Umi as that of a painted porcelain doll.

That wasn't the worst part. Under White Willow's cold, distant stare, Umi felt herself constantly weighed as if on a merchant's scale, her value falling this way or that, constantly changing, constantly reconsidered.

How long before the scale turns the wrong way?

Umi bowed low. "*Gomen nasai*, White Willow *sama*. I foolishly let the warm sun lull me to sleep."

"Is it this, then? Nothing more?"

Umi felt White Willow's gaze on her as a bird might feel a cat's, but she kept her eyes averted and her head bowed! "I didn't wake until nearly dark, and thus am only now come to bring your water."

White Willow said nothing for very long moments, then sighed wearily. "I've had a long, tiring day. I may not even require the water. Still, failure must bring punishment. Is that just?"

"Yes, Mistress."

White Willow contented herself with a sharp blow of her fan across the back of Umi's hand, with dire warnings of what would happen if she proved tardy a second time. Umi left the water and scurried gratefully out of the room, the sting of her punishment already fading. She tried to put as much distance between White Willow's chambers and herself as she could, short of leaving the house. She had seen much to disturb her in White Willow's room, but she had seen more along the path from the spring, and was in no hurry to encounter them again in the present darkness.

Umi considered what to do for a moment, but only for a moment. She smelled something wonderful coming from the kitchen and remembered she hadn't had supper yet. Kyuko the cook was tending the coals under the grate, which was empty, but there was a bowl of rice and three pickles sitting on the windowsill. The old woman grunted. "About time. I was about to toss this to the foxes."

Umi doubted that; she had yet to see Kyuko express more than mild annoyance at anything, and certainly not to the point of wasting food. Still, she was careful to express her gratitude, and the old woman smiled. With her round face it made Kyuko look something like a melon with teeth.

Umi ate in comfortable silence as Kyuko went on with cleaning up the kitchen. The kitchen seemed safe from the disturbing visions Umi had discovered elsewhere, but Umi found herself studying the old woman now with an intensity that she didn't understand. It was as if Kyuko had been here all this time and Umi had only now noticed her. The way the glow from the embers traced a line of gold along the side of her face, damp with perspiration. The way all her movements seemed practiced and precise, almost unconsciously so. Umi found herself wondering how many times the old cook

had done just this, in the very same kitchen, performing these very same duties with gentle good humor.

"If it is not impertinent to ask, how long have you been with Lady White Willow?"

Kyuko had been looking out at the woods, a distant expression on her face. The question apparently caught her by surprise. She hesitated for several long moments, clearly giving the matter some thought. "Well, I'm not sure one can really be said to be *with* our mistress, since she is mostly complete unto herself. I've been in her service since I was a little girl."

"Like me?" Umi asked.

Kyuko smiled. "Much like you. I remember the day she came to our village. She looked at many young girls, but she chose me. It was a fine day."

"Weren't you sad to leave your family?"

Kyuko raised an eyebrow. "Weren't you?"

Umi bowed her head. "Forgive me; it was a foolish question."

Kyuko dismissed that. "I hadn't thought of it in such a long time. The days here seem to flow together like currents in a river; there's no separating them."

Umi nodded. Until today, that had been true for her, too.

Umi's dreams were vivid and frightening. She woke early and visited the privy; afterwards she felt more than normal relief – the world seemed to have lost its strangeness. Now the leaves on the maple trees did not suggest disturbing patterns, hints of things unseen. They were just leaves, the stone wall that ran along one side of the grove path was simply a wall and did not, as it had seemed the evening before, have a section with eyes and small, stout legs. Umi swept the grove path carefully and then went to see Kyuko in the kitchen for her breakfast.

Now it was time to fetch the water.

Umi took her pail and trudged up the grove path. Not dragging her feet, exactly, but not hurrying either. When she came to the spring she filled her pail as usual and then stood there beside the water for several long moments, waiting for she didn't know what, looking for the same. She looked where the writing was, where the *shikigami* had been, and saw neither. She finally turned her back on the spring and hurried back to White Willow. Umi didn't want to be late a second time.

It was three days before Umi drank from the pail again. The little creature was in its cage as before, now regarding her thoughtfully. In fact Umi had taken a little more of the water this time, and she looked at the creature very long and intently when it appeared.

It ignored her scrutiny. "I wondered how long it would be before you took the water again," it said.

"How did you know I would?"

The creature smiled, showing very pointed teeth. "When a person is touched by magic it is hard to let the world go back to the way it was. Some people can do it with no problem at all, like old Kyuko. I did not think you would be like her."

"She's a fine woman and has been very kind to me," Umi said. "I would not have you speak ill of her."

It laughed. "And have I? No, Umi-chan. I merely spoke the fact; I made no judgment. I think that part came from you."

"I—" Umi blushed crimson. The *shikigami* was right. "What do you know of Kyuko?" she finally asked.

"Just that she came as a young girl to White Willow's service, as have you, and when her time came to drink the water she drank once and never again. Perhaps that was best for her, who can say? She is content enough with her life...or so one could suppose."

Umi frowned. "You make it sound as if drinking the water was expected!"

The creature showed its teeth again. "Isn't it? In my experience the one infallible way to make sure a certain thing will happen is to forbid it." Another smile. "She'd rather reduce her power than be insecure in the power she does possess. I think White Willow is very wise in that."

"I do not understand," Umi said.

"Of course not. Else you would not be standing here talking to me."

Umi took a deep breath. "Then what should I be doing, save hurrying with my pail to my mistress?" Umi asked. "And, come to that, what does White Willow really want of me? My duties are but few; such that I'm hardly worth even the small price I'm sure she paid my father."

The small creature was grinning from ear to ear, almost literally. "You have little wisdom as yet, but you're a clever enough girl as your kind go. Yes, there is more to this matter as you have guessed. But what? That would be good for you to know."

"Do you know what White Willow really wants from me? Will you tell me?"

"Of course I know." The *shikigami* seemed to consider. "I might tell you. For a price."

"What do you want?"

"My freedom, of course. Release me."

"Why are you imprisoned?"

"That's my affair," it said, but Umi shook her head.

"If I were to release you then it would be my concern too. I want to know what I am doing by releasing you, if I choose to agree. There may well be more to *that* than one can guess, as well."

"Clever girl," the creature repeated, almost admiringly. "But there's no time now. Run along to White Willow or you'll be late. And remember what I said about letting her find you out; you'll be no good to me if she suspects. Come back when you are ready to bargain."

Umi was almost late again, because she came across a vision that was very startling. She thought about what she had seen as long as she could, then hurried on with the water.

It seemed that White Willow stared at her long and hard for a bit, but in the end she had dismissed Umi without saying anything. Umi was relieved, but also certain that, if she kept drinking the Seeing Water, she wouldn't be able to fool White Willow for much longer. Frankly, she was surprised she'd done it as long as this.

Soon Umi found herself once more in Kyuko's kitchen, where, as usual, her supper waited. Umi was nearly through with her meal before she finally worked up the courage to ask what was on her mind.

"Kyuko-san?"

The old woman didn't look up from her washing.

"Hmm?"

"Did you ever wish your life had been different?"

Kyuko paused. "What possesses you to ask such a thing, child?"

"I just wondered...if you ever thought about it."

Now Kyuko did look at her, with an expression lost somewhere between a frown and a smile. "You are a strange child, Umi. What should my life have been, other than it is?"

Umi shook her head. "I think your life is a fine one as it is. Yet aren't there choices, or circumstances, that might make one choose or follow one path over another?"

Kyuko smiled. "A passing scholar once tried to seduce me, in my younger days. He spoke of different paths and life's potential, when what he really wanted was me under the maple grove. You sound a lot like he did, *Umi-chan*. Do you want something of me, too?"

Umi blushed, but did not waver. "I want to know."

Kyuko shrugged. "White Willow bought me from my parents, as she did you. I suppose I might have wound up a farmer's wife, and more likely dead now from overwork and too many children. Or perhaps a merchant's concubine, married off or

comfortably and discreetly retired. You may not believe this, child, but I was more than a little fair in those days."

Umi, looking at Kyuko's sweet face, had no trouble at all imagining it and said as much, but Kyuko didn't seem to hear.

After a bit she went on, but Umi wasn't sure she was speaking to her at all. "What should I have been? I was not born to be a great lady, nor a sorceress like White Willow. Those paths were closed, what was left? White Willow treated me well, my duties were – and are – easy to bear. What should I have done...?"

Umi bowed her head. "Pardon my foolish curiosity. My head is full of fancies these days."

Kyuko looked up. It was as if she had only now remembered that Umi was in the room. She leaned over and tousled Umi's black hair. "You are a strange girl, Umi-chan, but sweet. I don't know the answer to your question. I can't remember ever asking it myself. I – I guess at the time things seemed well enough as they were. Now run along and get your bath; it's late."

Umi had more questions, but she didn't think they were for Kyuko to answer. She finished her rice and hurried off to the bath house, where White Willow's menservants would have already prepared the tubs. This time she didn't avert her eyes from the bits of strangeness her new sight promised to reveal to her. She found herself actually eager for them now, and was a little disappointed when none appeared.

Umi drank from the pail the very next morning. "I don't suppose," she said, "that it would do any good for you to swear to tell me the truth?"

The *shikigami* grinned at her. "By what *kami* should I swear, that you would believe me?"

Umi considered. "I do not think there is any power that you respect enough to compel truth. Nor do I know that your nature will even allow for the truth."

"My warnings were true enough." The creature actually looked offended. "Consider, Umi – the *shikigami* are as much a part of the Divine as any venerated hero or goddess. We are family, in a way. What sibling really holds another more worthy than himself, proper forms of deference and respect notwithstanding? There is no power by which I will swear, so instead I suggest this: test me."

"How?"

"Ask me a question other than the one you really want to know. I'll answer, and you can test the truth of my answer. It's not as compelling as an oath, of course, but it will show that I am at least *capable* of speaking truth, and, perhaps, wise enough to know the answer you seek. After that, what you choose to believe from me is up to you. As it would be in any case."

Umi considered. "All right – why was Kyuko brought into White Willow's service?"

The creature sighed. "For the same reason you were, silly child; and therefore I won't tell you that. Ask another, and don't be so clever this time."

Umi blushed again. "Very well: Do you intend any harm to me or to Mistress White Willow?"

The *shikigami* frowned. "Why do you care what happens to White Willow?"

"She has been kind to me. You can well say that it only serves her purpose, but I am not certain of that, nor is that less reason to be grateful. I would not do anything to harm her."

"Such loyalty a dog might show its owner. You're welcome to it, Umi, but this question doesn't serve either of us. You will not know my true intentions until I act on them. Such is the way of things. Ask again, and be quick. Neither of us has much time here."

Umi put her hands on her hips. "Well then, tell me this: yesterday by the path I thought I saw a young woman, just for a moment. She was very beautiful, and wore robes of blue silk. I was distracted for a moment. When I turned back, she was gone. Do you know who she was?"

"She was and is a ghost. She often walks the path."

Umi felt a little chill. "Whose ghost?"

"Kyuko's."

Umi stared at the creature. "This is a lie on the face of it! Kyuko is very much alive."

"Kyuko as you see her now? Certainly. But..." the *shikigami* waved a clawed finger at her, "Kyuko as she *was*, now that is a different matter. What you saw was an echo, a memory. Something remained after the Kyuko you know moved on down time's river. Caught in an eddy along the shore, perhaps, or stubbornly clinging to a branch, who can say? Yet there it is. Those with eyes to see, will see."

"So how do I know you speak truly of what you understand?"

The creature smiled. "In the hour after breakfast, when Kyuko washes the bowls and her eyes seem to look at a place beyond here and now, then come to the maple grove path where the stream crosses it. Say nothing. Do nothing, save take careful note of what you see. Then come back here and tell me if my words are weeds or blossoms."

Umi waited for the right time, and had no trouble seeing it.

Kyuko grew distant, as indeed Umi remembered from many times before. She excused herself but doubted Kyuko heard her. She slipped out the back way to the maple grove path. She felt the need to relieve herself now, but she did not; the effect of

the Water of Sight was already somewhat diminished and she did not want to lessen it further. At least not yet.

Mists were gathering in the forest, summoned by the waning sun. Umi thought that, perhaps, she could see more than mist in the grayish-white wisps if she tried, but she did not try. She walked very quickly to the place the *shikigami* had spoken of, and there she waited. It did not take long.

Umi watched the ghost approach. She wondered how she would perceive the spirit without the magic water coursing through her now. Perhaps a bit of mist, or the wind blowing leaves along the path; a flash of blue that might have been a bird, but not seen well enough to guess, or even wonder. Perhaps all those things, or none of them. What Umi saw now was a young woman in a blue silk robe, her glistening black hair carefully arranged. There was very little shadowy about her; Umi almost fancied that she could reach out and touch flesh. She remembered the *shikigami*'s instructions and kept her hands still. She waited, and she watched.

The grove seemed very quiet now. Umi heard the sound of her own heartbeat, not even masked by the tickly chatter of the stream flowing beneath the small stone bridge. Now and then she heard something from the water that sounded almost like a word, but she didn't turn her attention away from the vision in front of her.

Umi saw the pail.

She hadn't noticed it before; her attention was on the specter's face, and clothes. It was Kyuko, or was. Umi was certain of that now; it had taken her a while for that particular seed to sprout, but now it grew fast and strong. When Umi saw the eyes, she knew. They were Kyuko's eyes. Younger, clearer, perhaps not yet so weary, but very familiar. It was only after that certainty had arrived that the pail was clear to her, too.

It's the same as mine...

Umi knew she should not have been surprised by that. The *shikigami* has said that Kyuko came into White Willow's service for the same reason Umi had; it wasn't unreasonable that she'd perform the same duties at first.

Until when? Another of her servants dies and everyone moves a step forward, as in a dance?

In her heart Umi did not believe matters were as simple as that, but she put the thought aside to consider later. She needed her attention for what was happening now. She watched *Kyukoghost* glide up the path in complete silence; not even the rustle of her silks carried on the faint breeze; it was as if Umi watched a moving reflection. The vision came to where the stream crossed the path under the small stone bridge. Umi looked directly into the ghostly eyes; there was barely an arm's reach between them, but Umi saw no recognition there. The spirit, like Kyuko herself, seemed to be looking at something beyond. In this case, something off the path, deep in the maple grove.

Someone, rather.

Where Kyuko's image was clear and bright, the man stood in shadow. Umi could

not make out his face. His robes could have been those of a mountain monk or a scholar; she couldn't be sure. Umi could easily guess, though, after what Kyuko had told her before.

This isn't a memory at all. This is a regret.

Kyuko stood on the maple grove path. She didn't move, or speak. She only stared out into the woods at something she obviously saw much more clearly than Umi did. Perhaps because it was only the shadow of a shadow, but it was real for this echo of the Kyuko that had been. Still, even after a while Kyuko's younger image began to fade too. Umi almost let it go. She remembered the *shikigami*'s warning. Yet Umi found that, at the end, she could not do nothing, or at least the "nothing" that the creature had asked of her.

"Why do you stop now?" Umi asked, aloud.

Silence. Umi walked forward, into the spirit's line of vision. Umi didn't know if it could see her, but she wanted to try. "Why do you stop now?" she repeated.

Umi knew the ghost didn't turn its head a fraction, or look directly at her, but she also knew that, somehow, it answered her.

I always stop. One cannot change the past.

"That is true," Umi said, "but this is not the past. Is he your regret?"

Now Kyuko did look at her. She seemed to peer at Umi as if *she* were the shadow, fading, hiding. The spirit smiled faintly. *There are two sorts of regrets, child: those things one does...and those things one does not do. The latter are the worst.*

"Then why hold on to it?"

The spirit smiled sadly. *Because it's all I have of him.*

"Then make something else, something better. Go to him. Change what is."

*That is not possible...*She stopped.

"This is not the past," Umi repeated. "This is now, and all things are possible."

Umi spoke with a fierce conviction that surprised her. She spoke of things she could not possibly understand, and yet she did not see the mystery in them. She knew what she said was true, and she was certain that the ghostly Kyuko knew that too.

Child, this doesn't concern you.

"You are my friend," Umi said. "It does concern me."

The image was fading fast, but not before Umi saw it hesitate for the barest of moments, then walk slowly across the small stone bridge and take the side trail into the maple grove where the other shadow waited. Umi almost felt as if it were her will alone that forced the spirit in that direction; she wondered if that were possible.

More than that, she wondered if it was right.

Kyuko didn't speak to her that next morning, or to anyone as far as Umi could see; the cook seemed to be in a daze. Umi wanted to speak to her friend, but she couldn't think what she should say. In the end she had gone off to face the *shikigami* one last time.

Umi stood before the basin at the end of the trail, the taste of the Water of Sight still cool and sweet on her tongue. The *shikigami* sat in its cage. "Did I speak the truth?"

"As far as you did speak, yes," Umi said.

Another fierce grin appeared. "Don't start laying traps and puzzles, Umi. I am far better at it than you are. Are you saying that there is truth I have not spoken?"

"I'm saying that you lied without saying a word."

The creature frowned. "When did I not speak?"

"You always spoke. Of many things and nothing. I think that was part of the problem."

"That's no puzzle, girl. That's a contradiction."

Umi shook her head. "Sitting in that cage, appearing to be what you claimed to be. That was the lie." Umi leaned over and took up a handful of the magic water. With the first drink still working within her, Umi took another. The cage disappeared. Umi took another handful, another drink. The *shikigami* disappeared.

White Willow stood in its place in a cleft of the rock, her white hair flowing around her like the glory of an albino sun. She was beautiful and terrible all at once. Umi was afraid, but she did not run.

All choices operate in the "now," as I said to Kyuko. This one is mine.

Umi picked up another mouthful of the water.

White Willow raised her hands. "I can't stop you, Umi, but I would not advise it. Mortals were never meant to see the world with *that* much clarity."

Umi thought about it. She finally let the water drip between her fingers to fall back into the basin. "You knew all along, didn't you?"

White Willow opened her fan and considered. "Of course I did," she finally said. "The real question is: how long did you know there was no *shikigami*?"

"The second time I took a bit more of the water than at first. The edges of the creature were...shadowed, almost like a picture in a lantern. I knew he wasn't what he seemed. I also never really believed that my perception could alter so drastically and still escape your notice, however fervently I might wish to believe that."

White Willow looked grim. "You've disobeyed me, Umi."

Umi bowed, but she did not falter. "As you knew I would. He – you – said as much. If you merely wanted to punish me for that you could have done it the first day. I assume there was something you wanted to know about me. I must be impertinent enough to ask if you found your answer."

"Yes, Umi. I have. Or perhaps more importantly, you have."

"I don't understand."

"I dare say." White Willow smiled again. "You have a great deal to learn. But will I teach you? That is yet to be decided."

Umi bowed again. "You own me," Umi said frankly, "and may do as you will. Yet I think there is something besides obedience you require of me."

"And I would take it from you if I could," White Willow replied with equal frankness. "but that is not the way this particular sort of magic works."

"What magic?"

"Yours," White Willow says. "Or rather, your potential. All human beings have potential all their lives. To be something greater than they are, or something worse. To choose one path and not another. To hone one skill and let another go fallow. Yet, before one path is chosen, all paths have almost equal potential, and are just as real. There is power in that potential, Umi. Power that one such as I knows how to tap, and use. Everyone has it to some degree, as I said, but no one has potential without limit. Some, however, come very close."

"Kyuko," Umi said. "I thought she was my friend. Why didn't she warn me?"

White Willow laughed harshly. "Warn you, child? How could she do so, without steering you toward one path instead of another, even though only *you* would bear the responsibility if you chose wrong? Do you think her so cruel, to deny you the same choice that she had?"

As cruel as I might have been to her... "No," Umi said. "Kyuko and I are the same?"

White Willow seemed to consider. "In a way. You both have great capacity. As long as it exists, I can use it. In time it fades, since potential is a child of time and as mortal as we, but it never completely leaves so long as breath is in the body. As for us, so for it – there is a place to begin, and a place to end."

"So why say anything to me at all? Why test? Why tempt me to interfere, as I did with Kyuko? If I remained ignorant, couldn't you continue to use me all the days of my life?"

"Clever girl. Yes, I could," White Willow admitted. "And there are many of my sort who've chosen that path. Yet if you think of potential as a well, then thwarted potential is poison to that well. Sooner or later I would choke on it. No, Umi. Kyuko drank from the spring as you did, and she made her choice. You'll do the same because, in this one matter, there *is* no choice. In time you will stay or go, but which path you take will be up

to you. Which will it be?"

Umi thought of the ghost of Kyuko's regret. *What you do not do is always the greater regret. Perhaps Kyuko did warn me, in the only way she could.* Umi looked at White Willow. She was still afraid, but there was something greater than her fear working now. A sort of hunger that Umi hadn't known before. "Will you teach me what you know?"

"Yes. You may not always like the methods I choose, nor what must be learned, but I will teach you. Learning those lessons is also up to you."

"Then I will stay," Umi said, "and I will learn. I have already begun, I think."

White Willow smiled. "I can feel the potentials weaving their tapestry even now."

Umi fancied she could as well, but perhaps that was her imagination. No matter; she would soon know. For the moment, however, she took leave of her mistress and sought out Kyuko. She thought she might have an apology to make and, perhaps, gratitude to show. Umi wasn't really sure, but that, too, seemed worth learning.

MNQ

January 12, 2008

6,800 words