

Fulton and Ophelia

It has been many years, but with recent events, I feel it appropriate to record some of my dealings with the Averginic Order and the many strange things that happened to me whilst I dwelt in the North. It was in February of 1971 that I'd finally managed to anger enough of my superiors to have me shipped off to Svalbard. The wind howled ferociously when we first landed and I think it only stopped once, the time I was with her.

My experience with the supernatural had always been rather limited. My abilities did not lend themselves well to field work. I found myself with enough action to know what I was doing, but not much else. My superiors were reluctant to give me assignments for fear of what I'd do wrong. They said I was insubordinate, that I was too smart for my own good, that I couldn't be trusted to do exactly as they said. So they gave me little cases. A ghost in the attic, an outbreak of zombies in Bulgaria. If I did what I felt was right instead of what they wanted, it would never affect anyone important. But I was young and stupid and brash, itching for real monsters to fight. I was happy to go to Svalbard, even so dishonourably. It meant I could do something that mattered. Some half frozen rock in the middle of nowhere was better than dealing with garden faeries.

There was little to do on the half frozen rock, much to my disappointment. Many higher ranking warriors passed through during my time there, but I was never privy to their actions until years later. It was a grand and rare occasion to do anything other than lick the boots of our much more important friends. It wasn't until that day when we heard of a possible huldra^[1] that I finally did my first and only field work on that island.

I was sent out with two other men, Ulrich and Erik. Neither of them liked me very much, but I didn't complain. I was inadequate to them, too short and too lean and too headstrong. It's strange how much that bothered me at the time. Now as I reflect on those two brave enough men, it melts away.

We set off one cold dark morning.

"Think you'll be able to handle the big bad huldra?" Ulrich asked. Fulton paid him no attention and kept scanning the dark landscape in front of them.

"Be sure to keep your eyes off her and remember—"

"I went to basic training, thanks," Fulton said.

"No need to be so testy," Erik said. He froze in the corner of Fulton's eye. "There, ahead, I think I can see it." Fulton jammed the binoculars further into his skull but was unable to make out anything more than he saw before.

"I can't see a thing," Ulrich said.

"Nor can I," Fulton said. After a moment's discussion, the three continued their trek forward. Whatever it was Erik claimed to see, it seemed unreachable. The sun began to peek out from under the snow and the men grew bolder. They three made their way into the forest with little event until things began moving in the shadows. It was then that two creatures emerged from the trees ahead. Those were no Huldre.

They moved quickly, their feet hardly making a crunch in the frostbitten snow. As the three gave chase, Fulton lost sight of both his companions. He kept his eyes trained on the two

loping figures ahead. Before long, Fulton was certain he had been running in circles. There was a bang. He turned toward the noise but saw nothing, tripping over the roots his clumsy feet could not see. He pulled himself up with a swift wipe at the snow clinging to his parka—the two were gone. He raced ahead, certain they couldn't have gotten far until he reached a drop off. At the bottom, he saw them, immobile. One with a river of red hair squinted up at the sky, kneeling at the head of the other, who lay still. Fulton moved shakily down the embankment, one of their white robes was turning red.

He drew close enough to hear one of them wheezing quietly, her blonde hair splayed out on the ground. As Fulton looked, he couldn't be entirely certain where the creatures face ended and the hair began. The other, two long thin antlers poking out from underneath the dark red mane, looked at Fulton sharply. Her eyes squinted in anger and Fulton noticed she had no eyebrows to form a proper scowl.

"You have killed him!" she said, a lyrical murmur running through the back of Fulton's ears. She lunged toward him, her black eyes burning into him.

"I didn't," Fulton said, throwing his hands in the air.

"You shot him," she said, despair cracking in the background murmur. Fulton looked at the dying man on the ground. She ignored Fulton and rushed to him. He gasped, singing a strange broken song to the other. Fulton felt intrusive.

Elves are beautiful, even in death. They look incredibly odd to human eyes, unearthly, unnatural, but once across the uncanny valley, they have a strange grace to their angular faces, even in death's icy grip.

As I watched the strange woman do what she could for her fallen companion, I was entranced. Once she was certain I had not shot her friend, she didn't seem to mind my presence. For many years I found it odd, but now I believe she was simply lonely and didn't want to do what she did alone. She said nothing to me that whole night until she sent me away. I would not be permitted to see whatever funerary ritual she did. In the duration, I just tried not to lose my mind as I waited. The only thing I should note about my short time alone in that forest was the sound of her mourning. It travelled far, the whole island must have heard it.

A single voice, wailing in the night.

"You are not like most humans," she said finally to Fulton as she emerged from the sea of black thunderbolts. She was carrying something wrapped in a white sheet. "Most would have ran."

"Ran where?" Fulton asked. "Running would just get me even more lost."

"You are thoughtful," she said. The two began walking. Fulton quickly fell behind her long dancing gait.

"What is your name?" Fulton asked as he caught up. She replied with a series of soft hums and thumps. Fulton's mouth opened but he had no words to reply.

"I'll just call you Ophelia," he said finally.

"Why?" she looked at him. Her face, while still difficult for Fulton to read, seemed confused. Fulton shrugged.

"It suits you and I can actually say it," he said and looked at the thin bundle in her arms

"Is that your friend?"

"I am taking him to the sea."

"Is that how you bury your dead?" he asked.

"It has not always been this way," she said. "Long before your kind—" she stopped herself.

"My kind what?" Fulton asked.

"It is best to say nothing," she said. Fulton held his confused gaze. She sighed and continued. "Long ago, we had other ways to bury our dead. We used to be able to do more than just savagely toss them into the sea."

"I've never heard of anything like you, I've never seen anyone like you. What are you?" Fulton asked. He thought to himself that perhaps these creatures were the normal dealings of those more blindly obedient than he.

"The last of an ancient race," she said. "I cling to life while my brethren lie in their graves, forgotten."

"That doesn't really help me that much," Fulton said. She looked at him sharply.

"It is not safe for me to say what I am," the murmur behind her speech took a hard edge, turning cold in the wind.

"Why not?"

"Because those like you wish to kill us!" she exclaimed calmly. She retained the same almost blank expression as the murmur screeched angrily.

"So you're just going to remain a mystery to me then?" he asked.

"I apologize," she said. "I do not think you would betray me, but there have been many among us who have been more trusting than I, and it has cost them their lives." She glanced at the shroud in her arms. They walked in silence for some time.

"Well, your people, what were they like? What did they do? Why have they all died?" Fulton asked. Ophelia did not look at him, but kept staring out into the forest as dawn broke, the snow turning a sickly blue around them. Fulton was beginning wonder if she'd heard him when she began to speak. This time the murmur overwhelmed what she said, like a song in a language Fulton didn't speak.

"There were days, there were many days, when our words could run, our words could conquer and destroy and heal. They were like ice in the wind, like fire in the breast, like cold earth freshly touched by the sun's warmth," she said. Fulton felt he was missing a great deal of context, but Ophelia didn't notice his confusion. "We had power. We were great, until the mud men came. Until you rose from the earth and took it from us, just as we took it from those before us."

"The 'mud men'? Is that what you call us?" Fulton felt vaguely insulted.

"Roughly," she said, "do not take it as an offense against you."

"Excuse me if I don't try very hard," he muttered. She continued to speak, Fulton's mind going in and out of tune with whatever she was saying.

"June was much better at understanding," Ophelia said.

"June?" Fulton asked, a million more question forming in the back of his mouth.

"The first human I ever met," she said. "I was very, very young then. The power of men was very young then too. It is not easy to forget your first interaction with something as powerful

or volatile as your race. I was very impressionable. Perhaps the same will be true of you.”

“I get the feeling that this will probably be the *only* time I’ll interact with your race, judging by what you’ve been telling me,” Fulton said.

“Our race is strange,” she said, “connected. When one dies, all know. And with their death, each of us ages less and we are given a longer look into the future to prepare us for that longer life.”

“Now if I understand correctly, you can see into the future and when one of you dies, that scope grows, and so does your life expectancy?” Fulton asked. Ophelia nodded. “So why didn’t you all just kill each other in the first place so a select few of you could live forever?”

“We do not think like mud men. It is great pain to have our brethren die,” she said. “I have heard that you cannot hear the voices of your others.”

“Um... what?” Fulton asked.

“You cannot feel the presence of other humans and you are not aware of their thoughts,” she said. Fulton shook his head.

“But you are. You guys can read minds?” he asked.

“Not precisely in those terms, we merely know of our brothers in ways you apparently do not,” Ophelia said.

“I don’t think this is helping me understand any better,” Fulton said.

“Nothing will,” she said, almost exasperated, or perhaps defeated. “Your race and mine are not compatible. That is why we are dying. This is why we breathe our last breaths. Our age is over, soon so will yours and all that will be left is silence.”

“Ooh, lovely,” Fulton said, blinking as the sun finally rose, throwing jagged shadows into the snow. “And how soon is this supposed to happen?” Ophelia did not respond. As the sun rose somewhat higher, Fulton thought he could see something glimmering ahead. As they grew nearer, he discovered it was the sea.

“How far is it we’ve been walking?” Fulton asked, turning back to stare at the dense forest.

“Forests can be deceptive to the minds of mud men, particularly those inhabited by huldre and the long dead,” Ophelia said. “We have travelled far, but I assume it has not felt very long.”

“No, not at all,” Fulton said, shaking his head. She glanced at him and something shifted in her black eyes.

“I have never asked you your name,” she said, a stain of regret in the murmur behind her voice.

“I’m Fulton Herbert,” he said. She glanced at him but said nothing more. They made their way to the shore and Fulton thought it looked almost magical.

It was magical. The sea is a stranger place than most forests of this earth, particularly in the north. Ophelia was very quiet and in her own way, very kind. She bid me stay on the white shore and made her way slowly into the sea. I wasn’t sure what she was planning, but whatever it was, it was important to her.

How she managed those icy waters perhaps I’ll never know. She never said one way or another, but she did not seem adversely affected when she returned to me. She walked until the

water was to her chin at least. Mind you, this woman was tall, at least 7 feet I would guess. At the time, this did not make me feel any better about my pithy height, but nothing made me feel better about my height in those days.

When she returned, she was soaked. She may have even submerged her head when she bid adieu to her friend, whoever he was. She told me his name, one I actually could pronounce, but I've long forgotten it. I've never had a head for those things. She told me he was important, very important, not only to her, but to others of her strange kind.

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"I cared for him deeply," she said. "I would never have wished any ill upon him. He was regarded with mixed feelings throughout our alcove, but he was a good ruler. In his old age, he did soften. That was long after the alcove had been destroyed, however. I hope my brethren will forgive him when he returns to them."

"Returns?"

"He has not truly passed yet," she said. "He, like the rest of us, are still here, waiting. We are waiting for the end."

"Oh yes, this end of the world you keep talking about," Fulton said with a sniff and a sidelong glance. "Anything I should know about?"

"No, you will be safe, you will have long died before the world burns," she said.

"Ohh that's great, lovely," he said.

"I don't know how I'm going to find my way back," Fulton said as they wandered through the forest.

"By yourself, you would be lost in here for some time," Ophelia said. "Humans are circle people. My people are more... linear. I will lead you to safety, back to your friends. I will not let them see me, however. We were so far from you and still he died. I will not be so careless again. I would advise you to not tell them of our presence. Your mud men overlords would very much like to know that I—that we had been here. I cannot risk that. I believe you will keep your word if you give it." Fulton nodded.

"Is that why so many of my superiors have been through here?" Fulton asked. "Were they looking for you?"

"Not only me," she said, "others like me as well. We thought we were safe here. We were wrong. All have left but me, either by boat, or to the sea." The woman shuddered, but only faintly, it could have been a shiver from the cold. The two forged on for some time in silence. Fulton wasn't sure what he would say to his comrades to explain his absence for the past days. It was then that Fulton realised he was hungry.

"Do you know if there's anything to eat in this forest?" he asked. Ophelia looked at him strangely.

"I am still mourning. I cannot eat," she said, "but I will show you where you can find sustenance." Fulton nodded apprehensively.

"If you're not eating, then neither am I," he said. "It's rude."

"Mud men have strange ideas," she said. "Why do you want to share in my discomfort?"

"It's rude to eat when the people around you can't!" Fulton said. "Weren't you the one who said your people don't only look out for number one?"

"We are connected in a way that your species is not," she said. "It is not unusual for our people to share in pain because they have no choice. But to choose pain... it is unwise."

"Well, sometimes being nice is unwise," Fulton said. "That's ok with me. Is it ok with you?" Ophelia took a deep breath before replying.

"I will not complain," she said. "You are free to do as you wish. You should eat something, however."

"I'm not going to eat if you can't!" Fulton said. "What part about that don't you understand?"

"I will find you something to eat," she said. "I am trying to be 'nice.'"

"Funny definition," Fulton muttered. Ophelia did not respond, but turned in another direction rather suddenly.

"No really, I don't need anything," he said, his voice as worked up as it would get without being outright angry. "When I get back to the base, I'll eat there. The sooner I get there, the sooner I can eat. Is that alright with you? Is that acceptable?" Ophelia stared ahead, expression blank.

"If you are so insistent," she said. Their course changed, again rather abruptly, and they continued in silence once more. Fulton began to lose track of his sense of time. He felt tired, but not enough to stop and not enough to say anything. He thought that perhaps he was enchanted by the huldre forest, as Ophelia had attested to the presence of those creatures somewhere within. This did not make Fulton feel any better, but Ophelia assured him they would not dare approach something like her. There was some enmity between the huldrene and whatever she was. Fulton still hoped that she would tell him what exactly that was, but as he began to recognise the trees around him, he realised that possibility was rapidly slipping away.

"You may make the rest of your way by yourself," she said. "I will go no further." Fulton looked at her almost with regret. Finally, he urged himself to speak.

"If you don't want to tell me, fine," he said. "I'll accept that, but this is my last chance to know what you are. This is probably the last time I'll ever meet one of you, *ever*. Please, I really would like to know. What are you?" Ophelia gazed at him for some time without speaking. Finally, she closed her eyes tiredly.

"I will tell you," she said, drawing herself close to Fulton, "but let the curse be on your head, not mine, should you decide to speak." She extended her neck down and murmured in his ear. Fulton at first didn't understand the lyrical singing but the more she sang to him, the more he understood, and the quieter he stayed. Even long after she left him and long after his time in Svalbard and long after his life waned, he remembered to stay quiet.

[1] Shapeshifting forest spirits often known to seduce unwitting humans into a number of terrible fates