

FEATHER AND RING by RUTH NESTVOLD

Ruth Nestvold has sold several dozen stories to a variety of markets, including Jim Baen's Universe, Scifiction, Realms of Fantasy, and Strange Horizons. Inspiration for her current story came to her in the hillside garden of a temple in the outskirts of Taipei.

* * * *

The line of cars in the single-lane street stretched as far as the eye could see—unmoving. Lindsay twisted the band on her ring finger and wondered how much longer she was going to be sitting in the stupid taxi. On either side of the river of colorful sheet metal, stores, open-front food stands, and soup joints sported signs in a hodgepodge of Chinese and Latin characters. A roofed market, with its bins of unknown, exotic produce, caught her eye. The strangely shaped purple fruit was much more inviting than a taxi that smelled like smoke and sounded like Mariah Carey.

The hotel was still blocks away, but she could use a walk; she'd get some of the pain and frustration out of her system, even if she did have to breathe exhaust fumes while she was doing it. Taiwan was wonderfully foreign, but the problems she had fled had followed her, twisting in her gut like acid at unexpected moments. All the things she'd relied on in her life were disappearing at once—business, money, husband. She'd been with Trevor since high school, and they'd started their software company Cleio just after finishing college. By the age of twenty-two, she already had the life she wanted, and she'd assumed she would have it forever.

Well, now it looked like she might be in this *taxi* forever. At this rate, she'd get to the hotel faster walking anyway.

Lindsay used her best impromptu sign language and smattering of Chinese to indicate to the driver that she wanted to get out *here, now*. After paying 150 Taiwanese dollars (all of five bucks) for her release and extricating herself from safety belt and back seat, she wandered into the market and another world. Bins of strange fruits that she had no words for stood in an open roofed area, and farther back she saw vegetables and herbs. Here the street sounds were muffled and the air fresher.

She picked up one of the wild, purple fruits—actually more like a psychedelic pink than purple, now that she saw it up close—and a young saleswoman hurried up to her. Nodding enthusiastically, the woman sliced open the fruit and gave Lindsay a piece. The inside was white sprinkled with dark seeds. It looked like straciatella ice cream, and it tasted simultaneously sweet and sour, the fruit firm and juicy like kiwi.

For a moment, the fresh taste made her forget the knot of pain in her stomach; it was a good thing. She had to hold on to that.

She nodded and picked up one of the bright fruits, pulling her wallet out of her shoulder bag, but the young woman shook her head, waving the wallet away.

Lindsay blinked and smiled. “Shie shie.” *Thank you.* Even after a week in Taipei, she couldn’t get used to how different the attitude toward foreigners was here from anywhere else she’d ever been. No matter what time she entered a store, people brightened up and said, “Good morning!” proudly. Instead of being a nuisance, she was interesting. Her hair was straight and dark and her skin olive, but her eyes marked her as different. Lindsay suspected that to the young saleswoman, she was as exotic as the fruit Lindsay held in her hand.

She put it in her bag and left the market out the other side. She felt much better than she had stuck in traffic, much better than in the office of NGTS—Cleio’s partner in distribution and localization—playing the role of competent businesswoman.

Much better than she had in Austin before she’d left.

No, she wouldn’t go there now, wouldn’t go to Trevor’s painful revelation that she’d become more business partner than wife—and, of course, he’d fallen in love with someone else. She would go to the decadently colorful temple she had been admiring out of the windows of taxis all week, the temple with its red columns and green dragons and gold-tiled roof.

A week in Taipei, and she still hadn’t had time to do any sightseeing. The schedule for the test of the English-language version of NGTS’s new game *White Magic* was grueling—the only reason they’d gotten out of the office today before dark was because the network had crashed. But Cleio had already committed to a release date and couldn’t back out now: the partnership between NGTS and Cleio revolved around reliable translation and distribution of each other’s products.

Lindsay entered the temple, grateful for the muted lighting and bright colors and smell of incense. A little gray-haired man in slacks and shirt hurried up to her, bowing at the waist, and Lindsay wondered if there was something she was supposed to do. “Ni hau,” she said, imitating his bow. She gestured toward the wealth of altars. “May I look around?”

The little man nodded and indicated with a hand motion that she should follow him. He led her up a flight of stairs, past more altars, and out behind the temple to a small section of tropical jungle rising up out of the busy city. Halfway up the side of the hill was an altar. The statue of a white goddess stood with a bottle in one hand, the other extended in what looked like an “okay” sign. On either side of her were figures resembling gargoyles playing with snakes.

Lindsay climbed the stairs to the goddess, sweating from combined tropical

humidity and sweltering October heat that easily gave Austin a run for its money. When she reached the top, she saw that worshipers had left all manner of offerings—from so-called “American cookies” to bunches of bananas, flowers, and bundles of the fake paper money burned for good luck in Taiwan—at the feet of the regal lady.

She smiled and shook her head, toying with the ring on her finger, which was swelled up from the heat. There was something about a goddess people liked well enough to bring flowers and cookies that struck a chord with Lindsay—as if the goddess were an everyday presence, a friend even.

Impulsively, Lindsay dug the psychedelic-pink straciatella fruit out of her bag and laid it on the altar in front of the goddess. Perhaps she should wish for something now. But what? That the deal with NGTS would go through—and Cleio would be eaten alive? Or that the divorce proceedings would disappear by the time she got home? Fat chance.

“Are you a follower of Kwan Yin?” a gentle voice sounded behind her.

Startled, Lindsay whirled around to find a lovely Asian woman at her elbow. Like most people here in Taiwan, she made Lindsay feel tall and wide. She seemed to be about Lindsay’s age, but at the same time older.

“Is that who this is?” Lindsay asked. “I was wondering.”

The other woman nodded. “Kwan Yin is worshiped as the goddess of compassion—she who hears the cries of the world. As a Bodhisattva, she achieved enlightenment, but rather than going to Nirvana, she remained on earth to help those in need.”

Lindsay turned around and looked at the statue again. “What a nice story. I’m glad I gave her the fruit.”

Her companion chuckled, and Lindsay turned to her with a grateful smile. The presence of the smaller woman was calming somehow, smoothing out the panicked fuzziness she’d been feeling so often since Trevor had told her he wanted a divorce.

“Your English is very good,” Lindsay said. “Where did you learn it?”

“I’ve had the opportunity to spend some time in England and the U.S.”

Lindsay nodded and held out her hand. “By the way, I’m Lindsay Gurdin.”

The other woman took it, bowing slightly. “Call me Ma-tsu. What brings you to Taiwan, Lindsay?”

“I’m testing the English version of a computer game for a partner company.”

“That must be nice, having games as your work.”

She shrugged. “Well, the business end isn’t always fun.”

“How do you like it here in Taipei?” Ma-tsu asked.

Lindsay gazed down on the colorful dragons frolicking on the roof of the temple and beyond, to the city she had only seen from the window of a taxi. “I haven’t really gotten around yet.”

“Ah, you must visit Yangmingshan Park. It is very beautiful, and not far at all.”

“I don’t know if I’ll have the time. I have to prepare for a presentation tomorrow.”

“You must get away, though. Promise me.” Ma-tsu gave her a beautiful smile that seemed to make Lindsay’s sorrows come loose from the knot in her stomach.

She thought getting away—running away—was what she was doing already, even if she didn’t have the time to play tourist. She shrugged and returned the smile. “Perhaps I’ll have some time on Sunday and can get to Yangmingshan then.”

Ma-tsu beamed. “Good.”

* * * *

In the offices of NGTS, Inc., Lindsay could almost imagine she’d never left Austin. Not even the fact that everyone in the room, except her, was ethnic Chinese detracted from the American corporate look of the place; after all, a lot of computer geeks she knew back home were ethnic Chinese, just not as many of them wore suits.

She had to admit, though, that the atmosphere was a lot more relaxed than she’d been led to expect before she came.

Just not today, at least not for her.

She pressed the spacebar on her laptop, and the last slide in the presentation appeared on screen, a graph in blues and purples documenting Cleio Software’s increase in profits in the last two years.

“As you can see,” Lindsay said, training her penlight on the figures, “Cleio remains a growing company. As our Asian distributor, you are well aware of

Cybera's continued popularity. Cybera III is in the works as we speak."

The vice-president of NGTS, Frank Shen, leaned forward. He was one of the ones wearing a suit. "But if you need us to invest in your company so much, the risk may be too great for NGTS."

Lindsay took a deep breath and tried to keep her panic at bay. "As pointed out in my presentation, Cleio is a solvent business. We've managed to make a healthy recovery since the tech bubble burst and stocks plummeted. We have the profits now, but with all the problems with the stock market ever since, we don't have enough capital for development."

Frank murmured something to his partner and then returned his attention to Lindsay. "Thank you very much for the information. We will consider the proposal and talk more about this next week, yes?"

"Certainly, as you prefer." She wished she could figure out what that statement meant, if it meant anything. Frank stood and shook hands with her and the meeting broke up. Lindsay closed the presentation and powered down her laptop.

"You like a green tea frappuccino?" It was Peggy Chiang, one of those who had worn jeans to the meeting. Next to her stood Robert Deng and Angela Liu—her Taiwanese lunch buddies of the last week.

"Come, I buy you one," Peggy said, taking Lindsay's elbow as she closed her laptop. "You need sugar."

Lindsay shook her head. "Was I that bad?"

"No, no," Robert said. "Not bad. Just nervous."

She let out a gusting sigh and allowed them to lead her out of the meeting room to the elevators. "I can't screw up. Cleio needs a partner."

Angela pushed the down button. "I don't think Frank wants to lose Cybera. Clara Lecto is one of the biggest celebrities in Taiwan."

Lindsay tried to smile. "As big as Mariah Carey?"

Angela grinned. "Not quite *that* big."

The Starbucks on the ground floor lobby of the building was full as usual, so they took their drinks outside. It wasn't quite as hot as it had been the day before when Lindsay had met Ma-tsu at the temple.

Now that she thought about it, it was interesting that Ma-tsu had used a

traditional Chinese name rather than a Western one. Everyone she knew here at NGTS had both.

“I met someone yesterday who didn’t have a Western name like all of you,” Lindsay said. “A woman named Ma-tsu.”

Her three friends stared at her briefly, their coffees and frappuccinos halfway to their mouths, and then, as if on cue, they started laughing.

“I think this woman was joking with you,” Robert finally said when he caught his breath. “Ma-tsu is a Taiwanese folk goddess.”

“A folk goddess?” she repeated.

“The goddess of the sea,” Angela elaborated. “She is worshiped in China too, but here in Taiwan we regard her as our own.”

“Have you heard of Kwan Yin?” Peggy asked.

Lindsay nodded mutely.

“In Taiwan, Ma-tsu is associated with the goddess of compassion. They are often worshiped together.”

* * * *

Well, at least Ma-tsu-whichever-she-was hadn’t been joking about Yangmingshan. The red line bus number 5 took Lindsay straight there—a beautiful national park, just north of the city. She wandered through the gardens, looking for the trail leading up to the volcanic mountain, and hoped she would eventually be able to get away from the other visitors a little. The pace of Taipei was exhausting—and with the worries and heartache she was dragging around with her all the time, her energy level was low to begin with. What if NGTS was gambling on Cleio going bankrupt, so that they could buy the rights to Cybera outright? Did they want the game that much? If so, she could just give up and go home now.

Go home to an impending divorce.

But what was she supposed to do? Cleio’s share of the profits from the English-language version of NGTS’s *White Magic*, as promising as the new game was, would never be enough to cover the company’s proposed business expenses for the coming year.

She gave herself a shake and tried to concentrate on her surroundings. On the lawn in front of her was a peacock, bright blue and proud of it, and she moved forward to get a better look. The peacock, however, seemed to interpret the move as

an invitation and came purposefully in her direction, probably assuming she had food.

Lindsay backed away, right into someone on the path behind her.

“Oh, excuse me!” she said, and then, remembering where she was, “*Du bu qi*!”

“I understood the first well enough,” a deep male voice with an American accent responded as she turned around.

He was tall and lanky with curly, shoulder-length hair, a riot of dark blond and rich brown corkscrews, and his wide smile was as friendly as his voice. The backpack slung over his shoulder looked as if it had seen better days, long ago and far away.

“So sorry,” Lindsay said.

“Hey, no problem. It’s not every day you get attacked by a peacock.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m Joel, by the way.”

She took it. “Lindsay.” She looked back at the offending bird, but he was standing motionless now, neck stretched tall, eyeing them critically.

“Playing innocent,” Joel commented. “But we know better. Hear me, bird?” The peacock cocked its head to the side. “No more funny business.”

She laughed and the bird turned around and waddled majestically in the other direction.

Joel brushed his curls back with one hand and looked down at her. “What do you say we hike the mountain together? Trying to get by in broken Chinese gets pretty tiring after a while. Besides, we were thrown together by a peacock. Now if that isn’t fate, I don’t know what is.”

Lindsay laughed again. Laughing—she was *laughing*. “Sure, why not?”

Together, they headed up the trail to Mt. Chihsing. “What are you here in Taipei for?” she asked.

Joel shrugged. “For? Fun. I’m traveling around, working when I can, you know.”

Actually, she didn’t know. She’d been to Mexico, easy enough from Texas, and she and Trevor had done Europe in three weeks for their honeymoon, but she’d never done the backpack-tourist thing, even though she’d once dreamed of it. She

turned the ring on her finger and stared at the thick foliage on the side of the path.

“And you?” he prompted her after she’d been silent too long.

“I’m here on business.”

“What kind of business?”

“I’m in computer game development.”

“Wow, that sounds cool. Anything you’ve worked on that I might know?”

“Maybe Cybera?”

“*Cybera?* Hot damn.” Joel stopped in his tracks and stared at her, and Lindsay felt a warm glow of gratification take hold in her chest.

He shook his head. “Clara Lecto is one of the hottest things in pixels. *Everybody* knows her.”

The warm spot was growing. “Thank you.”

“What exactly is your job?” he asked, walking again. On either side of them grew thick bushes and short trees, some cut back ornamentally, but some looking as if they grew wild, a small piece of jungle just outside the city.

“Actually, I developed the first version of Cybera with a friend of mine way back when I was in high school,” she said. She was already sweating, although the incline was not steep. “We taught ourselves the programming we needed to do it. And when we ran into something we didn’t know how to do ourselves, we enlisted more friends.”

“*You* came up with Clara Lecto?” Joel shook his head, and his curls glinted gold and bronze in the sun. “Man, I can’t believe I met someone so famous in the wilds of *Taipei*. Where’d you get the idea?”

Lindsay pulled a water bottle out of her bag, took a sip, and offered it to Joel. “I read this essay in AP English called ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’ and decided a female cyborg would make a great game character.”

“So you designed her yourself?”

“Not like she is now, we didn’t. Believe me, she’s changed a lot in her twelve years of life. And in the original Cybera, the emphasis was more on puzzle-solving than hunting down bad guys.”

He handed the water bottle back to her. “And what do you like more?”

“The puzzle-solving, actually. My favorite kind of games were the old-fashioned adventure games.” Lindsay suddenly realized she hadn’t mentioned that little twinge of dissatisfaction with her life to anyone in years. She wasn’t even sure if she’d still been aware of it. After all, her life had been perfect. Hadn’t it?

Joel pulled a rose-colored handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed the sweat off his forehead. Lindsay found the surprising color charming. “Like King’s Quest,” he said, shoving the pink piece of fabric back into his jeans.

“Yeah.”

“Then how come Clara Lecto turned into action-adventure?”

She shrugged. “Marketing. It was the wave of the future.” She wiped off the top of the bottle and took another drink.

“Don’t tell me—her boobs weren’t as big either.”

Lindsay laughed and choked on the water, and Joel patted her back.

“Bingo!” he said with a wide grin.

She gave him a stern look, trying not to chuckle.

“Have you ever thought about creating a new game that’s closer to what you originally wanted Cybera to be?” he asked as they continued on their way.

Lindsay shook her head. “Can’t. We just don’t have the resources right now. Cleio’s having financial difficulties—not enough capital to continue development on our big sellers, let alone invest in a new game that isn’t as likely to sell well.” She heard herself confessing her financial woes to him with surprise. She usually didn’t open up so quickly to strangers.

Joel stopped, taking her elbow and giving it a slight shake. “But what if you sold out, did your own thing? You’ve got the copyright to Cybera, right? That must be worth a fortune.”

She pushed her ring up and down just below the joint. A fortune? Not likely. Was it? She had to admit, she didn’t know.

But the rights to Cybera wouldn’t be one of the company’s assets if they went bankrupt. She still had some cards in her hand. She wasn’t sure why this hadn’t occurred to her sooner—perhaps she’d been concentrating too much on her own misery.

“I never thought of it that way,” Lindsay said slowly.

Joel grinned and gave a shrug that said, *easy enough*. “Hey, sometimes all you need to see your way out of a problem is a different perspective.”

Which he certainly provided. As they continued up the gentle incline of Mt. Chihsing, they talked easily, learning about each other on the hike. They even lived in the same city, of all things. Their lifestyles, however, were completely different. She probably wasn’t much older than he was, and she’d been running her own business with her husband for the last seven years. Joel was a graduate student in anthropology who’d only left college to travel the world with a backpack and a smile. For him, everything was temporary; for Lindsay, everything was permanent—only now, all her permanence was deserting her.

She didn’t know how Joel could seem so secure and carefree living a life of such constant change. She didn’t want to even *think* about all the change that was waiting for her when she got home. She twisted the ring on her finger and caught Joel looking at it and then away.

Lindsay slipped the ring off and put it in the pocket of her jeans. “That’s another fun thing waiting for me when I get back,” she said. “Divorce proceedings.” They had reached the summit of Chihsing, and turned to enjoy the view of the Taipei basin. This far up, the air was clear, and the city stretched out before them, hugging the Tamshui River and climbing partly up the mountains on all sides.

“Oh,” Joel said, his cheerfulness deserting him.

Now what had possessed her to reveal *that*? “I never thought Taipei could be so beautiful,” Lindsay said to change the subject.

“Yeah, the view is great, isn’t it?” Joel was obviously relieved.

It really was beautiful up here, away from the valleys of concrete filled with taxis and honking horns and exhaust fumes. A small spark of joy caught her by surprise, and she smiled.

From the summit, they hiked to the sulfur pits and the hot springs and the waterfalls. The green hills and the peace of the setting were a balm to Lindsay’s soul, and she returned to her hotel at the end of the day feeling more rested and composed than she had at any time since Trevor had told her he wanted a divorce.

And Joel—Joel was a living lesson in how to be comfortable with change. She was grateful for his admiration, but she knew it wouldn’t lead anywhere; they were just too different.

She picked her key up at the reception desk and took the elevator to the ninth floor. As she walked down the hall to her room, she noticed something on the floor in front of her door.

It was a long, blue peacock feather.

* * * *

The peacock feather rested against her monitor in the NGTS office while Lindsay clicked on one of the links Google offered.

Kwan Yin (Chinese; Quan Yin, Guan Yin, Kuan Yin) “she who hears the cries of the world.” Also known as Quan’Am (Vietnam), Kwan Um (Korea), Kwannon (Japan), and Kanin (Bali).

A guardian and patron of women, sailors, and those facing punishment, Kwan Yin is frequently invoked as the Goddess of Compassion. She traditionally appears as a beautiful Asian woman, holding pearls of illumination in one hand or a small vial or vase, representing growth. She is also associated with the dragon, the cosmic white horse, and the feathers of the peacock.

Lindsay sat back, stroking her own feather.

It wasn’t everyone who got attacked by peacocks. And it wasn’t everyone who had a goddess on her side. Why not? She didn’t believe it, of course, not really, but if it made things easier for her, why not imagine a Bodhisattva was helping her?

She stood up, laid the feather on her desk, and headed for Frank Shen’s office.

Frank greeted her with a smile, getting up from his desk and motioning her into one of the comfortable chairs next to the coffee table.

He sat down across from her. “What can I do for you, Lindsay?”

“After the presentation I gave last week, Angela told me that Cybera is probably our main selling point in a more extensive partnership with NGTS.”

Frank nodded, looking at her thoughtfully.

“It occurred to me, however, that your company might also be gambling on Cleio going bankrupt, in which case you would be able to buy the copyright to the game outright if you move fast enough. Just in case there are any considerations along these lines, I wanted to let you know that Cleio does not own the copyright to Cybera. I do.”

“Ah.” He continued to look at her, waiting.

“Now, under certain conditions, I might be persuaded to transfer the copyright to Cleio—and of course any partners it might have.”

Frank leaned forward. “What might those conditions be?”

* * * *

Lindsay climbed the steps to the altar of Kwan Yin, the peacock feather sticking out of the bag draped over her shoulder, the soft hairs brushing the back of her upper arm as she moved. The goddess gazed down at her, her expression gentle.

“No need to look so innocent,” Lindsay said when she reached the front of the altar. “I know better.”

Kwan Yin disdained to answer.

“So tell me,” she continued, not even feeling silly that she was talking to a statue, “was Joel just another incarnation of you, too? I read on the Internet that you were originally worshiped as male.”

The goddess held her vase of water and remained silent. From the trees on the hill behind her, birdsong filled the air.

“It doesn’t matter, you know. It’s not like I expected an answer.” Lindsay shrugged and opened her bag, taking out the thin wedding band.

“Mostly I just wanted to thank you,” she said, and laid the ring on the altar at the feet of the statue. “If I were the type to believe in gods, you’d be my first choice.”

* * * *

The weather in Austin was pleasant by the time she got back two weeks later, the humidity of summer slowly being replaced by the drier heat of fall. Most of the kinks had been ironed out of the English version of White Magic, and the partnership contract with NGTS was all but signed. Lindsay spent the first week in Austin working out the details of her resignation from Cleio, including the payment she would receive for the rights to Cybera. Trevor and the others weren’t happy, but the fact that NGTS had agreed to buy into the company kept them from being too vocal about it.

She was cleaning out her office desk, neatly packing her belongings in moving boxes, when the phone rang.

“Cleio Software, Lindsay Gurdin speaking. May I help you?” She wouldn’t be saying that much longer, but any pain she felt at the thought had the sweetness of new challenges in it.

There was a short pause at the end of the line. “Lindsay?”

At first she couldn’t answer. “Joel? But I thought...” No, she couldn’t tell him she thought he’d been a goddess in disguise. Or if not thought, at least suspected. “I thought you were in Japan.”

“I ran out of money.”

“That’s too bad.”

“I’m glad I got a hold of you. I might have something of yours.”

“What do you mean?”

“The oddest thing happened before I left Taiwan. I was visiting this old Buddhist temple in Tamshui dedicated to Ma-tsu, goddess of the sea. You ever heard of her?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Anyway, while I was there, this Asian woman who I’d never met before came up and asked me if I knew you. How could she have known that?”

“Beats me. Maybe she saw us together at Yangmingshan.”

“Yeah, yeah, that might be it.” He sounded relieved. “So at the temple she gave me this ring she said she thought was yours. Did you lose a ring in Taipei?”

Lindsay stared at the bright blue feather lying on her desk. “Yes, I lost a ring.”

Joel heaved a sigh of relief. “Man, am I ever glad. I really didn’t want to take it, but she insisted on it.”

“Well, thank you for bringing it along.”

“Should we meet somewhere so I can give it to you?”

“How about the Dog and Duck?”

“That sounds good. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too.”

Lindsay hung up the phone, still staring at the peacock feather. What was it he'd said in the park? *Thrown together by a peacock*. No, they were much too different—and besides, it was only a beer at a downtown pub.

But she could feel a silly grin tugging up the corners of her mouth anyway. *Hot damn*. She picked up the feather and inspected it. Tiny flecks of silver and green and purple flashed in the deep blue. She thought of Ma-tsu's sparkling dark eyes and shook her head.

Maybe there was a goddess after all.

Copyright © 2006 Ruth Nestvold