

Giant Swan

by Shutaro

Chiii-k... chk-chk!

The dream was so vivid he almost thought it was real.

Maxwell Frederick Aurion VIII awoke with a start. He laid there, in a cold sweat, staring wide-eyed at the bunk above his. The excess moisture on the cheap synthetic sheets made his every move cold, slimy, and unpleasant. Too hot in one spot, too cold and wet in another. Not a recipe for a good night's sleep. These were not the posh accommodations Max was accustomed to, but with a war on it was better than nothing.

A gentle breeze stirred the trees outside. It was a soft, familiar sound. A gentle rustling of feathers. Max laid there in the darkness, unable to recall precisely where he remembered it from. The dream? Only a few moments had passed and it was already fading from his memory.

Except for the darkness.

The impenetrable darkness.

It was not an empty darkness. There was something living there, inside that void. He couldn't see it, but he could feel it watching him... Studying him from just beyond the reach of his senses. He felt like a science experiment, a specimen under a microscope.

It was not a hostile or threatening presence, though... Not exactly. The feeling was more like a mild curiosity. However, it was not this presence, in and of itself, that had terrified him so.

Rather, it was the vast gulf of nothing that stood between It and him. It was so vast, and he was so very small. The sense of his own insignificance, however brief, left the hairs on the back of his neck bristling.

Chiii-k... chk-chk!

Branches scratched at the glass of the cabin window, stirred by a second gust of wind. He felt certain that somehow this sound had crept into the background of his dream. Perhaps that was why it seemed so familiar?

Pale blue-green moonlight filtered in through that same window, projecting dancing shadows against the far wall. The outlines, when filtered through the prism of his mind's eye, resembled great black wings. However, they looked... Wrong. He couldn't quite put his paw on it. They looked broken, twisted and bent back at un-natural angles. In his imagination, they belonged to some broken toy. Perhaps to a puppet whose strings had been cut, cast aside once it had outlived its usefulness.

"Chin up," his father had said to him, in the mad dash to pack and get to the train station on time, "You're descended from long line of great men. Make us proud."

They hadn't told him where he was going, or why. Something was wrong, but he had been unable to get a straight answer from his father, or any of the other adults he had encountered on the trip here.

Chiii-k... chk-chk!

"*Chin up*", he thought to himself, "*I can do this*".

“Max!”

Maxwell trudged drowsily up the rough gravel path toward the dining hall. With the ringing of the morning bell, and the din of the other campers rushing to get in line for food, the voice calling his name barely registered. The air was thick with the scent of dust and the distant aroma of hot food.

“Maaaax! Hey, what’s the matter with you? You don’t look so good.”

The voice belonged to Thomas Alexander Innmur-Aurion. Thomas was a cousin, on his mother’s side, and the two of them shared more than a passing familial resemblance. All the members of the Aurion clan had the same distinctive red fur (tinged with golden-orange highlights), long canine muzzle, and alert triangular ears with dark tips. There were differences, however.

Thomas’ mother was from a different clan, and as a result was a full head shorter than Max even though they were roughly the same age. His fur was also more golden, while Max’s was a warm vulpine red.

“I... Couldn’t sleep last night. The wind kept me up,” he said, a little sheepishly, trying to regain the poise and composure that had been drilled into him since he was a pup.

“Better get it together, Leader,” Thomas said with a wry grin, “I hear today they’re going to let us hike out to the abandoned campsite on other side of the lake.”

It wasn’t a position he wanted, to lead the small band of four boys. However, with a name like Aurion, he was expected to take a leadership role. He kept telling himself that; a soft mantra in the back of his mind that made the burden a little easier to bear.

“Don’t worry about me,” he replied, shoving down the rising wave of self-doubt, “I saw the way you handled that compass yesterday... You’re lucky you didn’t wind up in the middle of the lake,” he said, masking his nervousness with a playful grin.

Fear, his father had told him once, was an animal. A hungry chained beast. You had to keep in front of you, under control at all times. It was something you had to be ready to kill at a moment’s notice.

Thomas laughed, “We’ll see about that! I hear that site is haunted,” he teased, falling into step beside Maxwell as they entered the dining hall, “It’s on the edge of some old moggy graveyard or temple or something. We should go check it-...”

“I heard that!” hissed a tall grey-furred feline that had been walking just in front of them, cutting Thomas off in mid-sentence.

Max winced at the inadvertent slur.

Thomas raised his paws defensively, backing away slightly in a submissive fashion, “Only kidding, Tam! It’s a joke... A joke,” he repeated with a smug, mocking tone. The smaller canine’s apology was anything but sincere.

Fortunately, Max was there step between the two of them and defuse the situation, “Easy, guys. We’re all on the same side here. Tam, why don’t you go on ahead and grab us a spot in line? We’ll be right there. Thomas and I need to... Go wash up.”

Tam bowed his head deferentially, his clear blue eyes shooting one last icy glare in Thomas’ direction before he headed on up the hill ahead of them.

“One of these days,” Max said softly, when the feline was just out of earshot, “That mouth is going to get you in trouble.”

“He’s too sensitive,” Thomas snorted, “He needs to grow a thicker skin.”

“Lay off him, Thomas,” Max said, with a sigh, “Making friends here is hard enough for him, as it is.”

“None of us would even be here if it wasn’t for *those people*,” he said in a voice tinged with a bitterness beyond his years.

Max rolled his eyes, “Do you think he’s some kind of spy or something? You’re being ridiculous,” he said, yanking Thomas off by the scruff of his neck as they resumed their walk up the hill, “You don’t know why we’re here, anyway.”

“And you do?”

“No, but I can tell when you’re trying to pick a fight. If you keep it up you’re going to get your tail kicked.”

“You’re not my dad,” he said, pulling free of Max’s grip, “Back off. I can take care of myself.”

“Suit yourself,” Max sighed, letting it drop, “Let’s go eat.”

The remainder of the morning meal passed without incident. Max ate hungrily, in between the raucous shouting, conversation, and chants of the other boys in the dining hall. He was seated with Thomas, Tam, and the fourth member of his group; a dark brown ursine named Gustave. He was large and well-muscled for a boy of his age, nearly twice the size of any other boy at the camp.

About half way through the meal one of the elder members of the camp staff took the stage to read the news, a few select letters from home, and announcements about the day's activities. The staff worked hard to make sure everybody had a good time, but it all felt just a bit off. The news was always good, too good, and the letters were always cheerful and on-time. However, the days were so full of activities that they barely had any time to think about anything else. It all felt too right.

Too picturesque.

Too perfect.

Max listened, and ate, all the while unable to shake the persistent feeling of déjà-vu that had haunted him since the previous night's dream.

After breakfast Max led his group out on the day's hike. They had been assigned a few canteens, a backpack containing lunch for the four of them, a map, and a compass. It was an outing that would consume the better part of the day's activity. They had been on the trail for about an hour when Max's ears perked, picking up on the conversation from behind him as he studied the map and compass.

"C'mon, Tam, you mean you're not even a little bit curious?" Thomas said, walking backwards up the swinging a short stick as if it were a makeshift weapon, "I would think you of all-..."

"I'm a Mandrian," Tam cut him off, "And I know the Law. Whatever's out there, it's forbidden. *Keer sin 'Zaveen*. Bad news."

“Ghost stories! For scaring pups... Are you *scared*?” Thomas taunted the feline, the mocking edge in his voice was much harder this time around. Whatever grudge he had, Thomas was not about to let it drop.

Max stopped.

“*Covet not those Things which are for the Gods.*” Tam quoted, “The Book of Epochs is not a ghost story. If you want to go, that’s fine. But I’ll stay behind.”

“*Consume not the Flesh of the Sentient Breed,*” Thomas spat back with a growl.

Max spun around just in time to see Tam lunge for Thomas, claws out and teeth barred in a feral snarl. He had just enough time to drop the map and compass and yank Thomas back by the scruff of his neck. The force of the sudden motion sent both Max and Thomas tumbling to the ground. Tam would have been on top of the both of them had Gustave not restrained the angry feline with one of his massive arms. He recognized the seriousness of the insult and, like Max, had no desire to see the morning spoiled by bloodshed.

Chiii-k... chk-chk!

“I’m no cannibal, you arrogant whelp!” Tam roared, “Let me go!!!”

“Not a chance,” Gustave rumbled.

Maxwell glared at Thomas, shoving him aside as he scrambled back to his feet, dusting himself off, “Stop it! We’re supposed to be a team here,” he turned to Tam, “You, go calm down! He may be a jerk, but he’s family and I’m not going to let you hurt him. And you,” he said returning

his attention to Thomas, “Shut up about the ruins. We’re going to stay together. If one of us doesn’t want to go, then none of us will. Is that understood?”

Thomas bowed his head, grudgingly, “Yes...” he said through clenched teeth.

“Apologize to him.”

“But!”

“APOLOGIZE!”

“I... I’m sorry, for... You know,” Thomas said, more out of fear than any genuine sense of contrition.

“Good enough,” Max replied. Tam spun away from Gustave’s grip, stalking off into the trees with his tail lashing back and forth angrily. Max turned to attention to the map on the ground, as well as the small pile of glass and metal debris that used to be the compass.

Max swore.

“It’s ruined,” Gustave said, noting the remains of the compass and the dirty, scuffed map, “We should go back and get a new one.”

Max sighed recovering the now wrinkled, dusty map as well as the remains of the compass, “If turn back now, we’ll never make it in time... And it’s just over those hills,” he said, pointing out toward the other side of the lake, “If we keep following the map, we’ll be there in no time.”

Chin up.

This wasn’t so hard.

They crested the hill on the other side of the lake at mid-day. The clear blue-green sky had faded to a pale grey overcast and a soft mist fell. Their destination should have been just on the other side of this ridge; a pleasant green meadow ringed by trees and filled with other campers enjoying what had been a clear summer afternoon. However, from where he stood all Max could see were a few boulders and a bunch of dead weeds. Beyond that there was an ominous-looking stand of tall, dark trees.

“It’s just beyond those trees,” he said, nodding confidently toward the jagged line of pines and redwoods. It had to be there.

Right?

“Are you sure?” Gustave rumbled, “I don’t see any trail.”

Max nodded and pointed to a shape moving just within the tree-line, “Look, I can see one of the others. Just over there,” he said, leading his tiny band through the mess of dead grass and brambles. It was rough going, but it was quicker than backtracking to pick up the trail.

Thomas piped up, “You know, the ruins are just that way... We could still go take a look,”

“Later,” Max said, waving him off with a hint of irritation in his voice.

Tam scowled.

“*azh 'Shirash with broken wings... Lone the shepherd of forgotten things,*” Thomas quoted, in a sing-song voice, to nobody in particular.

Max could only roll his eyes, “Quit trying to be creepy, Thomas. We’re not going, and that’s final.” There was something in his posture that betrayed his uneasiness, however, and Thomas was quick to pick up on it.

“I think you’re scared, too... Are you *scared*?” Thomas taunted, sensing an opening in Max’s carefully constructed façade of certainty.

“Says the pup who cried when his parents dropped him off at the station,” Max countered with a scowl.

“You actually, *believe* that nonsense, don’t you? You really think *The Swan of Night* is buried in these woods?”

“You shouldn’t say that name,” Tam protested, “It’s bad luck.”

“I heard it was *He Who Does Not Sleep*,” Gustave rumbled.

“Whatever,” Thomas snorted, “It’s just a ghost story.”

“We’re late enough as it is,” Max said, his voice now thick with aggravation, “And now we’re getting separated,” he said, as Tam stormed off into the woods.

“Tam! Wait!” Max shouted, taking off in a run through the field after him.

The three of them ran in an effort to catch up with him. Even though Max never lost sight of Tam, they were never quite able catch up with him. They got close, however, when he stopped walking to speak with...

Someone.

Max recognized the shape he had seen earlier, but he couldn't make out the details. Just a tall figure with white fur from head toe. As Max drew closer he could pick up the clear, musky scent of a female; a distinctly canine aroma, far stronger than he was used to. It stirred some new feeling deep inside him; something warm, primal, and thoroughly disorienting. Tam and the unknown figure paused for only a moment before continuing on, walking deeper into the woods.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Stay calm.

Chin up.

Gustave panted beside him, "We'll never catch him, at this rate."

"We have to stay together."

"Taaaaaam!" Thomas shouted, "Come back!"

Max couldn't tell if Tam was ignoring their calls, or if he just couldn't hear them. He simply walked on, following the Unknown Female as if in some kind of trance. A chill breeze stirred the branches above their heads, causing the stiff limbs to creak and groan in protest.

Chiii-k... chk-chk!

Even from a distance Max could tell that the house was... Wrong. It appeared to sag, about to collapse under its own weight. This gave it its own distinct geometry, a jumble of lines and angles that didn't seem to add up. Rotting and rusted toys sat abandoned in the yard. There was a driveway, but there were no roads. There was a brick walkway leading up to the front door, but

there were no sidewalks. There were no lights, no electricity, or street signs... The house had no address, but there was a decrepit mailbox sitting at the edge of the yard where the sidewalk should have been. It sat there, in the middle of the clearing, as if it had fallen out of the sky: sullen, forgotten, and left to rot.

"This... Shouldn't be here," Max said aloud, without thinking.

"It shouldn't be this dark out, either," Gustave noted, glancing at the twilight-grey above them.

"Looks like a normal house to me," Thomas said, "Probably somebody's old cabin or something."

"Then where are the roads?", Max replied.

"Ruins, then," Thomas added, excitedly.

Gustave shook his head, "Too new."

Max was the first to notice Her.

The others noticed soon after and fell silent.

The Unknown Female was standing in the front doorway. Max was finally able to get a good look at her. She was tall. Her short, snow-white fur was covered with a myriad of blue-grey, silver, and black designs. Max thought that some of the them might be symbols, but he couldn't recognize them. They looked old and strangely familiar. Perhaps he had seen them before in his lessons? He had a hard time getting a fix on them...

Because they would not stay still.

Sometimes they moved, and sometimes they morphed and transformed into other symbols. Other times the shapes simply dissolved into abstract designs, or faded out entirely. The shifting patterns made it nearly impossible to determine her breed or clan... All that Max knew for certain was that she was canine, and that the symbols were not her most striking feature.

The Unknown Female was beautiful beyond words. Her features, from the slightly pointed tips of her ears, to the graceful slope of her muzzle, down the lines of her neck, past the curves of her well-proportioned chest and hips, and all the way out to the tip of her slightly bushy white tail, were absolutely flawless. It was if her entire being had been laid out according to an equation which perfectly expressed the ideal female form.

While Max's adolescent instincts naturally found this unnatural perfection alluring, some deeper intuition found it profoundly unsettling. She, like the house, was wrong. Out of place. Too perfect to be real. Like a living doll...

Or a corpse.

The Unknown Female regarded Tam with a clinical, lifeless gaze. Eyes like glass lingered in contemplation. She seemed to regard feline before her as if he was some curious new species of insect.

Then, she spoke:

“Kéër’az än azh ’šhirash, vashm āz ’m õñn ään ’Ri’æhn.”

Her words were as clear and as perfect as she was. Max could scarcely pronounce them, let alone comprehend their true meaning. However, that gnawing intuition buried deep inside knew the truth. It knew that this was the Elder Tongue, unencumbered by the constraints that had been

imposed upon it by the crude mortal organs of speech and comprehension. These were words that had not been spoken aloud in thousands of years. The syllables and grammar were utterly alien, but intent behind them was unmistakable:

“You have been forgotten.”

Max wasn't sure when it started, but the symbols that danced across Unknown Female's fur were... Escaping. It was so subtle, at first, that he barely noticed. But over time the effect became more pronounced. The ink, or whatever had been used to draw the designs on her fur, was bleeding away from her. It leaked, crept, and spread out onto the weathered timbers of the doorway around her. Whatever they were made of, the Unknown Female's white fur was no longer sufficient to contain them. Max felt like he was watching a painting crawl free from its canvas. A thing that should only exist in the realm of imagination had clawed its way into the real world right before his eyes.

The tendrils crawled, moving soundlessly across wood, brick, and dirt. Not content with simply changing shape, they began to shift their color as well; changing from glossy metallic blue to inky black to sickly green. They reached out for Tam, coaxing him to come closer. But he stood still, held under the sway of Unknown Female's unnatural charms.

Within that spreading mass, Max saw things. Images would rise up out of the roiling chaos, show themselves to him, and then sink back into the shifting sea. He saw the faces of the dead and forgotten. Some of the faces were locked in a grotesque grimace of fear and panic, others looked serene and content in their unknown slumber. Some whispered, some tried to speak to him. Some glared at him, accusingly, blaming him for the innumerable sins of his ancestors.

Two great black hands, more like twisted talons, rose up from that creeping tide. They stood in stark relief, appearing almost two-dimensional against the background of debris and vegetation. Swiftly, and without a whisper, they plucked Tam up off the ground and drew him closer to the Unknown Female. They carried him up, dazed and mute, into the waiting embrace of her uncanny valley.

The next moment, they were gone.

Thomas was the first to react. He let out a wail unlike anything Max had heard before. It was a low mournful sound that rose into a panicked cacophony of rage and terror. This was not the defiant youth that Max knew, the one that had been spoiling for a fight not long ago. This was the angry wail of a frightened child. The terror of what he had just seen joined forces with the deep-seated rage that had been simmering within him all afternoon. It was this fire which kept him upright and propelled his slight, juvenile frame through the half-open door of the house with a clatter of splintering wood.

Max moved to stop him while his mind worked furiously to make sense of what he had just seen. Surely there was a logical explanation for all this. A prank, perhaps? The Gods knew Thomas had it coming. But how? Tam had simply ceased to exist. Here was there one moment, then gone the next; plucked from the fabric of reality with disturbing ease.

Weighed down by these thoughts, Max was unable to reach Thomas in time. The scene playing out before him was like a movie. A terrifying scene that deteriorated his fight-or-flight response to the point of uselessness. Even if Max had managed to catch up with the young canine, he was not certain his strength would be enough to restrain him.

All he could do was watch.

Thomas hit the floor of the house with the force of a full-grown adult. Before he could utter another cry, he was gone. A flurry of a thousand black wings had swallowed him whole.

Max looked back to Gustave, whose massive frame stood ridged like some great bronze sculpture. He couldn't leave them behind. Like it or not, they were his responsibility. Max knew what he had to do, and with every ounce of will he could muster he swallowed his fear. Holding the beast in check, he approached the house.

"Go back," he told Gustave, "Get help. I'll find Tam and Thomas."

Without a second look, Max stepped through the open door.

Max was relieved to find that he had not disappeared upon stepping through the open doorway. He glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see Gustave still standing there, but he was gone. Had he gone for help? Or had he been snatched up by the Unknown Female? Max couldn't tell. He only knew one thing for certain.

He was alone.

And the house was angry.

This was not some vague sense of resentment or anguish, nor was it the sense of mild curiosity he recalled from his dream. This was a very specific brand of rage, heavy and simmering. It was a hatred that weighed on him with every step.

The house was angry at *him*.

The house hated *him*.

The walls stared at *him*.

“Don’t be silly, it’s just a house. It doesn’t have feelings. It’s just a house,” he told himself, under his breath, trying to shake the feeling that he was being watched.

“Tam! ... Thomas!”, Max called out, his voice bouncing off the bare walls and echoing into the darkness.

The inside of the house was no more tidy than its exterior. Papers, broken dishes, overturned furniture, and smashed appliances littered the room; all of it blanketed with a thick layer of dust. This was the debris of a life that had been hastily abandoned.

Max moved deeper into the house, despite his fear. He had no choice. What would they say if he returned without Tam and Thomas? He was the leader, they were his responsibility. He needed to find them. He needed to bring them back.

The floorboards creaked beneath his feet. Max noticed movement, a faint glimmer out of the corner of his eye. The dim light from outside filtered in through the open door and broken windows, but it wasn’t enough to see by. Max stopped, fumbling through his cluttered day-pack for something, anything that might help. His paw closed around a smooth metallic cylinder. Light! Removing the small battery-powered flashlight from his backpack, he flicked it on and directed the yellowish beam toward the twinkle in the darkness.

It looked like something had been lodged in the aging plaster of the wall. Something smooth and shiny. Glassy, like a light bulb. But who would put a light in the middle of a wall? No, that wasn’t it. As he crept closer, he noticed movement around the shiny spot in the wall. The plaster,

as if reacting to his light, seemed to be moving; bubbling up and becoming liquid. It melted and ran, as if somebody had spilled acid on it. In that mess he noticed a second twinkle.

Then a third.

Then hundreds. They were swarming up out of the muddy plaster like hungry insects, glistening like worms. Max realized what they were...

Eyes.

They spilled out of the wall, the rotted plaster giving away with a wet tearing sound, and came to rest in a small pile at his feet. Each and every one of the slimy, fleshy marbles was focused squarely on him.

Startled, Max let out a yelp and stumbled backwards. The flashlight clattered to the floor. It broke open, scattering its contents all over the floor and plunging the hallway back to darkness. He tripped and fell backwards, landing squarely on his rear with a loud thud.

Max sat there, in the darkness, too terrified to move. The little light that filtered into the room was, by now, far too dim to see by. He waited, hoping that his eyes would adjust. But they didn't, and he wasn't about to go groping about in the darkness for the remains of the flashlight. He sat there, on that dirty floor, hugging his knees to his chest and gently rocking back and forth.

"I am not here, this is not happening, this is just a dream," he muttered to himself, over and over again. But, as the hallway grew darker, he found that he was unable to wake himself. His ears perked, a soft scraping sound from the darkness catching his attention. Was that him? He held his breath, sitting absolutely still, straining to hear. There it was again, a sound like talons scraping across the wooden floor.

Max was no longer alone.

Something was moving there in the darkness. Every so often he'd hear a set of feet shuffling, scraping against the floor. After a few moments, a second set joined in. Then a third, after that. His canine hearing was keen, but in his panicked state he was unable to keep track of how many things had begun to circle him as he sat there, trembling in the darkness.

"H... Hello?" his voice choked out, a horse whisper.

The unseen figures did not answer. They simply watched, lurking in the shadows. Max felt certain they were examining him, poking and prodding at him with sharp bony claws. He imagined invisible talons rifling through his brain, touching each and every one of his thoughts. His feelings. His memories... To these creatures, they were nothing more than curious artifacts. Specimens to be indexed, inventoried, and catalogued.

Chiii-k... chk-chk!

A familiar sound accompanied a soft rustle of feathers. No, the sound was different this time. It was not the sound of branches scratching at glass. It was not the sound of the wind in the trees. This sound was muffled by flesh. Max realized that it was coming from inside the things; like grinding, broken bones. Every time the things in the shadows moved there was scratching, scraping, grinding, and a soft rustle of feathers.

"Tam? ... Thomas? ... Is that you?", he forced out a second, barely audible whisper.

No response.

He tried to stand, to force himself to move. To run. To slay the fear inside him, the beast before him. I can do this. I can do this. Gods, they're in my head! The doorway is so close... But his

limbs would not move. No matter how much he wished, pleaded, sobbed, and prayed. He was alone, locked in place, in the dark with these... Things.

Something cold stirred his fur. A breeze? That was it. That was when he recognized it. The darkness suddenly became familiar. The Presence, half awake, lurking in the void... Beyond the darkness. It was there. Watching him. First one eye, then another... Then a third. He could see them open in his mind's eye, neon black mushroom clouds rising from nothing. He couldn't explain it, but somehow this comforted him. All of the fear, the panic, it retreated back into the dark recesses of his mind.

The longer that he crouched there, studying the pictures inside his head, the more detail he could make out. It was vaguely avian and hundreds of feet tall. It had great black feathers of made of glass and a body carved from stone. It's great craning neck was supported by a massive skeleton of steel girders and ancient concrete. It floated there before him, on a lake of flame. He could smell the smoke, the rotten stench of melted flesh and singed fur.

That was the moment when Max knew.

He realized what none of them had been willing to admit to themselves.

The bombs had fallen.

The war was over.

A cold wind rose around Max. The once gentle breeze was now tugging insistently at his fur and clothing. He could hear its distant howl grow louder, building to a crescendo. It was a low and mournful sound, steadily rising into a panicked cacophony of rage and terror...

...and it was coming from his own muzzle.

The dream was so vivid, he almost thought it real. Maxwell Frederick Aurion VIII awoke in a cold sweat. He shivered, damp fur sticking to his skin as he once again stared wide-eyed at the bunk above his.

Chiii-k... chk-chk!

Not again, he thought to himself, *Chin up. You can do this.*

He rolled over, hoping to find some solace in sleep before the morning bell rang again. But that was not what he found. Instead he found single jet black feather resting on the pillow beside his head. As if it had been placed there. He stared at it for several moments as his sleep-addled mind struggled to put the pieces together...

...and the wind began to howl.